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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

WILD APPLES

POEMS BY TIMOTHY WALSH

TIMOTHY WALSH grew up in New Jersey, but he has lived in Madison, Wisconsin, for the past twenty years. When he is not writing, he spends a lot of time on the water, sailing, canoeing, and kayaking. His poems and short stories have appeared in many publications, including *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Soundings East*, *Rivendell*, *Wisconsin Academy Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Free Verse*, and *West Wind Review*. Walsh won the "Grand Prize" in the 2004 Atlanta Review International Poetry Competition and was a finalist for the Ann Stafford Poetry Prize. Two of his short stories have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes.

Walsh has a B.A. from Boston College and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His book of literary criticism, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature*, was published in 1998 by Southern Illinois University Press. He is currently the Director of the Cross-College Advising Service at UW–Madison.

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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

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TIMOTHY WALSH



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FIRST EDITION

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*Dedicated with love
to my wife,
Barbara*

Words from Wine

Was it from a wine press, then,
that all this flows?
That rickety wine press Gutenberg rigged
 into a printing press,
the movable type interchangeable as grapes?

Do we owe to wine, then,
these great harvests of words
pressed into vast yields of books,
portable as bottles,
precious as spring water flowing through
 a thirsty land?

Do we owe it all to the vine
that we shelve our books in libraries
as we cellar our wine in waiting rows,
putting up words and wine against our future need?

Was it the wine press, after all, that has made us
into such drunkards of the word
that we imbibe by the hour from folded sheets
 of paper,
turning pages like doors that open up
fathomless spaces within ourselves?

Willowing in Winter

Willowing while the river ran wild past our feet,
we reached out reckless from the bank
to grasp the longer shoots dangling over water.

Just one more armful, you said, just one more
sheaf to finish that last basket that sits
with ribs exposed on the dresser
looking something like a shipwreck.

Back home, you kneel amid discarded clippings,
twisting water-soaked willows round the basket's ribs,
sometimes using feet or teeth to secure loose strands.

Pen in hand, I watch and write,
weaving words like willows round a delicate frame
that has no strength until the willow's warp
binds it to itself,
flexible yet stronger than it will ever need to be.

Words *are* more willow than water,
more a growing thing than a flowing,
to be shaped into a woven web whose worth
is partly in itself and partly in what it will carry.

From amid your clutter comes a small thing of integrity.
You speak of all the sap in a quart of syrup,
of the gallons of milk in a block of cheese,
of the canceled pages behind my lines. . . .

In the hollow of the bed,
we weave our arms round each other,
twist together our souls' desire like licorice,
and there is no wind more wild than our blood.

Willowing while the river ran eternally toward the sea,
I saw your toe touch water when you leaned
nearly too far out,
and I knew your limbs and the limbs of the tree
drank somehow from one source,
and my love opened upward and out,
filling the sky with blue.

The Nursery at Night

Here we stand at the potting bench,
father and son and a heap of soil,
your three-year fingers delighted with the dirt
and the filling and emptying of pots.
I tell of how from simple seeds
all flowers and foods blossom,
how without grass there'd be no cows,
and how from out of grains we grow.
You turn giddy with the thought of trees
as I break open a catalpa pod
and spill silken wings in your hand.

Rattling seed packets, you plead to begin,
thinking to watch plants rise and flower
on the instant like a time-lapse movie.

But already I see exactly how each morning
we'll run to the sun room where our nursery
will sit on the long, low radiator,
to watch for when those first pale seed leaves
poke through the moss, leaning toward light.

We press seeds into spongy sphagnum,
and more end up on the floor than in pots,
but it matters not at all
since we have more than anyone could want.

Soon, sleepy-eyed and slow, you yawn
a long, milk-breathed sigh,
and I carry you up to bed
where, exhausted, you sink into the pillow
mumbling about the moon.

Later, sitting by your side, I sip hot tea,
debating if we are more an annual,
leaving only seeds behind,
ourselves dissolved to nothing,
or perennial, dying back to earth
but burgeoning again somehow
in some unimaginable soil.

