

## ORDINARY APPLES/Ron Nyren

ASK SOMEONE HOW EVE tempted Adam, and the answer will likely be *apple*. But the Book of Genesis says only that Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree. Some biblical scholars believe it was an apricot. I feel that a plum or a peach would have been more likely, something with juice that could run down Adam's chin, trickle along Eve's bare breasts. Sin never sounded to me like the hard, clean *chawk* of biting into an apple.

I grew up in Baldwin, Connecticut, where apples have always seemed an ascetic pleasure. The town took its name from one of the most commercially successful varieties of the nineteenth century; our founders must have felt it would have lasting resonance. However, though the Baldwin survives shipping well, its trees bear fruit only every other year. New annual varieties began to supersede it around the turn of the century. Now you hardly see the Baldwin anywhere. Should we miss it? F. A. Waugh, in his 1908 book *The American Apple Orchard*, wrote, "It is exactly the apple for the ordinary man. It is an ordinary apple."

This could serve as the town's motto.

Most of what I know about apples comes from my high school Latin teacher, Mr. Kintner, whose family owned the largest orchard in town. Often, toward the end of class, when we had finished conjugating twenty verbs or giving the dative forms of a long list of nouns, Mr. Kintner announced which varieties had been grafted onto the orchard's trees the previous day, or how many pounds boiled down into a pint of apple jelly, or how it was a shame that the insipid McIntosh and Red Delicious were crowding the other varieties out of grocery stores around the country. He made these remarks in the same animated tone of voice with which he mentioned that the ablative singular always ends with a vowel—a tone suggesting that apples were another ancient language unjustly maligned as dusty and irrelevant.

Five foot seven, very skinny, with the cuffs of his suit coat hanging down almost to his knuckles, Mr. Kintner resembled a walking coat-rack. His thinning, coppery hair, swept away from his forehead, had a peculiar ripple to it in the back, like a waterfall ending abruptly at his neck. I had a running discussion with Roger Longo, who sat next to me, about whether it grew that way naturally. Roger claimed Mr. Kintner plugged himself into an electric socket each morning with his hair wet.

Mr. Kintner rarely stood still. He hated to sit at his desk. "Gaul is divided into three parts!" he said, drawing Gaul on the blackboard and slashing it with chalk lines. "The game of bobbing for apples comes from a Druidic rite of divination," he said. *Vitam regit fortuna, non sapientia*, he wrote, and we translated: Chance, not wisdom, rules life. He showed us a slide of Rubens' *Judgment of Paris*, the three goddesses with their luminous, doughy flesh, the dazzled young Paris awarding the apple inscribed "To the Fairest" to Aphrodite, in exchange for the love of Helen of Troy.

Early in our first year at Baldwin High, he told us the myth behind the Latin word for apple, *malus*. There was a priest of Aphrodite named Melus, a close friend of Adonis. When a bull gored Adonis to death, Melus could not stop mourning. "Finally," Mr. Kintner said, "the Goddess of Love took pity on him and turned him into an apple tree."

Melissa Colhalter raised her hand. "Why an apple tree?" Her broad and shiny forehead radiated her usual insistent drive for knowledge; someone had told her that Latin would teach her the origins of words, and so she was determined to get to the heart of everything.

With one of his sweeping gestures, Mr. Kintner clapped a hand to his chin and pondered. "Because apple trees," he said finally, "are quiet. If you're the Goddess of Love, the last thing you want in your temple is noisily weeping priests." Then he turned to me and said, "Vaughn, please translate: *manus manum lavat*."

Though everyone loved Mr. Kintner's enthusiastic style, the class dwindled with each grade level as students defected to more practical electives, like Typing and Accounting. By senior year only Melissa, Roger, and I remained. Melissa loved the different forms that Latin nouns took: nominative, accusative, ablative, dative, genitive. I asked her once how she kept the declensions straight, and she said she pictured each one as a bookcase; choosing the right word was like lifting down a book from the proper shelf.

Though I struggled with the vocabulary, I stuck with the class because I loved anything that touched on the Greek and Roman myths, the fantastic array of gods and heroes, their outsized cruelties and desires. I loved Hermes and his winged sandals, Hephaestus and his jealous rage for Aphrodite, Odysseus and his quick wits, Procrustes and his bed.

