Ode to an Orange

A critic has written that Woiwode’s descriptions of nature can “hypnotize the senses” with their precision and vitality. In the following essay, first published in Paris Review in 1984, Woiwode turns his descriptive powers on a familiar fruit.

Oh, those oranges arriving in the midst of the North Dakota winters of the forties—the mere color of them, carried through the door in a net bag or a crate from out of the white winter landscape. Their appearance was enough to set my brother and me to thinking that it might be about time to develop an illness, which was the surest way of receiving a steady supply of them.

“Mom, we think we’re getting a cold.”
“Why, you mean, you two want an orange?”
This was difficult for us to answer or dispute; the matter seemed moved beyond our mere wanting.
“If you want an orange,” she would say, “why don’t you ask for one?”
“We want an orange.”
“We’ again. ‘We want an orange.”
“May we have an orange, please.”

“That’s the way you know I like you to ask for one. Now, why don’t each of you ask for one in that same way, but separately?”
“Mom . . .” And so on. There was no depth of degradation that we wouldn’t descend in order to get one. If the oranges hadn’t wended their way northward by Thanksgiving, they were sure to arrive before the Christmas season, stacked first in crates at the depot, filling that musty place, where pews sat back to back, with a springtime acidity, as if the building had been rinsed with a renewing elixir that set it right for yet another year. Then the crates would appear at the local grocery store, often with the top slats pried back on a few of them, so that we were aware of a resinous smell of fresh wood in addition to the already orangy atmosphere that foretold the season more explicitly than any calendar.

And in the broken-open crates (as if burst by the power of the oranges themselves), one or two of the lovely spheres would lie free of the tissue they came wrapped in—always purple tissue, as if that were the only color that could contain the populations of them in their nested positions. The crates bore paper labels at one end—of an orange against a blue background, or of a blue goose against an orange background—signifying the colorful otherworld (unlike our wintry one) that these phenomena had arisen from. Each orange, stripped of its protective wrapping, as vivid in your vision as a pebbled sun, encouraged you to picture a whole pyramid of them in a bowl on your dining room table, glowing in the light, as if giving off the warmth that came through the windows from the real winter sun. And all of them came stamped with a blue-purple name as foreign as the otherworld that you might imagine as their place of origin, so that on Christmas day you would find yourself digging past everything else in your Christmas stocking, as if tunneling down to the country of China, in order to reach the rounded bulge at the tip of the toe which meant that you had received a personal reminder of another state of existence, wholly separate from your own.

The packed heft and texture, finally, of an orange—in your hand—this is it—and the eruption of smell and the watery firework as a knife, in the hand of someone skilled, like our mother, going slicing through the skin so perfect for slicing. This gaseous spray can form a mist like smoke, which can then be lit with a match to create actual fireworks if there is a chance to hide alone with a match (matches being forbidden) and the peel from one. Sputtering ignitions can also be produced by squeezing a peel near a candle (at least one candle is
generally always going at Christmastime), and the leftover peels are set on the stove top to scent the house.

And the ingenious way in which oranges come packed into their globes! The green nib at the top, like a detonator, can be bitten off, as if disarming the orange, in order to clear a place for you to sink a tooth under the peel. This is the best way to start. If you bite at the peel too much, your front teeth will feel scraped, like dry bone, and your lips will begin to burn from the bitter oil. Better to sink a tooth into this greenish or creamy depression, and then pick at that point with the nail of your thumb, removing a little piece of the peel at a time. Later, you might want to practice to see how large a piece you can remove intact. The peel can also be undone in one continuous ribbon, a feat which maybe your father is able to perform, so that after the orange is freed, looking yellowish, the peel, rewound, will stand in its original shape, although empty.

The yellowish white of the orange can now be divided into sections, usually about a dozen, by beginning with a division down the middle; after this, each section, enclosed in its papery skin, will be able to be lifted and torn loose more easily. There is a stem up the center of the sections like a mushroom stalk, but tougher; this can be eaten. A special variety of orange, without any pits, has an extra growth, or nubbin, like half of a tiny orange, tucked into its bottom. This nubbin is nearly as bitter as the peel, but it can be eaten, too; don’t worry. Some of the sections will have miniature sections embedded in them and clinging as if for life, giving the impression that babies are being hatched, and should you happen to find some of these you’ve found the sweetest morsels of any.

If you prefer to have your orange sliced in half, as some people do, the edges of the peel will abrade the corners of your mouth, making them feel raw, as you eat down into the white of the rind (which is the only way to do it) until you can see daylight through the orangy bubbles composing its outside. Your eyes might burn; there is no proper way to eat an orange. If there are pits, they can get in the way, and the slower you eat an orange, the more you’ll find your fingers sticking together. And no matter how carefully you eat one, or bite into a quarter, juice can always fly or slip from a corner of your mouth; this happens to everyone. Close your eyes to be on the safe side, and for the eruption in your mouth of the slivers of watery meat, which should be broken and rolled fine over your tongue for the essence of orange. And if indeed you have sensed yourself coming down with a cold, there is a chance that you will feel it driven from your head—your nose and sinuses suddenly opening—in the midst of the scent of a peel and eating an orange.