Wallace Stevens' Garden

I think of the eggplants that Wallace Stevens grew
in the turned backyard soil of Hartford,
each one perfect as a poem, plump and enigmatic.

Did he harvest tomatoes by the bushel,
sun-ripened with an ambiguous acid-sweet bouquet?

In among the salad greens, did he sculpt leaf lettuce,
deleting larger leaves to force energy into the growing tip?

And did he relish arugula? I'm sure he must have
relished arugula—its pungent, pepper-spice tang,
such a carnival of flavor in an unremarkable leaf.

In the cutting garden, what wild zinnias
or bearded iris did he snip to grace his table vase?

I admit I do not know, but I feel sure
Wallace Stevens would nibble fresh arugula
while he sat on a shady garden bench
wearing a ridiculous straw hat,
watching the circus of squirrels
tumbling across the yard,
bemused by the raucous visitation of grackles.

Blue Kayak

On a lake wider than desire,
with a paddle of ash and cherry,
in a kayak blue as midnight, gliding
through the still time just after sunrise
when light cascades from a cathedral-vaulted sky
alive with swallows and a crane's ancient call,
past a solitary heron standing motionless
on a driftwood tree. . . .

Propelling this sapphire kayak, purling
through emerald beds of lake weeds,
rousing dragonflies sleeping by thousands,
who rise in the air, weightless as angels,
to join the dance of the paddle.

Palestrina in a Pickup

Past choirs of pines and snow-dusted cedars,
hauling a load of flagstones
down this backcountry forest road,
he listens to the hypnotic hum of the engine
while ethereal voices on the radio
resound off the curve of the windshield.

Under the hood, the V-8 is purring—
lifters, cams, rocker arms, and pistons
moving together in harmony—
an engine he's stood over so long with tools
that it's become more familiar than his child.
And now these voices, smooth as oil-bathed machinery,
altos, trebles, and basses singing from somewhere far off,
sent through the air from some distant transmitter
to the truck's steel antenna. . . .

He lights a cigarette as the Credo flows
 into the Sanctus and Benedictus.
Smoke fills the cab like incense,
rising from the coal-end of the cigarette
 like a coiling spirit.

He looks out across the forested hills
and senses his wife beside him—her weight
upon the bench seat, her perfume mingling
 with the smoke—
his wife, dead these four years now,
gone, but beside him in the truck
as surely as this music from a bygone time,
as surely as the smoke that fills his lungs
or the hum of the engine
that washes over him like a warm bath.

When the Earth Exhales

When the earth exhales damp vapors that freeze
heavy and stiff on the gray morning grass
and coat the trees with crystal silk creaking in the wind,
the chipmunks rummage in the winter garden,
nibbling brussels sprouts and chard and carrot tops
and know by the signs it is time
to stop awhile in the earth.

When, from out of the overcast, snowflakes
descend, fluttering madly across a new-manured field
so the blaze orange hunters seem tongues of flame
contesting the frost, a rusted combine sits indifferent
amid the storm, and I know the ice
on the fishpond is fit for an auger
where into dark depths I'll drop a line,
angling for whatever from the sealed underside
of winter will come.

Plastering

Cracks are inevitable as wrinkles
in an old house that's been slowly settling
these seventy years—
hairline cracks spiderwebbing walls,
pressure cracks spanning ceilings
wide as frozen lakes,
a few jagged lightning bolt cracks
descending on arches and windows.

To repair a crack well, you must first widen it.
Gouge out the loose plaster with probing tools,
scraping away old layers of paint that record
the changing styles of lost decades.

Cover the cracks with fiberglass mesh,
then work the plaster rhythmically,
feathering the angle of the plaster knife,
laying the swath in smooth motions. . . .

As you work, Chopin mazurkas on the stereo
insinuate themselves into the wet plaster.
Your arm motions fall into three-quarter time,
and the work becomes something
more like dance.

Arm strokes blend into arm strokes,
working the plaster, the mind blank as a wall.
Hours pass. The piano seems an echo
of eternity beckoning
as you work on the house, and the house
works on you.

