THE ORCHARD

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by Michael Finley

illustrations by Richard Stephens

for my brothers

My family's home in the Firelands in Ohio in the '50s
had about fifty apple and a dozen cherry trees.
In the spring the blossoms would roll through in waves,
the cherries first, followed by the white apples,
then the rose colored apple blossoms, like tied tufts of crepe,
kleenex blossoms on wires, until the orchard
was a carpet of apple shag almost lilac in color
and the crabapple trees whose rusty dots
planted cinnamon in the air.

The trees were only 20 feet tall, perfect for kid climbing.
We swayed in them for hours on summer afternoons,
gnawing the first bitter beads, nodding at this year's flavor,
the ideal moment before the worms invaded.
Being small we could climb to the highest twigs
and the wind would hold us up there, heads poking
through the canopy, gazing out over the flapping leaves.
I made a tree fort around the trunk of one
out of stolen plywood and ceramic tiles, I would sit in it
by day and sketch blueprints in a spiral notebook.

I slept in it a few times,
and drew up plans to include my friends in,
like a university where we would tell one another
what we had read in books, about dinosaurs and what
kinds of clouds there were. I planned to buy a sprayer
and a bottle of malathion and hook it up to a hose
and advance through the trees dealing death to parasites
and life to the fruit, hose away the scaly mites
and red cedar worms that riddled the sweet green meat.

And my brother could tell us about the Civil War,
He read the thickest books on our couch,
like Sinai stones, and us boys would all be professors,
trading wisdom by the boysenberry bramble
where the Queen Anne's lace teased the butterflies
and last year's lost baseballs lingered underfoot,
the color of beaten weeds. When the apples were of
a suitable size we used them as baseballs, smashing one
after another with Louisville Sluggers till they wept
furious milk, high over the monkeypod trees
and into the murk of the chugging swamp.

A St. Bernard named Topper, who belonged
to the landlord, sometimes lumbered through,
jowls dripping, a dazed and mortal look on its face,
like the Cid mounted up for one last ride, and we would
drop our bats and run into the barn,
and hide in the cornrick till Topper had passed,
unaware of his harmlessness.
We mounted a basketball hoop on the side of the barn,
and used to play *PIG* and *HORSE*.
We had nothing else to do,
we played *AMOEBA* and *CORNBORE* and *SMUT*.

Sometimes my brother would stand on one side
of the barn, and me on the other, and we
would throw a football over the roof to each other.
You couldn't tell where it would appear as it crossed
the roofline, and the ball seemed to pop into reality there,
like a sword held up by a supernatural hand
from an anodized water trough. There was also
a corn grinder we used to stuff ears of dented corn into,
and the cobs would pop out the end,
shiny and red and clean,
like a basket of fresh pulled teeth.
Then one day the barn caught fire and burned.

My dad ordered us to mow the yard, but the mower
was self-driven and we could not control it as it skidded
over the fallen apples, swerving and sawing,
scalloped the fallen apples with its blades, and sprayed
the slash around our ankles while we pushed,
and yellow jackets would sneak into our pantlegs
and sting us good.
The rest of the time the machine didn't run, and our dad
would hike up his pants and prostate himself
on the slab, peering up the glass gas-ball,
emery-board the sparkplug gap, and crank the cord,
but that mower would never start,
Patrick and I had broken it with our minds.

And in the fall the rotting apples blanketed the yard,
bumpy and squishy and brown, and the whole world
smelled like cider and we drew them into rotten piles
with garden rakes and the apples stuck
on the hard steel tines and we'd stop
and pluck them off every half minute.
Then we set the piles of knobby apples on fire
and the sweet stink of roasting mash would swamp
the neighborhood, and somewhere the muskrats
and possums and raccoons that we knew only
as furtive figures humping across dirt roads at night
stood up, sniffed the evening air, and took notice.

At the heart of the orchard stood a pyramid of railroad ties,
dripping creosote, that we played King of the Mountain on,
but gingerly, because the ties were always giving way,
and wolf spiders made their home in among the tarry beams.
When Mr. Thomas bulldozed the orchard lot
and built a tract home where my tree fort had been,
the new neighbors used the beams as rifle targets,
and you could hear the bullets
slitting through the leaves sometimes,
and it wasn't safe to wander over that way any more,
and we were getting older anyway.

But part of me still bundled up after snowfalls
and legged it down to where the creek trickled
through the trees, and thundered through new ice
in rubber galoshes. Then in the spring,
when the blossoms once again lit up
the remaining patch of trees, I wondered if this was
the year to spray, and stop the cedar scabbing,
rout out the inevitable worms, put red fruit on the table
in a painted bowl and earn our childhood finally,
by acting decisively, with purpose and poise,
like good kids, but other things happened, and we didn't.

Surprise Michael !!! I've finished.

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The Firelands is a part of northern Ohio
granted to the citizens of New London, Connecticut,
whose homes and businesses were burned
during the American Revolution
by renegade general Benedict Arnold.