Roger took Latin because he wanted to be near Melissa.

The first day of our senior year, we arrived at Latin class to find ourselves assigned to a tiny room crammed with six student desks and a miniature version of a teacher's desk. We quickly sensed how difficult this year would be. There was no room for Mr. Kintner to pace in

front of the blackboard. Instead, he had to sit for the entire class, and while we inched through *The Aeneid*—our sole text for the year—he had to satisfy himself by fiddling with a pink rubber eraser, which he spun and bent and stabbed with his fingernails. When he waved his hands in the air, he resembled a man who has been confined to a wheelchair without the use of his legs, but who refuses to acknowledge his disability.

To make matters worse, it was the last period of the day, when we were all exhausted and chafing. And Roger had edged his desk so close to Melissa's that their elbows nearly brushed, which made the room seem even smaller, as if it should only have fit two. When Roger leaned forward to read from his translated lines, a slight flush came over Melissa's cheeks, though she continued to stare intently at the page in front of her.

I had always thought of Roger as one of those amiable, bland boys, the kind who carry combs in their pockets, wear Polo shirts and chinos, join the Key Club. The kind who seem inexplicably at home in school. He walked through the halls easily, as if wearing slippers. In Latin class he was a middling student—he always studied for quizzes, but cursorily. He had never stood out.

The summer before our senior year, however, he'd had a polyp removed from his vocal cords, and the operation had tinged his voice with smoke. Now he sounded, not exactly raspy, but nubbly, like a flannel blanket. This gave him distinction, made us take a new look at him. Like Melissa, I watched him while he read. He had a round, sleepy, pale face with a slightly upturned nose, which made him resemble a handsome china pig. I could understand why even Melissa, known for dating only her homework, got lost in his voice. When Roger finished and Mr. Kintner asked me to translate the next six lines, I gave a start and asked which line we were on.

Toward the end of class, Mr. Kintner leaned back in his chair and stretched his alarmingly supple spine. "As you know," he said, "every year for the past three years I've written a little play for the Apple Harvest Festival Pageant. This year, it will be the story of Atalanta's race. I always ask my Advanced Placement students if they'd like the starring roles. Don't worry, you won't have to learn lines, you will simply have to act, while I read the narration."

None of us were really theatrical types, but we liked Mr. Kintner, and more than that, we saw the rest of the school year unrolling before us, every day ending in this tiny room. The thought of being able to work with Mr. Kintner on the open-air stage in October seemed like the only chance for relief. "Sure," we said. "Why not?"

"Ms. Giovanni will design the set," he said, "and she has graciously offered to have her classes build anything we need." Then, as if he'd said too much, he closed his book, stood up, and went out into the corridor, although there was still a minute to go before the bell rang.

We knew he had been married to Ms. Giovanni for a year. She taught wood shop at the high school. They had first met seven years ago during a community theater production of *Barnum*, in which he played the lead and she played his wife. We speculated that they had divorced because both of them liked center stage. Ms. Giovanni had since married a much older man. Now she and Mr. Kintner were both nearly forty. When they happened to pass in the hall—rare, as the wood shop was in the school's basement—Mr. Kintner would stop and give a loud "Ahoy!" in the middle of his hurry, and she would curtsy with exaggerated formality, a few wood shavings detaching from her blouse. It was as if they were old theater hams who had been rivals so long they'd become cheerful about it.

And so we had two Mr. Kintners for a while—the circumscribed one in Latin class, and the more expansive one who guided us after school in the roles he had prepared. Because our school lacked an auditorium we practiced in a room off the gymnasium, often accompanied by the grunts of football players charging into sawdust-filled bags. Mr. Kintner called them a Greek chorus. He cast Melissa as Atalanta, saying he'd chosen this myth because Atalanta was a runner, and he knew Melissa was on the track team. Roger was to be Hippomenes, her suitor, and I was to be Atalanta's father, the king. Mr. Kintner had coaxed a few juniors and sophomores into playing the smaller roles.