Forever after, you see plastered surfaces
as frozen artifacts of muscular motion,
and, sitting in the quiet of the room,
you can hear faint mazurkas
echoing in the walls.

Bicycle Bicycle

She pedals standing,
light on her tires,
fingers encircling handlebars
as bracelets encircle wrists,
kicking up her skirt, kicking up
her skirt so it flounces playfully behind,
hair streaming in the sunlight,
uncurling in the curling wind,
her thoughts on last night's lover
and not the streaming traffic
that snarls the crowded streets.

Words as Wild Apples

Beneath thin red skin
is soft white flesh, both tart and sweet.
Locked within sleep tomorrow's trees.
Round like worlds, clustered like galaxies—
cut them sideways to see stars within.

They hang in thousands through this thicket,
this old abandoned orchard
some forgotten homesteader dreamed
into life and left to run rampant
across this sloping ridge.

A dozen storm-bent parent trees still live—
Gravenstein or Spitzenberg, perhaps—
their apples dwarfing the small and twisted fruit
of the countless wild crabs that have sprung
from the orchard apples' seeds.

That is the way of apples, always reverting
to wilder strains, no two entirely alike,
since apples are, like us, not true to seed.

Down the road, the neat and grafted groves
proclaim the sure profit of convention.
A sunburnt orchard man scythes back
the creeping progress of the thicket
against his trim and measured rows.

If you listen, he'll explain the virtues
of grafting, of removing all sky-bound limbs,
warning that it is far easier to make a thicket
of a grove than a grove of a thicket.
But somewhere in his bones, he knows
the unknown in apples sleeps
within a few black kernels,
while from grafting nothing new can come.

If this alphabet were a clutch of seeds,
this page a new-turned soil, imagine
what might burst wild as spring seedlings
upon some fallow slope of the mind,
words budding in upland hollows
to bear strange new fruit and fill
our cups with strange dark ciders. . . .

Wild apples hang high above our heads.
In them, hear echoes of thunder, resonance
of rain. After sunset, come wander
through the night, and together we shall know
 words as wild apples,
 poems as flowering crabs.

Where the Air Is Wild

There is a road close by the clouds
 beyond the leaning farm.
She walks there mornings and at dusk
 where the air is wild.

No mower rips the wayside grasses;
 no people press their eyes;
Yet I've seen her mornings and at dusk
 alone and with her child.

There is a road that hugs a ridge
 beyond the tottering barn.
She sings there mornings and at dusk
 where the air is wild.

The Rattlers at Spirit Lake

Seldom seen, the rattlesnakes
are sunning themselves somewhere
on the quartzite ledges high above.

Spirits dwell here, too,
sure as the scent of pine,
while turkey vultures slowly circle the bluffs,
so stark against the sky
that never seeing a rattler only increases
your admiration for their stealth.

If you sleep in the hollow of a wing
beside the eagle mound, you'll dream
of flight, of soaring above clouds.
You'll see rattlesnakes coiled below
on craggy outcroppings within yourself.

When you awaken, lake water lapping
will be the rhythm of your heart.

Paddling to Plummer's Cove

Through swirling lake mist,
 our canoe's prow . . .
Beyond the rim of pine and birch,
dawn's fiery aura ignites the haze.
The mist is so thick, we can hardly make out the water
where our paddles find their grip.

Pulling for Plummer's Cove, stroke upon stroke,
this aluminum hull our second skin,
we move as one within our craft.
A solitary loon calls to the departing night.
Silence thickens in the aftermath.

Greyness gradually lightens. The mist shape-shifts.
Now it is a lens, bringing all things close.
We glide the last few yards, paddles suspended,
 dripping.

Beyond hemlock-hidden entrance,
 in stillness smooth as mirror,
sleeping ducks blanket the sandy banks,
 beaks tucked neatly under wing.

Now! See there, exquisite and aloof,
 a great blue heron!
among cattails and lily pads
 foraging.

We sink within the forest's repose
where all chance forms of sentience flicker,
drifting, alone, together,
grounded to the hull's cold metal.

Regally, the heron rises, paddling air.

The last fingers of mist disperse
as a strengthening sun breaks through.
We paddle our canoe, returning,
cutting through ripples of a second world.

