

## Wind Fall Apples in October

My brothers and I gather this fall,  
as usual at the old home place, try to settle old issues.  
When will we clear the vines from the old spring,  
shore up the rot in the apple house,  
consider impossible plans for a second bathroom,  
a clothes dryer on the back porch for rainy spells,  
decide which trees to cut, dry out,  
and split for winter heating,  
whether it would be worth it to prune  
the ancient pear and apple trees  
planted in the orchard in the 1800's.

We don't fertilize or spray,  
although we talk about it.  
No matter what we do, the fruit  
bends the brittle trees to breaking point.  
It falls, unpicked, enjoyed mostly by  
the occasional bear or deer,  
and by me, determined to bake the traditional pie  
to honor our ancestors, particularly our grandfather  
who carried those seeds by horseback  
all over the mountains of North and South Carolina,  
Georgia and Kentucky, where today gnarled trees continue to bear  
the fruit of his labors: Jonathans, Wine Saps, the pink June apples,  
the ruddy Macintosh, Banana Apples, Early Transparents and gritty Sand Pears.

We no longer can attach the names to the trees,  
know the best eating apples, which ones to put up for applesauce.  
We aren't sure which varieties would survive winter in the log apple house,  
so we don't save any for winter-roasting in the fire place.  
The time for asking questions is long past.  
The boys tell me the apples are not worth bothering with this year,  
too much rain, or too little rain. I forget.  
But, as always, I will gather as many as my apron will hold,  
mostly the windfalls as I can't reach the high branches.  
I shake down a few from the lower limbs.  
making sure I take a few of the better ones from each tree.

They are all riddled with the paths of worms,  
and I contemplate how many worms it would take  
to do that damage and how many are still lurking about.  
Cutting around the apples' brown spots, I will make that two-crusteD, lard-rich pie,  
and watch my brother's pride as they devour their own pie apples  
topped with ice cream or melting slabs of red-rimmed "rat" cheese.  
I brush aside the vision I have of all those worms  
continuing to feast on our apples, gnawing silently, unseen.

## Quarantine

*Our nature is revealed in the course of our life's experiences -Jonas Salk*

In Cashiers Valley, North Carolina,  
I was sitting in Miss Elaine Norton's  
fourth grade class listening while she read  
to us the adventures of Tom Sawyer and  
Huckleberry Finn. It was late September  
but even in the mountains Indian summer  
was lingering lazily on, and I could hardly  
keep my eyes open. Suddenly,

there was a sharp rap at the closed door,  
and we all sat up straight in surprise.  
Miss Norton called my name and a whole class  
of curious eyes turned on me as I was led away  
into the library across the hall  
where I had read almost all the books:  
Cotton in My Sack, Circus Shoes,  
all the Miss Minivers and Tom Swifts, Katherine,  
my favorite about a little Russian girl who slept  
on top of a stove with her whole family,  
and even The Able McGloughlins, in which  
a man and woman ran naked across the snow,  
that one obviously donated unread.

I loved the library and all the  
disorganized worn-out books, even the boring ones  
that I read only once, and when Miss Norton said  
I could start painting my bird picture, and I imagined  
the red cardinal and white dogwoods I would trace  
on my piece of clear window glass  
and how the background would be all black  
with just a bit of crinkling silver foil taped behind  
to give it sparkle, I felt my chest swell  
with happiness at being chosen;  
but my stomach felt funny

and the room was too hot and all the characters  
in my beloved books seemed to be peering out  
with puzzled faces, and I knew something  
was not right. It was not my turn to paint,  
and Miss Norton was always fair and orderly.  
When I looked out the big window and saw  
my class pouring out the side door, lining up  
for "Red Rover, Red Rover," and Miss Norton  
didn't come to get me for recess, I was sure something  
was wrong. I turned away

from my friends choosing sides without me,  
away from the glare of the sunny playground,  
back to the library now shrunk small  
and dark as the cave where Tom and Becky were lost,  
and I was scared and wanted to go home.

But when my Father came with his big sad face,  
I wanted to go anywhere but home,  
and I left the tops off all the paints  
and knew I wouldn't be painting that red bird  
or knowing how Tom Sawyer out of that cave  
and that it wasn't going to matter.

**The summer of 1950 over 33,000 people were stricken with polio, most of them children. Salk's vaccine was still unperfected and the push and pull of iron lungs the size of cars filled our nightmares. We stuck dimes in cards to send to the March of Dimes; and all over the country, pools, parks and theaters were closed and children were kept at home and forced to nap. Polio was in the air. It was in the food. The virus could grow even on a piece of paper. It could be anywhere. But, we didn't have a pool, a park, or even a theater in our tiny town and by the time school started we felt safe tucked away in the mountains and had begun to relax. But my two-year-old brother Mark had a ruptured appendix and he would bring the dark disease home from the hospital and terror to our little town.**

When I got home, Mark was already gone, left alone at the orthopedic home in Ashville where the nurses were rude and sent Mama and Daddy two hours back home, powerless against the system that wouldn't let them stay with their little boy.