Mr. Kintner engaged us in preposterous theater exercises, getting us to move around the room like different kinds of animals or like one of the four elements, asking us to quack the way a lion would if lions quacked, or to speak with the voice of a refrigerator. "Mr. Derousse doesn't believe in this sort of thing," he said, referring to the history teacher who directed the high school drama club. "He's a strict adherent of the Stanislavski method. No room for true creativity." At the beginning of each rehearsal, when he required us to shudder like trees in a windstorm or ooze around the floor like mud, we winced and avoided meeting each other's eyes. But by the end of rehearsal, even Melissa laughed.

"Remember to remain royal in your posture when you perform the marriage ceremony," he told me, pulling back my shoulders. But I noticed he was gazing at Melissa and Roger. They stood as he had just

posed them, facing each other, their hands in each other's hands, staring at each other's sneakers with great concentration, as if attempting at all costs not to smile. Perhaps because they could not, Mr. Kintner smiled instead, in an easy, unhasty way that I had never seen from him before.

"Is this marionette theater?" asked Ms. Giovanni, coming in from the main gymnasium. The "oofs" of the football players followed her in until she shut the door behind her. "Are you going to dance Vaughn around the stage through the whole play," she said, "as well as speak everyone's parts?" Mr. Kintner removed his hands from my shoulders. She smiled sweetly and sat on a pile of mats to watch the rehearsal. Mr. Kintner gave a slight bow that consisted mostly of closing his eyes in her direction, then resumed instructing.

Not long after, I saw Melissa and Roger in the cafeteria together, taking sips from the same can of cola. In Latin class they moved their desks farther apart, as if to conceal their affection, but from time to time I leaned forward in my seat and saw their shoes touching. The room came to seem even tinier. If Mr. Kintner noticed, he gave no direct sign. But he often let us out of class a minute early, with another of his sweeping gestures, as if to say, "Go, enjoy your youth."

On the first weekend of October, the Apple Harvest Festival began. Canvas booths occupied the town green like an army encampment. A traveling carnival set up rides and games in the vacant lot next to the Congregational church. Everything looked orderly: the booths were in line, the carousel gave off its happy tune like a perfume, and the air smelled of fresh apple fritters from the Lions Club booth.

But the more interesting of the festival's two weekends was the second. It started with a few of the booths opening Thursday night—people strolled through hesitantly, almost furtively, as if worried they might be participating in something unauthorized. On Friday, arts-and-crafts vendors crammed their stalls into any remaining space in the town green and squabbled over boundary lines: the vendor of hand-tooled wooden belt buckles complained about smoke from the Rotary Club's barbecued ribs booth; the vendor of stained-glass lampshades found she had been assigned the same stall number as a group of clowns who painted children's faces.

By Saturday afternoon, you could hardly move. You had to inch past people carrying paper plates stacked with corncobs and runny beef sandwiches, past parents clutching at children who chased apple-shaped balloons that were forever escaping, past teenaged girls who

didn't watch where they were going and jostled your elbow with sheaves of pink cotton candy. By evening, splotches of spilled beverages and food colored the sides of the canvas tents, and the bright orange garbage receptacles overflowed with crumpled napkins and greasy waxed paper. The carousel's music had repeated so often that it seemed demented.

From the booths you could buy every kind of apple concoction imaginable: apple cider, apple crisp, apple cake, apple pie, apple rhubarb pie, apple-and-green-tomato pie, apple cupcakes, apple brown betty, apple slump, apple pandowdy, baked apples, caramel apples, mint apple jelly, maple apple custard, apple chutney, apple soufflé. You could buy plain apples from the three huge Kintner Orchards booths, which sold Gravensteins and McIntoshes. No Baldwins, though. They didn't ripen until November.

At three o'clock on Sunday, the last day of the festival, we met at the field below the elementary school, where the pageant stage had been set up. Ms. Giovanni's senior wood-shop class had constructed a throne for me and a pair of arches to serve for entrances and exits. Aside from a spear, our only props were three apples that had been rolled in glue and gold sparkles. The throne had been painted black, with red roses stenciled on as decorations. "Roses?" I said when I saw the throne, and Ms. Giovanni smiled. "That makes it ornate," she said. Mr. Kintner raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

When we finished rehearsing, we went up to the elementary school, whose bathrooms had been designated our dressing rooms, to put on our costumes. Ms. Giovanni applied makeup, giving me thick, sharp-pointed eyebrows because, she said, kings always had big eyebrows. Then we all waited in the parking lot for our turn. The weather was unusually warm for October, and I felt itchy in my heavy toga. I envied Roger and Melissa, who wore tunics.