Upon Midnight Tempests

Upon midnight tempests we toss and roll,
riding the spindrift seas of night
propped amid pillows of feather and silk.
The creaking box spring merges with the cricket's cry
while a quavering candle throws shadows on the walls.

You say our molecules were forged in distant stars
long before the earth was born—that perhaps
we two are made of the selfsame star-stuff
come together again at long last.

I wonder if this arch of night is nothing but
the starry vault within the skull thrown large
against some vast umbrella of black
where a flashing synapse and shooting star
merge in a single blazing arc.

I run my hand along your hip
warmly aglow in candle shadow,
and we rekindle a soft zodiacal light
falling luminous across the bedsheets.

You clasp the bedpost. A wineglass spills.
Burgundy-soaked, the mattress takes on
the ruddy bouquet of passion. . . .

Later, we collapse upon each other,
for a moment tightening a tourniquet around time,
knowing that whatever eludes the shackles of words
crouches in the night space of the heart
where galaxies pinwheel through fathomless dark.

Nightfishing

He walked the long midnights
fly-fishing words from the inky black
lake of the sky, wind-furrowed hair
an understudy for meadow grass.

Hip-wading down darkened lanes,
he sensed what watched from shadows,
neatly fly-casting the limpid pools
to tempt some trophy prize under
overhanging ledge.

At dawn, he arranged the nightly haul,
placing each tapered weight against
the ambient ebb and flow of distant
ocean breakers pulsing through his heart.

Stringing them now along taut lung lines,
avoiding a too neat beat of long and short,
hard and soft, delighting in something
more self-organized, patterns as arresting
as an oak or iris or star-flecked sky.

By evening, he set his rod and tackle
to rights.

Cedars

They are nothing but a plain row of cedars,
an arbor vitae hedge, a property line
marking the boundary between flesh and frost,
lungs and leaves, dreams and dust.

A measured row of nine, planted a decade ago
when of an evening I lowered
the burlap-balled roots into the earth.

Now I measure my own spent years
in the growth of cedar tops.

Greener than the deepest shades of love's longing
after love,
jade moments mirroring my emerald thoughts. . . .

I have seen them weighed down by snow,
in ice storms that split frost-brittle branches.
I have walked their line in fall and in springtime's mud—
have watched them retreat to winter's olive drab,
then surge with a thaw to a green beyond green.

Arctic midnights, I've stood stone still
beside these cedars, held my breath,
and felt them singing to the moon,
while of a summer's noon the blanket
of Queen Anne's lace around their feet
contrives a courtly grace.

Once, cleaning the cedar closet,
among folded woolens and comforters,
I stood amid the cedar-thick air, amid
the whorled grain panels, stood as if within the tree
itself, as if within secret sap channels
running from earth to sky.

And for an instant I knew how,
in the looming dark of dissolution,
we might work through the rooted loam
to lodge within such branching sapience.

My Father's Canoe

Cedar planked, it cut the waves,
sharp-bowed and feather light,
dodging tugs and ferries
across the Hudson to the Palisades.

You tell it regular as ritual—
how you'd lunch on sardines and bread
looking back at Manhattan,
then climb the cliffs
to taste danger
and stare down death.

Again and again you rehearse
how you sold it during the war
for a lousy fifty dollars.

Cedar canoes now knife through my dreams—
memories never my own, now made mine,
radiating outward like the paddle's ripple.

Reaching for Raspberry Light

The breeze is freshening out of the northwest.
Rounding Red Cliff point, the swell steepens in the channel.
To starboard, Oak Island looms, greenly forested
 amid bounding blue waters.
We hold our course on a broad reach, slicing through whitecaps.
I tighten the backstay to spill some wind from the main
feeling like a rider reining in a prancing colt.
“There,” I say, pointing into the distance. “There. You can just see it.”
On a small island far ahead, sunlight glints on polished glass—
 a tiny tower jutting above the trees.
After so many years, here we are once again
 reaching for Raspberry Light,
watching it grow larger until we can make out the white
 clapboard siding and the red roof.
“Raspberry Light.” I nod to the others. Inevitably, my thoughts run
to the berries back home along the back yard fence,
raspberries plump and juicy, translucent in the sunlight—
golden sunshine streaming through pellucid bodies,
the light tinted a rich red, radiant as wine.
Tonight, we’ll anchor in Raspberry Bay and watch the lowering sun
 turn redder by degree,
and then, for a brief moment just before dark,
the whole world is revealed, infused with raspberry light.

