

## The apple man

Old Mr. Lunsford yanked his shopping cart  
out of the alcove and limped  
toward the bus stop,  
stuffed into his oil-stained work shirt  
and frayed tweed jacket. He never shopped  
across the street at Ugolik's grocery  
or around the corner at Kowalski's delicatessen.  
Late in the afternoon, Mr. Lunsford  
reappeared, stumbling back to his flat,  
his cart filled with mysterious bottles  
in brown paper bags  
and apples.

I'd sneak downstairs when my brothers  
visited, escaping cigar smoke and pinochle,  
hoping for a fat, snappy, sweet-tart  
Stayman or York. Sometimes  
he made me guess their names,  
giving hints of exotic realms  
from whence these jewels came.  
Every time I asked to share  
his bagged drink he said,  
"Apple juice is better for you,"  
and gave me a sip anyway.

At other times, his husky voice vibrated  
like a breeze against an old pie tin  
with tales of Johnny Appleseed's  
barefoot travels through the wilderness  
and ancient fire festivals honoring  
the many faces of the harvest—  
Pomona, a pruning knife in one hand,  
an apple in the other, protector of Roman orchards;  
Lammas, the day of loaf-mass and first fruits;  
Mabon, the second harvest;  
Sukkoth, a week of thanksgiving.

"What's your favorite apple?" I always asked.  
"The one in my hand," was his perpetual answer.  
"Did you know Johnny Appleseed?"  
"In my dreams," he'd reply,  
an opening to an outpouring  
that ended only with a steady  
swallow, his eyes closed,  
blocking the stars  
and my questions.