Apples for the Teacher

by Emmet Rosenfeld

Apples for the teacher, an image as old as school itself.

This year would be different, I decided: apples from the teacher! The gnarled branches on the tree in my backyard were drooping from the weight of them. Years past, I let them fall to the lawn, an excuse not to mow, food for squirrels. This year I harvested, filling a big blue tub.

Unlike store-bought, these are green and flecked, imperfect. They fit in your palm like a rock. Good only for baking, a neighbor said, but in fact they taste fresh and crisp. Now there's apple cobbler in the fridge, apples on the workroom table. And a shiny apple on the desk of every student in sixth period, the creative writing class.

Smell them, I coax. What do apples make you think? I write about an imagined village in Russia, a place from where my family must have come, long ago. Harvesting the trees in fall, rows like claws reaching toward the sky.

Impossible winters, the cellar almost bare. The stove in the middle of the room, no running water. A few rotten apples nibbled by mice; when you cut away the bruised parts, nothing's left, but we were so hungry we ate it all. Fervent, rabid, a meaty half-gnawed apple better than the gnawing empty pit of a stomach never filled...

Lost in my paragraphs, far away, I absently raise the apple to my mouth, shattering the silence with a loud HA-RUNK.

Is everyone afraid of apples? Some students giggle, others keep on scribbling in their journals. A few study their apples intently, strange fruit seen for the first time. Minutes pass and thoughts fall to the pages. I do not know these students yet; I wonder what they're writing. At last, I hear it, an answering KA-CHUNK. I steal a glance to see who took a bite: it's Horace from Jamaica, new to our school. Patrick's next to him and he too takes a bite. "It's pretty good," he whispers. From then on, the silence is punctuated by curious crunching.

The members of this class will edit the school's literary magazine later this year, and many of their writings will fill its pages. I asked them to share an apple from their tree, in other words, some lines from either their writing about apples or another entry in their journals. Here are a few bites:

Apple of my eye, I see
Green, the color of envy
Speckled brown in twisted spots
Stemming up from my desktop...
—Eric Tippins

On the top of my apple there is a little hole. As you walk in there is a long hallway. In the hallway, there are old drawings of some caterpillars from a long time ago...
—Jheri Toy

It's one of those days, cloudy, rainy... I let my mind drift out the window, dodging raindrops, up and over those moody clouds and into that sun where it stops for a minute as if in greeting, or warming itself up from the wet journey, and then descends or ascends to the worlds that I've created for myself while sitting in gloomy classrooms, waiting for my visit with the sun...
—Banan Hager

...Can't be me they hate me
want to snake me
but I don't have time to travel in the garden
where evil lurks...
I refuse to fall in the pit
get bit
and have venom flowing through my veins
it's a shame...
—Jenyse Coleman

The map of my life is a two lane road that doesn't make for much of a tourist attraction...
Occasionally on an electric night a flash of lightning will fleetingly light the sleeping canvas...the seeds of nonconformity sprout forth in a sunlit, flashing, glittering plethora...
—Mary Courtney Wolfe

I feel empty when I don't have a dream... I am who I be? I am who I see? I am what I eat?... what I think?
—Ann Bannister

I am the apple.
—Leo Heinzl

The responses range as wide as the pitch and tenor of student's voices. Eric's formal lyric poetry exists side by side with Jenyse's rap; Jheri's fantasy has a different flavor than Banan's surrealism, or Mary Courtney's experimental adolescent angst contrasts with Leo's Zen-like sense of humor. On the first day of school, the kids filling the chairs are as alike as a bunch of apples in a grocery store bin. As seasons and quarters progress, identities emerge, until each student—like an apple held, considered, tasted—is unique.

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