Sailing by the Moon

It's true the wind generally dies at dusk,
but later, when the world is safe in houses,
the night breeze gathers strength.
Tonight, a crescent moon rises in the east, a sliver of light
not bright enough to hide the stars.
In the motor launch, we seven glide across the mooring field
past dark hulls swinging sleepily at mooring pins like horses
held by halters.

We scramble aboard, loose the mainsail in billowing folds,
and hoist it, pull by pull, up the mast, a tall, white wing luminous
in the jeweled night.
We let go the mooring line and ghost across dark waters,
weaving through the mooring field as we raise the jib and gather speed,
our wake streaming phosphorescent behind us,
bow lifting and plunging over waves.

Gradually, the shore lights fall away.
Beneath this scimitar moon, our voyage seems a mythic quest
for some magical substance—
the philosopher's stone, the *soma* of the Hindus, a grail
or golden fleece.
But what we are seeking is the diamond night itself.

Soon, the boat finds its rhythm, rising and falling
hypnotically with the waves.
The black waters below and the night sky above seem one.
With two at the helm, we gather on the foredeck,
breathing in the gusting winds that fill our sails,
knowing that we sleep by day and awaken with night.
We gaze up at the stars till we grow dizzy,
seeing farther for the lack of lights or obscuring sun.
holding fast to shrouds and lifelines.

Sailing deeper and deeper through shadowless dark,
the boat seems not floating on water
 but sleeking through space,
as we leave the world behind,
 scudding by the moon.

What the Snow Fence Says

Across the blank and sloping field
where, under slate November skies,
crows are pecking at underbrush,
a fragile fence—chicken wire and wood pickets,
many splintered from long use—
draws a brave line across the rolling surges,
marking off the inside from the out,
the here from the there.

The wide gaps between slats make it seem
more nothing than something,
more a scaffolding for what will come
than anything that works.

Rust red against mute autumn browns,
it is what someone thought sufficient.

When the north wind drives the snow
through trees and across clearings,
the fence stands fast, a slight impediment
to the large flakes settling on furrowed earth.
Wind moves through it as well as snow
so that it seems of no consequence.

But soon narrow finger-drifts grow
against each picket, and then
snow piles against snow,
blocking even the gaps, thickening and rising.
Higher up, where the fence remains,
the storm blast passes through,
unable to harm what won't resist,
while the rising drift anchors the slats
ever more secure.

Soon only a mounting wall of snow
halts still more snow while the fence reposes,

like a Pharaoh entombed,
awaiting spring thaw,
content in the knowledge that
success is a matter of knowing
what not to do.

The Marsh in Winter

If you stand and listen,
you will hear the voice.
Reeds sharp as rapiers rasp the wind.
Frost creaks in the trees.
Sunlight, ice-bright, falls from the sky.
Scattered cedars and junipers loom like shadows.
Sheathed in ice, a willow droops heavily
 across the path.
Driven snow packs the creviced bark of cottonwoods.
Once-hidden bird nests now plainly marked
 by a white cap of snow. . . .

Out on the marsh, blue water shows through shifting ice.
Tall brown reeds, slim as dancers, bend in the breeze.
A hundred thousand cattails, each one lit
 by the low-angled light of a westering sun,
each brown seed head blazing
 like the head of a saint.

Skating on Spirit Lake

Moonlight croons across the craggy bluffs.
The pines are wind harps, resonant and green.
Overhead, the star-flecked bowl of a lute
hangs close, while our flashing skates scatter
diamond chips across the glassy surface.

