

Appleless  
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I once knew a girl who wouldn't eat apples. She wove her walking around groves and orchards. She didn't even like to look at them. They're all mealy, she said. Or else too cheeky, too bloomed. No, she stated again, in case we had not heard her, our laps brimming with Granny Smiths and Red Deliciouses. With Galas and Spartans and yellow Golden Globes. But we had heard her, from the very first; we just couldn't help offering again. Please, we pleaded, eat. Cracking our bites loudly, exposing the dripping wet white inside.

It's unsettling to meet people who don't eat apples.

The rest of us, now, eat only apples, to compensate. She has declared herself so apple-less, we feel we have no other choice. We sit in the orchard together, cross-legged, and when they fall off the trees into our outstretched hands, we bite right in. They are pale green, striped red-on-red, or a yellow and orange sunset. They are the threaded Fujis, with streaks of woven jade and beige, or the dark and rosy Rome Beauties. Pippins, Pink Ladies, Braeburns, Macintosh. The orchard grows them all.

We suck water off the meat. Drink them dry. We pick apple skin out from the spaces between our teeth. We eat the stem and the seeds. And for the moment, there are enough beauties bending the branches for all of us to stay fed for awhile. We circle around the core, teeth busy, and while we chew, we watch the girl circle our orchard, in her long swishing skirts, eyes averted.

One day we see her, and it's too much. She is so beautiful on this day, her skin as wide and open as a river. We could swim right down her. It's unbearable to just let her walk off, and all at once, we abandon our laps of apples and run over. Her hair is so long and wheatlike you could bake it into bread. For a second our hearts pang, for bread. Bread! We've been eating only apples now for weeks.

We close in; we ring her. Her lips fold into each other; our lips skate all over her throat, her bare wrists, her empty palms. We kiss her like we've been starving and she tilts her head down so she doesn't have to look at us. We knead her hair and kiss down the long line of her leg beneath the shift of her skirt. We pray to her and our breath is ripe with apple juice. You can see the tears start races down her face while our hands move in to touch the curve of her breasts and the scoop of her neckline. She is so new. There are pulleys in her skin. Our fingers, all together, work their way to her bare body,

past the voluminous yards of cloth. Past those loaves of hair. We find her in there, and she is so warm and so alive and we see the tears, but stop? Impossible. We breathe in, closer. Her eyelashes brighten with water. Her shoulders tremble like doves. She is weeping into our arms, she is crumpling down and we are inside her clothes now and our hands and mouths are everywhere. There's no sound at all but the slip of skin and her crying and the apples in the orchard thumping, un-caught: our lunches and dinners and breakfasts. It's an unfamiliar sound, because for weeks now, we have not let even one single fruit hit dirt.

She cries through it all and when we're done and piled around her, suddenly timid and spent, suddenly withered nothings, she is the first to stand. She gathers her skirts around herself, and smooths back down her hair. She wipes her eyes clear and folds her hands around her waist. She is away from the orchard before we can stand properly and beg her to stay. Before we can grovel and claw at her small perfect feet. We watch her walk and she's slow and proud but none of us can possibly catch her. We splay on the ground in a circle instead as she gets smaller and smaller on the horizon.

She never comes by the orchard again, and in a week, all the apples are gone. They fall off the trees and the trees make no new ones. The air smells like snow on the approach. No one dares to mention her but every morning, all of our eyes are fixed on the road, waiting, hoping, staring through the bare branches of an empty orchard. Our stomachs rumble, hungry. The sky is always this same sort of blue. It is so beautiful here.