

No Peaches

The winters down here are mild, with what people call “cold snaps” coming and going a few times, and with a few odd days of ice or snow. Cold comes, but it doesn’t stay. Spring comes early, but in some years with a few false starts, tricking the peach and apricot trees into blooming too early. There is a peach tree in our backyard, next to a fence near the old garage. The tree has grown during the years I have known it, and now it hangs its branches over the fence and into the drive next to the road, bending blind limbs against the garage wall. During some summers the limbs sag heavily with the weight of many peaches – so many that we soon tire of them and they fall to the ground to rot beneath the low-hanging branches. Some summers there are no peaches at all. When there are no peaches, it is because the tree has bloomed too early and the blossoms have been killed by a late frost. This is what my parents tell me.

“Maybe next year,” one of them will say.

“A whole year?” I wonder.

I think a year is a very long time. When there are no peaches, there is nothing to be done except to wait for another year. I take comfort in the normal, routine procession of events during a year: school starts, Christmas comes, spring arrives, the peach tree blooms, and there are peaches. When there are no peaches, I feel like something is wasted, that things are not quite right. My parents are not bothered by the absence of the peaches, though. I marvel that a year, for them, does not seem like a long time.

I can understand the peach tree blooming early. There are late-winter mornings when I wake up and – without knowing why, or how – sense that something has changed, or is about to change. Maybe it is the light, the steepening angle of the sun; maybe it is something in the air; or maybe it is something intangible that we have evolved to know, without knowing why we know.

These are the mornings when I step outside onto our back steps and look out over our rough little part of the world and think it beautiful, though surely it is not. Life seems full of possibilities, pushed forward by a type of urgency. Like the peach tree, I feel the need to bloom, to break into the open, to burst at the seams. I feel a strange sense of mania welling inside me, a swell of increased, unfocused energy, an unexplained sense of renewal. I want to be moving. I want to be doing everything at once. I feel time racing. I am happy to be alive. The peach tree, in its own way, must feel the same urges. It is compelled, in any case, to risk a year of life, betting against a frost that sometimes comes.

Early one morning I walk barefoot through the dew, and step up close to the peach tree. Its limbs sway slowly in a breeze that signals a warm day to come; its leaves shine wetly with beaded condensation. Tiny buds, like small pebbles, hard beneath bright green velvet skins, are emerging from among the leaves. This year, there will be peaches.