The lake is free of snow and frozen smooth,
a night rare as sapphire. Arctic air
steals in on stinging winds, rebuking all
clipped and tinsel words.
By our clouds of warm breath vanishing
 we know each other in silence.
Look, the stars seem trapped in ice,
and there's an eerie glow underfoot!

At Spirit Lake there are no houses, just
you and I and the resinous pines and whatever
swims the liquid depths beneath this frozen crust.

Hurling frictionless, holding hands. The air
hums electric, a quivering something too deep
 for ears, a low blood-pulse
of earth, of sky, of boundless night.

Skating, skating together through darkness,
we listen for the underside of silence where
stones are organ stops and trees veiled cellos.

Keeping Christmas

Day dawns bright the morning after Twelfth Night,
the sixth of January, a date so deeply etched in our minds
by that rascal Shakespeare
who cast his fantastical net enchanting future centuries.
I am sad, but yet not sad,
for it is time for Christmas to come down.

In the living room, the Christmas tree stands
so perfect in all its gaudy, glittering, garlanded height
like an eccentric cousin visiting from a more formal land.
Unwrapped presents lie piled on the velvet tree skirt
below gleaming Christmas balls that hang like planets
from balsam boughs.
Silently, we begin the ritual undressing of the tree,
as if decommissioning a once-proud ship,
our movements mysterious, pagan, druidic. . . .

Later, the snaking strings of lights coiled for next year,
the ornaments safe in fruit boxes, the treetop angel
tucked in tissue paper,
I pull the tree free of the stand and carry it out the door,
a trail of balsam needles littering the floor.

Outside, a few Christmas trees are already by the curb,
sprawled beside trash bags and garbage cans,
but it is our household rule never to discard a Christmas tree.

Out back, I lop off each branch, balsam pervading the air.
Balsam resin collects on my hands as I spread the boughs
on flowerbeds.
I place the eight-foot trunk to edge the raspberries,
knowing that in summers to come each sumptuous berry
will have the taste of Christmas—
plump, acid-sweet, Santa Claus red. . . .

Standing, I see all around the yard
the trunks of Christmas trees from years past,
edging fruit trees and garden beds,
slowly decomposing,
leaching Christmas cheer and childhood
back into the teeming soil.

Thunderstorm, Madeline Island

These hailstones in July are small surprise
While that eerie phosphorus glow ignites
The midnight clouds. Roiling thunderheads
Crack and resonate, and random lightning
So zippers the sky that the flashes merge

And magnify. The ferries bump, asleep
At the dock, unperturbed, while gulls people
The breakwater. A squall blots the mainland
Lights, and a tattered moon over Ashland fails.

Wailing through red cedar, whistling
In white pine, the storm song splits the silver
Maple's limb and opens a locked chamber
Of the mind, loosening the electric

Allure of apocalypse. I think of
Rowing out in a single scull to meet
Wind-whipped waves while a sloop under power,
Sails furled tight, makes for the harbor light.

Upland Apples

Where black bears forage the blackberry break
and wild roses run through sandy soil,
soil reddened with iron—
iron in the blossom and in the bud—
where rivers chisel sandstone beds and tumble
down ledges, spilling over falls,
falling, falling in an endless rush,
past leaning river birches undercut
by the same water that nourishes them,
where at dusk a rust-red sun sets treetops ablaze
and fields of clover perfume the air,
there you will find them,
 the wild apples,
branches sagging with their weight of fruit,
hidden among cedar, fir, pine, and birch,
deep in the haunts of the whitetail.

Unseen, a bear crashes the underbrush.
Hawk on the wing and raven in the oak.
And you, alone, roaming an upland wood,
crossing meadows of lupine and tansy,
yarrow, hawkweed, daisy, and mallow,
skirting the forest edge
until the inevitable chance discovery.
It is an older tree, lightning-struck,
moss on the bark, thriving on neglect.
Pick an apple. Inspect the jade-green skin
flamed with red, a sunset in your hand.
Now taste the wild September fruit,
tempered by night frost and autumn moon,
flavor more astonishing than northern wildflowers
 to a southern soul.
Taste and realize
that though we mortals devour the apple,
it is the apple that prevails.



WILD APPLES

by Timothy Walsh

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