

How to Grow an Apple Tree

1. Have a joking conversation in the wake of news that a friend is moving.
2. Toss around the idea some, play with it. The more you think of it, the more serious you become.
 - a. It will remind you of the conversation. Just a little bit, just enough to make you smile when they are gone.
3. Gather seeds from the apples you take to lunch—carry them gently in your hand, until you have a bag to bring them home.

In order for an apple seed to germinate, it needs to be kept cold for months before planting. From May to nearly September, I kept the seeds of hope wrapped up in a damp paper towel, hidden in the back of our fridge. Once we pulled them out, the paper towel had little spots of mold, but there was life there, too. Five of the apple seeds had their tiny stems emerging, white fading to green, and I pressed them gently into a pot of cool soil, blanketing them. *This, I thought, is what life looks like.*

After that, it was easy. I only had to give them some water and place them where the sun could see them. I waited and watched as they shot up quickly, so much faster than I expected them to. It was the first time the phrase “they grow up so fast” made any sense at all, and I wish I had taken more photos, for a day-by-day comparison. I wish I had begun sooner, so that my friend could have brought a little seed, a little tree to her new, distant home. *This is what life looks like.* Within two weeks, I moved them into a larger pot, several inches higher than before, and still they grew.

As months passed, the trees continued their growth, no longer shooting up but creeping slowly higher. One was two feet tall, the other shorter but with two trunks. I wanted to give them names, because names carry love, and *this is what life looks like.*

All there is to do is wait. I continue to let them see the sun, to water them. I transfer them to a new pot, but a few short weeks later I’m asking myself again if it’s big enough, and if it isn’t, when is there time to transfer them? So, I continued as I always had, and I told myself to have patience, to wait. There are no easy answers now.

10. Watch leaves turn an orangey-yellow color, splotchy and uneven. It is unsettling to see. It is spring now, warmer outside, yet they were planted in the fall. Is this normal?
 - a. Where are the guidebooks? There are no library books that help.
 - b. The leaves do not fall. If it is normal, why don’t they fall?

11. Change sunlight, change water. Stab blindly in the dark, try to hold on to the life. They are the only things you have ever raised on your own.
12. Admit defeat. It takes four months to accept that they are dead and that no amount of sunlight and water will revive them.
 - a. *This is what life looks like.*
13. Empty the pots. It takes another three months before you can bring yourself to pull the tree from the dirt, to stare at the roots, no longer white fading to green but a dull brown.
 - a. You make it through one before stopping.
 - b. It hurts more than you expect it to.
14. Move on. There are more plants now. Basil, oregano, bamboo, cactus. There are guidebooks now. Study them—know them deeply. Learn what to look for, what to do. Treasure this life.
15. Buy an apple.
 - a. Try again.
 - b. *This is what life looks like.*

This piece was written as a personal essay for a college application, responding to the prompt concerning the experience and lessons learned from failure. The piece was later published in the student anthology, Monday Afternoon.