Roger began juggling the golden apples and then did tricks, tossing them under his legs or over his shoulder, crossing his wrists, jumping in place. I had never seen him so lively. Melissa caught sight of him and ran over. "Don't do that!" she said. He laughed and kissed her cheek, but she did not smile.

The Apple Pageant served as our town talent show. Mrs. Polanowski, the librarian, sang Irving Berlin's "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," and two men who worked at the hardware store recycled an Abbott and Costello routine. Mrs. Breen's tap-dancing class hammered the outdoor stage with shiny red shoes. At last it was our turn.

The audience numbered around seventy, most of them friends and family of the players. The rest simply weren't ready to leave the festival yet; they had tired of everything apple-oriented but still could not drag themselves home. They had the look of people dawdling in bed, in contrast to the actors' friends and the beaming mothers and fathers who were sure whatever happened on stage would be miraculous. It was hard to know which made us more nervous, the sleepy strangers or the alert familiar ones who hoped for more entertainment than the pageant was likely to supply. My own mother sat all the way in the back, and at first I thought hopefully that she had binoculars or a camera in her lap, but then I realized she had brought knitting.

Mr. Kintner stepped up to the podium. Without his suit coat, dressed in a toga, his matchstick wrists should have looked more fragile than ever. Yet he enlarged himself with his voice, speaking with the commanding rigor of a Roman orator as he narrated our pantomime of the myth of Atalanta.

As soon as Atalanta was born, her father, the king, seeing that she was not a boy, abandoned her on a hill near the country of Calydon. The goddess Artemis ensured that she was nursed by bears, and later a clan of hunters raised her. She grew up swift and strong; no man could catch her, which was fortunate, because the Delphic Oracle had told her that marriage would be her death. As a young woman she won a contest to kill a great, ravaging boar, and when her father heard about it he decided to recognize her after all. He demanded that she marry, however. She told him about the oracle's prophecy, but he responded, "Who are you going to listen to, a stranger in a cave, or your own father?" So she consented, on the condition that any potential suitor had to race her—if he won, he could be her husband, but if he lost, she would kill him.

Although Mr. Kintner had taught us that good public speakers choose different individuals in the audience to speak towards, I noticed that more often than not he addressed the corner where Ms. Giovanni sat with her husband. They had brought a cooler, and with wine glasses in their hands they watched Mr. Kintner with approval and a genial amusement. Like a Roman senator making his case, he strode across the stage, unable to remain behind the podium.

Yellow ropes marked out a track that encircled the stage, and here the races were staged. Atalanta raced one unlucky suitor and met him at the finish line with a spear, which she gleefully plunged through his armpit. He fell writhing to the ground with realistic moans. The second suitor turned around and ran the other way when he saw she had

reached the finish line, but she caught up and slew him, too. To my surprise, Melissa improvised a little jumping-up-and-down dance after each death.

Hippomenes was the third suitor to try. He had help from Aphrodite, who secured for him three golden apples. As soon as I gave the starting signal, he threw the first apple. Atalanta gave a cry of delight and stopped to pick it up while Hippomenes surged into the lead. She quickly outran him, but just as she began the second lap he threw the next apple, and once again she couldn't resist pausing to grab it up.

The third time around, as Atalanta neared the finish line, Hippomenes got cocky and, in an unscripted move, threw the last apple from behind his back, over his shoulder. He put enough force into it to sail it over Atalanta's head, but his aim was imperfect, and it flew into the crowd.

Melissa jumped over the yellow rope to hunt for the apple. The crowd tried to help her. Those who had been sitting on lawn chairs or blankets stood up to look for it. Some people said they'd seen it bounce over here; others had seen it roll over there. Soon everyone in that section was standing, shaking out blankets and jackets, hunting through the grass. "Well, it can't have vanished," Melissa said, darting impatiently from place to place. "Someone must have taken it. It couldn't just vanish by itself."

