

Peaches and Penumbras

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Creative Writing at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2009

By Jenna A. Nickerson

Thesis Director
Dr. David Hopes

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Rick Chess

Peaches and Penumbras

Poems by:

Jenna A. Nickerson

301 Cricklewood Square Apt J
Asheville, NC 28804
(704) 280 1868
janicker@gmail.com

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Seduction

is a thicket of blueberries sprawling,
wild, on the mountainside. Just one
plump powder-blue berry wilts
a body to the ground.
Hands could part scarlet
leaves until the moon rises and then
only the forefinger and
thumb would feel for the firm velvet
skin budding from its stem. You,
your fingers, your mouth all ache for
more, to hold their little weights inside
your palm, to take each one in.
But they spread in every direction,
spiraling like a field of vectors
away from you, the center.

Cataloochee Valley

For one more month, winter will still linger
in the valley, while the first hints of spring
slip in like a lover, hovering over
her skin in the thick black of night, thawing
her thighs inch by inch until
all of the rivers running through her surge.
Even the trees sigh and ache
in anticipation, their lean trunks creaking
with the cold still so deep inside of them
she will not notice spring has tiptoed in
until she wakes up, one day, with its warmth.

The Lake

That summer, a bare bulb
flickered in the boat
house, and you stood on the
dock, water black like oil rocking
against wood, rotting right
under your feet. I'd
hear your reel croak, singing
through the silence, and watch you
from the side porch. Every
now and then I'd catch
the peak of your back cast,
the green foam fly suspended
like by invisible
threads, until you jerked
it back to life, flung it
forward into the dark. When the
rod finally bent with
that bass
you had hunted for
three weeks, its white belly
bulging, brittle jade
scales, each one resting
on the next, its mouth
pouting, gasping, it should
not have surprised me that, on one
knee, you offered it back
to the lake, your
fingertips just barely
breaking the surface
as the fish darted away.
You, anchored like a
fixture at the end of
the dock, a lighthouse.

In the River

True, I may not cast with my wrist always
as steady as the men; it might curve slightly
in the sweep of my outstretched arm,
back and forth,
back and forth, the rod
tracing the same arc in the air
until it has spilled all the slack line
into the river, the dry fly perched on its
placid surface just past the deepest run.

And, true, I may not spy the trout's dark
liquid shadows as fast as some of them.
But I could stand there,
all day, wading in the same spot,
tossing fly after fly just to tease that one
trout out of its pool, to see its belly flash
silver in the slanted afternoon sun,
threading the wet line back
through my hand, then, reeling
with the other.

And when I catch hold of it
for those few seconds, to slip my lure from
its lip, its satin skin glistening
in my grip, I do not
measure it or scale its weight,
filing the numbers away like the rest
of them. No, I simply let it go,
like letting water flow from my hand.

By 30

They can't understand
when you tell them *no, not me*.
But every woman wants one, they say -
like a baby is a beach house
in the Bahamas.

In Praise of Peaches

I'd watch her pick them,
the tree in front
of her house now speckled
with their soft curves.
We'd eat them in the
kitchen with the blinds closed,
July sun pressing
up against the windows.

Each afternoon we'd
live like this, no-
thing outside to ponder,
not even her
mother driving home
to find us, bare
legs beside bare legs, backs

against the cold floor
nectar glazing
our faces, hardening
on our fingertips
as we siphoned them like
the bee to the goldenrod,
peaches warm and
tender in our hands.

Phantasm

The absence of laughter at dinner.
Only ice clinking in cold glasses,
ringing the chasm.
A love no longer fathomed, not even
the making of love.
Or two bodies
underneath pressed sheets,
the silent orgasms,
like two plasma ions breaking free.

Fable of the Black Locust

It whirlwinds towards the maturity of
seventy or eighty feet, an explosion
of growth, surface
zero in reverse.

Its flint trunk blasts skyward, its branches
zigzag and shade its native
neighbors, travailing
to see the sun.

All the while,
its heart rots,
insects boring to its core,
so that, soon, it will crumble
like the rest of them.

Point Pleasant Beach, NJ

Here, each wave, like an army
of white stallions, stampedes
towards the shore – side by side,
they rear up, charge forward,
plunge head-first into the sand.
Each line of defense
behind the next, flaring, foaming,
bucking mother nature off their backs.
Only then, after each attack,
the sea spreads its ashes
softly over the land.

Iwo Jima Memorial

Not because he wanted cold March rain
soaking through his collared shirt, tucked
too neatly into his pants, dark khaki:
standard Catholic uniform. And

not because the rain, coffee color D.C.
rain, drumming on the roof of his idling
bus still did not drown out the drone
of thirteen year olds eight hours from home,

but because, when their guide finally turned
her back on that group, more interested in each
other than their history outside,

he wiped his own warm wet breath
from the window to look at it: those
six men, their valor forever captured,
the flag waving even in the rain -

he had never felt so damn American.
Shoving his way to the front, he stepped out.

This small boy, beside the hum of his
idling bus, tipped his head back, hair dripping,
and opened his mouth to drink.

Seventh Grade Confession

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.'" Genesis 1:26

One by one, we'd disappear into that dark room,
waiting to be washed in the alkaline bath
of Catholic absolution so that
our latent sins could be, again, exposed.

The priest steeped us in his questions,
purging awkward words from our mouths –
the gentle afternoon caresses on the
school bus or that cigarette in the garage,

and the lying about both of them. He saw
it all develop before him, watching
each dark fleck dissolve as he made us
his permanent radiant images.