A stranger came and nailed a white sign on our door. The charred remains of Mark's clothes and toys, and even books, smoked and spewed sparks like a smoldering volcano

in the back yard pit where we usually burned trash.  
My five-year-old brother Jon stared quietly in disbelief.

Mark was gone, but fear and grief fell on us, ghostly  
and invisible, smothering our very breath with its cold heat.  
It hid

    under my bed with the dust bunnies,  
        waiting to grab my feet,  
            and slunk around corners  
                ready to jump out when I least  
expected it. It sat with us at the dinner table  
where we ate in grim silence, knowing it would pounce  
if we let down our guard.

The phone rarely rang.

Nobody visited.

In time, Mark would come home, thinner  
but almost well. The quarantine would end,  
and Mama would threaten the school  
with uncharacteristic vehemence  
until they reluctantly let me come back.

But for a long time I would be suspect,  
a little girl who preferred the library and books  
to playground games. And life for me  
was never quite the same  
once I came to know  
the power of exclusion

## **Within Lies the Mystery**

In memory of Anna Simashov Yepishin, Poet  
April 30, 1988--April 30, 2013

I vowed I would not hold vigil again.  
How could I?  
Already I had seen the dance  
knew how it would end.  
Last summer was the first rehearsal  
I was sitting in the dark waiting for a miracle,  
a long wait, and then

the limp stem of the night-blooming Cereus rises up,  
the bud swells,  
a touch of white appears at the tip.  
It is the night of the dance.  
The dark air is charged, heavy with purpose,  
the bud quivers, shimmers in readiness.

The dance begins  
too subtle to be seen.  
Futile hours pass  
as I try to catch the slightest action.  
Little by little the bloom arrives,  
without my seeing a single tremor.  
Yet I feel the air shiver  
startling sacred alive,  
the pure whiteness of flowering  
leaps into the darkness,  
lights up the moonless night.

I bend and look deeply  
within the trembling petals,  
fragrant fragile fresh,  
trying to find the very heart of you,  
poetry so deep, so intricate,  
webs of tangled loveliness,  
one stalwart stamen  
dead center  
rising as if to greet tomorrow.

I don't want to see the final act  
of your one-night performance.  
It will come as it must.  
Before dawn, you collapse, head down,  
skirt of flesh-pink ribbon  
falling around the white soul of you.

Already I have seen the dance  
felt its mystery,  
know how it will end,  
Still  
I sit vigil once again,  
long for a second blooming.



## ***La Apasionada***

You hunch there, a fat toad in the wet morning of my garden,  
cigar lit, paper open, waiting for me to serve your breakfast.  
Here is your coffee, scalding hot as you prefer it.  
May it burn you as you have burned me.  
Here are your eggs, running blood, as you like them.  
*Huevos Divorciados.*

The poet in you will not miss the irony on your plate.  
But you will brush my intrusion aside  
as you would a fly that might alight on your dish of honey,  
any bit taken from you begrudged.

I abhor your rumpled suit, rumpled hair, rumpled face,  
rumpled soul, stale from another's rumpled bed,  
another new model needed to inspire passion in your work.  
I want to screech like your mynah bird - its cage door always locked,  
crash my crayon-bright offerings over your head,  
plate by plate until your rumpled brain spews like an erupting volcano  
your arrogance, "*reservados todos los derechos.*"  
If I am unhappy, I should go. Yes?  
But how can I run when I cannot walk,  
crippled in every way - by lust, ambition, jealousy,  
my need to be you, to own your heart, your body, your genius,  
to transfuse your blood into my veins.

Is it so strange that I am neither man nor woman?  
You plundered my femininity, my soul,  
claimed my moon for background  
on your canvas.

## Feeding the Hungry

In the beginning days at St. Joseph's,  
I left the kitchen,  
went outside to the yard  
where the hungry waited impatiently  
for paper plates piled high.  
Father blessed the scraps  
of donated produce  
refashioned to satisfy palates  
accustomed to receiving what is given.  
Not thirsting for words,  
they burned holes with weary eyes.

Soon, I chose not to confront  
the beaten-down faces or defiant ones,  
though the latter caused less discomfort.  
Now I stay in the kitchen, stir pots,  
finish sauces and dressings  
to cover the chopped plums and potatoes,  
roasted and stewed  
to hide gashes and bruises.

Afterwards, we volunteers  
sit around a large table inside,  
eat left-overs from all  
we have prepared, surprised  
and proud of our miracle with  
"loaves and fishes."  
In cheerful camaraderie  
between most unlikely friends:  
old and young, black and white,  
blessed and maimed,  
from Mexican migrant worker  
to *gran dame* of charity,  
we break last remnants of bread together,  
wash pots, mop floors slowly,  
leave at last, relieved  
to find the court yard empty  
of burned-out eyes.