And oranges can also be eaten whole—rolled into a spongy mass and punctured with a pencil (if you don’t find this offensive) or a knife, and then sucked upon. Then, once the juice is gone, you can disembowel the orange as you wish and eat away its pulpy remains, and eat once more into the whitish interior of the peel, which scour the coating from your teeth and makes your numbing lips and tip of your tongue start to tingle and swell up from behind, until, in the light from the windows (shining through an empty glass bowl), you see orange again from the inside. Oh, oranges, solid o’s, light from afar in the midst of the freeze, and not unlike that unspherical fruit which first went from Eve to Adam and from there (to abbreviate matters) to my brother and me.

“Mom, we think we’re getting a cold.”

“You mean, you want an orange?”

This is difficult to answer or dispute or even to acknowledge, finally, with the fullness that the subject deserves, and that each orange bears, within its own makeup, into this hard-edged yet insubstantial, incomplete, cold, wintry world.

Meaning

1. Woiwode opens and closes his essay with the same thought: his mother’s question, “You mean, you want an orange?” was “difficult for us to answer or dispute” (paragraphs 4, 19). Why was it difficult? What did the orange signify to Woiwode that made “the matter” greater than “mere wanting”?

2. What dominant impression of the orange does Woiwode create? To what extent is its opposite captured in the last words of the essay: “hard-edged yet insubstantial, incomplete, cold, wintry”?

3. If you do not know the meanings of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: ode (in the title); degradation, wending, elixir, resinous (paragraph 10); heft (12); detonator, feat (13); abrade (15); disembowel (16).

Purpose and Audience

1. In repeating his reflection on his mother’s question in paragraphs 4 and 19, Woiwode changes verb tense from past (for example, “This was difficult,” 4) to present (“This is difficult,” 19). What does this shift reveal
about the grown Woiwode’s reason for writing about his experiences and feelings as a child? To what extent are “North Dakota winters of the forties” (1) and “this... wintry world” (19) the same or different?
2. An ode usually praises some person or object. Is Woiwode’s praise for the orange weakened by the unpleasant sensations he sometimes describes, such as bitterness (paragraph 14) or burning eyes (15)? Why or why not?
3. Woiwode could expect this readers to be familiar with his subject: most of us have eaten an orange. To what extent does he succeed in making this familiar object and experience fresher and more significant? What details surprised you? What details evoked your own experiences?

Method and Structure

1. Woiwode mingles straightforward objective description and emotion-laden subjective description. Locate two or three examples of each kind in paragraph 13–16. What does each kind contribute to the essay?
2. In the body of the essay (paragraphs 10–16), Wo iwode describes the orange from a number of perspectives. What topic does each of these paragraphs cover? Is the sequence of topics logical? Why or why not?
3. Other Methods Wo iwode uses several methods of development in addition to description—for instance, paragraphs 1–10 are narrative (Chapter 2), and paragraphs 13–14 divide the orange into its parts (Chapter 3). Most notably, paragraphs 13–16 analyze three processes (Chapter 4), three ways of eating an orange. Why does Wo iwode explain these processes so painstakingly?

Language

1. An ode is usually a poem written in exalted language. Find language in Wo iwode’s essay that seems literary or poetic. What does Wo iwode convey by such language?
2. In paragraph 11, Wo iwode gradually shifts pronouns, from “we” and “our” to “you” and “your.” Do you find this shift disconcerting or effective? Why?
3. How many of the five senses does Wo iwode appeal to in this extended description? Find words or phrases that seem especially precise in conveying sensory impressions.
4. To describe a bowl of oranges, Wo iwode uses images of heat and light: it was “glowing in the light, as if giving off the warmth that came through the windows from the real winter sun” (paragraph 11). Locate other words or phrases in the essay that evoke heat and light. How does this imagery contribute to the essay?

Writing Topics

1. Does any food have strong emotional associations for you? Birthday cake? Spinach? Chocolate ice cream? If so, develop a descriptive essay about this food, conveying your dominant impression through sensory details.
2. Many people derive comfort from an object not just in childhood, but throughout life: they may no longer sleep with that teddy bear, but the sight of it on the shelf provides security and comfort. If such an object exists for you—a Raggedy Ann doll, a model ship or car, a pillow—describe it in an essay intended to reveal both its physical attributes and its significance.
3. Although Wo iwode’s essay is written with greater skill and range of vocabulary than a small boy would be capable of, the essay reveals the many facets of a small boy’s emotional life. Write an essay in which you analyze the boyish concerns and observations evident in “Ode to an Orange,” demonstrating how Wo iwode captures the workings of a boy’s mind. Consider, for example, the way he compares the orange to a hand grenade (paragraph 13).