

WILD APPLES

Field Notes from a River Farm

Wayne Curtis



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Wild Apples

We are motoring through the countryside, checking for blossom on the old crabapple trees of abandoned farms. Steve, my son, is driving his antique car, and I am sitting in the passengers seat nursing my camera. I have photographed a few wild trees that are all pink and white, as well as the blossom of lilac, chokecherry, hawthorn, and plum. At one of these farms I picked a bouquet of wildflowers to bring home and put in a vase to stand beside a basket of apples on the dining room table.

“Pull over,” I say, and point. “There’s an old tree just in there a ways.” Steve parks on the roadside and waits for me as I squeeze through a tangle of low-limbed spruce toward a tree that may or may not still be standing.

This is a thing my family does in the early spring, when the blossoms are out, and again in the autumn, when we can sample the fruits of those ancient trees we have gotten to know through the years. (Sometimes we go there in mid-summer and check on their progress.) We compare and contrast one crabapple’s flavour with that of one from a tree on another farm. All of these farms went out of exist-

ence long before any of us can remember. It's like a journey into the past. For generations the gathering of these crabapples has been a tradition in our family. We all have a sour tooth. My sister Daphne is so good at tasting that she can tell from what secret tree a certain apple was picked. And when we get together on fall Sundays, we exchange anecdotes in a loving mythology and with a flavour that carries not only the sweet sourness of a good crabapple but visions of the farmstead where it grew, the house, its history, where the family scattered to, which of them is still living, who their children and grandchildren are, and so on. And through that unique taste, the imaginative spell that accompanies each bite, a kinship has bonded us with these people, many of whom are long dead.

Those old trees carry the spirit of genealogy, the ghosts of grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and lovers, their youthful innocence, their desires, their guilt (confessed perhaps to the priest) and their dreams having forsaken them long years ago as they became one with nature. My own concept of paternity is that, through the centuries, these little crabs have come to be part of those of us who love them, as everything we eat eventually turns into human flesh. And if, some autumn, one of us is unable to get out, we may find a few crabapples in a sack on our front doorstep, with no note but the knowledge that a family member has made the rounds. And we savour the taste while trying to discern from which tree the fruit was picked.

When I was living in Ontario through the sixties, each September my mother sent me a box of crabapples, neatly

tied with a ribbon. I used them to treat my friends at work, people who had once lived in the country but had left to find jobs. Most had not gone back to visit in years and thus had all but forgotten the apple's significance in their lives. It was fun to watch them revel in that old youthful flavour, which, to like-minded people, appears to be the one thing that has stood the test of time, and watch their faces, hear the memories evoked by a taste that, for many, was bitter to the core. Once, in the city, I decorated the windowsills of an old stone church for Harvest Sunday. It was intriguing to watch people marvel at the decor. After the service, without guilt, shame, or any torment from my old-fashioned religious superstitions, I went back, stole the crabapples again, and treated the parishioners as I made my rounds looking for pledges on an every-member visitation day. Those crabapples were worth their weight in gold.

So you see, like certain pieces of aged music, fine art, or special people, these little crabapples have become sacred to my family. We are all crazy about the bittersweet flavour that, through the years, has helped to bond us together, cultlike. Even now, as Steve and I drive through a vast countryside and I sit looking out at the scenery, I'm experiencing something of old in the blossom, a fragrance that keeps on telling. Memories unravel like strings of old yarn that time has long since woven into a tapestry. For a brief moment.

I'm wondering if I've been dreaming life, or if indeed my life has gone back to being a dream. But at my age the memories matter more than visions of the future, and in

some obscure way I think the past is the stuff from which time is made. And that's why life goes by so quickly. Life is a series of dreams we try to make real, and so they cannot last. We grasp for pockets of flavour, sounds, and sights that take us to a certain place and age. It is said that we are never as close to our vanished loves as when we are in old familiar surroundings.

I know too that in my memory, triggered by any of my senses, life is romantic compared to the cruel old world of adulthood. It is a place to go, an escape. When you're young, everything is a big deal, but when you're old, nothing is a big deal. In my youth, the simplest of things brought lasting pleasure. Perhaps this was because of happenstance, but that inner theatre entertains me even now, especially now. It's a kind of guided dreaming, like the writing of fiction, the scene always out of date but each word a shared symbol with a message that is wistfully visual — the great characters with whom I shared things, the bonding, the love. It's like an old radio show that keeps improving with technology. I cannot recall the first time I ever picked a crabapple, or tasted one, but I do remember the experience with someone who, even now, fills a sacred place in my mind.

Perhaps, down the road, someone will paint this scene, inspired by that most utopian of all fruits, the lowly crabapple. We would see them from the road on our way from school. Watched through the spring as the old grey tree, so jagged and gnarled we thought it might have been dead, sprouted a new leaf, then a delicate pink blossom, so fragile

to the bee's touch that it scattered in the wind. It left stems of green pin cherries that turned to olives, then marbles, then plum-sized apples, green, yellow, red, and finally a deep purple, hanging from branches drooping nearly to the ground, like alder branches weighed down from an ice storm or Bible pictures of the trees in the Garden of Eden.

The apple tree was in the centre of a clearing, where it shaded a crumbling rock cellar that gave the property its name, the Old Mersereau place. Here the wild plum, lilac, and hawthorn bushes made a hedge that separated rusted farm relics from what had once been a dooryard and elm-treed front garden. Here, on nights of the full moon, the old-world ghosts with their iron-banded wooden buckets lumbered to a spring on paths long since healed over. We could hear their whisper in the trees, and their rustic song remained in the chuckle of the brook. Here we watched the apples ripen, until the leaves turned a dozen shades of yellow and scattered in the funeral breezes. The old tree dropped its fruits to litter the undergrowth, attracting the jay and the partridge, so that it attracted the hunters. Until the snow fell and all trees became barren and equal and the old farmstead was forgotten once more.

We had gone there only for crabapples, had picked our way through lodged grass, unscythed for decades, carefully stepped around rusted tin cans, bottomless pails, and blueberry-studded bear scat. We squeezed through a tangle of thistle, tripped on skeletal limbs and found that scarred old trunk whose roots made the earth swell underfoot.