Mr. Kintner came out from behind the podium, hesitant, folding and unfolding his script. Hippomenes shouted, "Doesn't matter! I won the race! Time to get married!" But Melissa did not step back into character; her whole posture had changed, and it was only then that we saw how well she had been playing Atalanta, how she had so perfectly captured the Amazonian grace and cheerful confidence of the fastest person alive. Now she was panting with exhaustion, a few strands of her hair stuck with sweat to her tall forehead.

"I know it doesn't matter," she shouted. "I just don't see why anyone would steal it." Her face rippled, as if holding back the pressure of tears. She turned and headed toward the stairs that went up to the elementary school. Roger made as if to follow, but Ms. Giovanni reached her first and, touching her shoulder gently, accompanied her up the steps.

It took us a while to wash off our makeup. The elementary school sinks were so low that we had to hunch over them, and Roger had forgotten it was his job to buy cold cream. We were using a jar of mayonnaise that the janitor had found for us in the faculty lounge refrigerator. It worked all right, but we smelled like sandwiches.



Earlier in the day, Mr. Kintner had warned us that actors often felt sad when they washed off their makeup after the last performance, no matter how successfully it had gone. But we had never even finished. Roger moved with a contained agitation, grimly wiping the greasepaint from his face with paper towels, as if half expecting to be called back out to the stage to finish things. His tunic's yellow sash had come untied and dragged along the floor behind him. I wanted to tie it back up, tie him back together so he could become his old affable self again. But when I picked up the sash to fix it, he snapped, "Just leave it."

We ran out of mayonnaise, and our eyes remained rimmed with black, giving us a hollow, awake-at-three-A.M. look. "Well, everyone could probably guess the whole thing would end in marriage anyway," I said, trying to cheer him up as we put on our coats. "This way," I said, "the audience gets two endings—the one they knew was coming, and the unexpected one." But Roger only shrugged as we walked out to the parking lot behind the school.

The field where the pageant had been held was now deserted, the stage empty. Our props had already been removed, and the sun had just set. Melissa approached Roger, whispered something in his ear, slipped the two remaining golden apples into his coat pockets, and ducked back into the school.

Mr. Kintner closed the trunk of his car and came over to us. "Does anyone need a ride home?" he asked. Roger only waved good-bye and walked away. I said I would stay at the festival a little while longer, even though things were closing down. Mr. Kintner looked tired and dried out—his suit jacket hung from his body even more loosely than usual. Then Ms. Giovanni's truck pulled up alongside us, with the throne and the two arches in the back. Her husband leaned out the passenger's side. "Wonderful. Really enjoyed the play," he said, his white hair luminous in the twilight. Ms. Giovanni jumped out and ran to Mr. Kintner's side. "Don't look so sad, it's theater, it's about the unexpected," she said, and kissed him on the cheek. She waited for him to smile, then jumped back into the truck and drove away.

"*Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit,*" Mr. Kintner said, quoting the *Aeneid*. "Perhaps one day we will look back on this and laugh."

I shook his hand and headed off. But as I reached the corner of the school, I heard Melissa calling to Mr. Kintner, and so I turned around. Dressed in blue jeans and a white shirt, carrying her tunic, she walked with a slouch. "I ruined your play," she said. "I ruined it. I'm sorry." In the parking lot's orange floodlights, the two of them looked spectral, stage-lit. "I'm sorry, I should have kept on with the rest

of the story." She kept winding and unwinding her tunic around her arm. "I screwed up," she said. "I don't know why I got so mad."

"No, no," said Mr. Kintner. "Don't worry about it. The real Atalanta should have been so lucky. Not long after she married Hippomenes they misbehaved in a temple together and were killed by the gods. The oracle had been right after all."

For a while Melissa studied the pavement. "You didn't put that in the play," she said at last. Her tone implied disapproval that he had misrepresented the truth. She looked up at him. "You had it end with the marriage."

"Good heavens," he said, "why depress everybody?" And then he reached into the pocket of his suit coat and pulled out the missing golden apple.

She reached for it suddenly, and he jerked it away with a startled motion. But when she said, "Hey," and reached again, he intentionally raised it high in the air, jogging sideways as she chased him.

"Where did you find it?" she said.

He gave a short chuckle in reply, and handed the apple to her.