Sunday Mass

These Catholics, the Lord
lingering on their tongues long
after Eucharist: wheat and wine
inside their mouths. From

practice, they turn and kneel
in attention to the altar: a slab
of marble, grayish white, fixed
to the floor, steadfast like

these Catholics against
the price of gas around the
corner, the Baptist church ten
minutes closer to home, curbing

the birth of babies. Here are theirs,
newly baptized, in the crying room
now with their young mothers,
yawning through the last song.

These Catholics, gathering in the
narthex after Mass, dip their hands
in the holiest of water, take
the last sacred breath for that week,

and, as if one body, flood
through the front doors, called, ready.

My Mother, Seventeen

I would imagine her in my grandparent's basement,
during those summers when everyone
would sit upstairs, chatting, with the T.V. on
and no one watching it, its hum barely audible from
where I would sit by myself in near darkness.

It was like an old movie set, the props
rightfully draped with dust. Once
every couple of years, a vase would move
to a different surface, a painting disappeared
from the wall – here, a photograph
of me now on the coffee table.

That basement aged more slowly than
the maple tree next to the house where,
on a rare afternoon, I could imagine her swinging on
that wooden seat roped to its branch
humming *Come Sail Away* as the sunlight faded
behind her over Dunn Field, its fluorescent lights
trembling to life for that night's ball game.

Always, though, I could imagine
her in the basement by herself, seventeen,
as I would trace my finger across the labels
of the liquor bottles, the ones she could never
touch and I would think what if
we could both steal a taste together, what

secrets we could share if I had been there
with her then, filling that basement
with a life so fervent
dust couldn't even find a place to settle.

Pantoum for the Alternative

Never how my mother did it -
sitting for minutes, maybe even hours,
he holds both of my hands, listens,
letting me go, unincriminated.

Sitting for minutes, maybe even hours,
I watch yesterday's snow melt off the hill,
letting myself go, unincriminated,
thinking now of nothing but time.

I watch yesterday's snow melt off the hill,
my mind unwinding, cool,
thinking now of nothing but time.
Over the top of his book, he sees

my mind unwinding, cool,
settling back into place.
Over the top of his book, he sees
on my face the pieces, like a puzzle,

settling back into place.
For him, I let it show
on my face, the pieces, the puzzle.
I don't discuss the damage, but

for him, I let it show.
Picking up my pen again, I move
forward in perfect stillness and
he welcomes me back with his smile.

Picking up my pen, I move,
and sit next to him on the sofa.
He welcomes me back with his smile -
never how my mother did it.

The Skyline

And then there was Manhattan
tattooed on the glowing horizon –
an inky silhouette etched
into the dawn's pink flesh.

Cankun Factory, China

*"They don't care what they're
making as long as we buy it."*

-Edward Burtynsky

Row after row after row after row after row after row.

Row after row after

row after row after row after row after row.

Row after row

of workers wearing yellow jackets.

Only the buzz of them, until

the alarm, like a school bell,

sounds, and they stop.

Each row follows

row

after row

after row,

filing out from the factory.

Inside, one has fallen asleep,

his head alight on the table.

The Match

The only reason, on a Saturday,
I'd wake myself at five in the morning.
Across the hall, you
had barely even slept, drilling in your head
how you'd do it: the quick shuffle
of your shoes across the mat,
the snap of the other boy
in your grip. Now on one
knee, you'd catch him
on his way down
for a second, on your shoulder
like a father catching hold of his son,
before dropping him over, lowering
him to the ground –
In the silence of our house,
we knew the drill. And I forgave you.

The Young Virtuoso

Look how he holds his shoulders wide apart,
leaving his heart unguarded. Even before
he recounts his father's body failing
inside those same unwavering arms, I know
he will give us words so wild
we have to close our eyes to just feel them.

But when he began to recite the lines he'd read
a hundred times to himself,
his words were acupuncture, each
one pricking at my skin, pulsing
a rampant energy through the meridians
of my whole body. Like figuring out that

the Earth is not flat, that the edges
of our world curve continuously around,
suspended and surrounded
by vast, endless, unknown space.

Not Our Usual Style

In your hospital room,
I finger the rubberband from
my hair and tie
the curtains to the side
of your window
so that you can see,
outside, the marigolds
which still bloom in
new york in late september.
I look at them too.
I look at anything
but your fingers, twisted now
like tree roots stretching
from their trunk,
old and surfacing.

On the corner of
river avenue, the yankees
are playing their last
game in the old stadium.
We watch it with the sound
turned down.
You do not talk
about them razing
the stadium on sunday,
which, for you, is like
the men taking that giant oak
from your backyard this summer,
leaving a hole, six feet wide,
gaping in the ground.

At four the nurse
brings your dinner and
hands me the knife and the fork.
Only then, I look at your
crooked fingers, your lower
jaw letting go, dropping open
for me—
you rest your hand
on my knee, and
I feed you.

Circadian Ensemble

With my thumbnail, I'd carve a slit down
the middle of a single green blade, careful
not to split it in two. I'd sew it between
the length of my left thumb
and the length of my right thumb,
stitching them together
with the thin green thread.

I'd tilt my hands
away from each other, fanning
my fingers out slightly like warming
them over a fire. Then, touching
my thumbs lightly
to my lips, I'd blow out
my breath until my lungs had nothing left
to give.

In my backyard, I'd rest for hours
like this, finding
the pitches of each blade and
creating
my part in
the birds' circadian ensemble.