Feeling like a spy, I turned away, hot-cheeked, and walked to the front of the school. A breeze carried the smell of cotton candy toward me. I thought that now Roger and Melissa's relationship would end. Mr. Kintner must have rigorously combed through the grass after the performance, hunting for the third apple so that he could be the one to capture Melissa's heart. Hadn't his chuckle meant that?

Not until days later did I learn that a family in the audience had found the apple, which had bounced into their bag of doughnuts. They had returned it to Mr. Kintner as he and Ms. Giovanni were loading the set into her truck. Perhaps, then, he had teased Melissa only to lift her out of her earnest woe, perhaps he had only been playing some kind of theater game—the kind of game a teacher might play who realizes he's swept up his students into his own darkness.

But on that Sunday evening, as I walked back toward the festival, I believed he had found a way of forgetting Ms. Giovanni. I imagined he would give Melissa a ride home, talking to her with animation. I imagined Latin class would become even more claustrophobic, with Roger glowering unhappily on one side of me and Melissa pretending not to notice on the other, while Mr. Kintner shredded pink eraser after pink eraser. He would take Melissa on a stroll through his family's cider mill after school one day; he would show her, with a flourish, the rows and rows of mint apple jelly lined up for sale.

Eventually I found Roger by the Lions Club booth. Darkness had fallen, but most of the portable lights attached to the booths were still on. The Lions Club members were closing up, brushing fritter crumbs off the counter and pouring vats of used oil into metal canisters, taking great care not to spill any.

Roger paced back and forth. "Have you seen Melissa?" he asked, and I shook my head. "She said she was going to meet me here ten minutes ago," he told me. The pockets of his brown corduroy coat bulged with his two apples. I asked him if I could see one, and he handed it to me. The gold sparkles had worn away in places from having rolled on the ground, and my thumb found a soft, half-dollar-sized bruise.

It was then that I did something unlike me, something cruel in a way. I took my pocketknife and began peeling the apple. Roger had been glancing around agitatedly, so he didn't notice until I had a nine-inch strip of skin hanging from my knife. "Hey," he said. But I kept going, without meeting his eyes, saying only, "What were you going to do, let a good apple rot?" Finally, I had one long spiral of gold.

According to one legend, if you skin an apple all in one piece at midnight on Halloween and throw the peel over your shoulder, the peel will take the shape of your future spouse's initials. But Halloween wouldn't come for another two weeks, so I threw the skin onto one of the overflowing trash barrels. Then I sank my teeth into the apple. It was a McIntosh, not one of my favorites—a little too sweet—but a fine one nonetheless. Roger watched me eat for a while, and then pulled the other apple out of his coat and put his hand out for my knife, which I gave him.

The crowd had thinned out, and here and there men were already collapsing booths. Small trucks and vans inched through the streets, coming to carry away whatever merchandise hadn't sold, and over by the vacant lot I saw a flatbed truck pulling out with the Ferris wheel, folded like some gigantic dead beetle.

You could say what we were doing by eating the golden apples was symbolic, and then try to figure out what it symbolized. Certainly we weren't eating them because we were hungry. After the festival everyone in town was appled out, and for a week Kintner Farms couldn't give them away. If I'd meant anything by peeling the apple, though, once I started eating it I was only eating an apple. That subacid tang, the mildly rough texture against the tongue. Roger looked so solemn that I leaned close to him, as if to say something important, but instead

I opened my mouth to show the chewed-up apple. The laugh took him suddenly, and he began to choke. I pounded his back as he bent over, my hand whumping his corduroy coat, which was so padded I had no effect, and that seemed to make him laugh even harder.

When he finally straightened up, he looked much happier. All the blood had rushed to his face. He didn't know I'd lied about not having seen Melissa, and he didn't know how much I wanted to kiss him then. I didn't let myself know this either. We weren't eating the apples of the Tree of Knowledge, we were eating a couple of McIntoshes, we were eating the apples of stupidity, we were eating ordinary apples. They tasted good. When we had finished, we threw the cores into some ever-green bushes. It was my last October in Baldwin. The men in the Lions Club booth turned off their lights, and one of them handed me a heavy white box of fritters.



Ron Nyren's stories have appeared previously in *Mississippi Review* and elsewhere.

