

The fifth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2017

‘The Gift’

by Claire Bullen

...a huge success! Over 1000 entries
were received for the 2017 prize...



old parsonage



GEE'S



'The Gift'

Every year, life gives you one perfect peach.

This is not something you have been taught, but something you have learned over time. You may eat dozens, even hundreds, of peaches in a year: bruised and smooth, yellow and white, gibbous and flattened. But only one is ever perfect.

You never know when your peach will arrive. Some years, it comes in high July. Say, a humid and unproductive Wednesday afternoon. Your day has been spent badly, time wasted. A headache distracts you, as does your colleague, who sits at the desk across from yours and has a habit of chewing her bagel sandwiches open-mouthed.

You plead an early lunch break and use your hour to walk to the Asian grocery store nearby, which you reserve for especially uninspiring days. Inside, you squint at Korean hot sauce labels, press packets of whole star anise to your nose,

pick up a sachet of spiced cashews and a bottle of jasmine tea. A quick examination reveals your wallet is empty of cash; you know that the grocery store has a five-pound minimum for credit cards, so you discover your peach entirely by accident. It is nestled in the fridge between a collection of aubergines and a crate of oblong, wart-studded squash. It costs 85 pence, which is just enough.

During the walk back to your office, you keep the peach in your hand, warming its chilled velvet in your palm.

You eat the peach on one of the benches outside your building. Next to you, an Italian family looks at a foldout map and bickers loudly amongst themselves. But when you bite into your peach, their voices dim. You examine it more closely, its sunset skin, fading from red to orange. Flesh of perfect tenderness. Perfume of far-off orchard, so alien to the concrete and traffic of London.

A runnel of juice wells over the peach's skin where your teeth have punctured it, and snakes quickly down your palm. You bring your hand to your mouth, sucking at the liquid, before sinking your teeth into the peach once more. As this is a perfect peach, its flesh pulls entirely clean from its stone. After you finish, you run a thumbnail through one of its grooves before wiping it on your skirt and tucking it into your pocket.

These benches, which face your eyesore of an office

building, their backs to the famous, rainbow-hued houses of the neighbourhood, always struck you as oddly placed. Now, you have discovered their purpose.

Perfect peaches have a habit of appearing unexpectedly.

One year, you brought a peach to the cinema, where you ventured on a rainy afternoon. You retrieved it from a sack of peaches bought days earlier as you ran out the door, late as usual. The others were all average, perfectly decent peaches, but nothing special. You had no hopes for this peach, then, but it surprised you. For whole minutes, you lost track of the plot, bewitched by the flavour that was so bright it was almost visible in the darkness. You slurped, probably, annoyed your neighbours, but they would've understood if they'd known. By the time you returned your attention to the film, the hero spy was trapped in a prison cell in a foreign country, and you had no idea how he'd ended up in that predicament.

Five years before that, your peach was served to you as dessert at your favourite neighbourhood restaurant. University had finished, and you were soon to move from New York to London, where you knew no one. Your best friend sat across from you. For dessert, you ordered peach pie, but it came deconstructed: three roseate slices formed half a blossom on the plate, atop a pillow of cream. Biscuit crumbs traced the

plate's border in an arc. You didn't expect much from this meagre allotment of peach, but a bite confirmed it. You nudged the fruit with your spoon, wanting and not wanting to finish the two remaining pieces. Your best friend asked why you had gone quiet.

You've noticed that perfect peaches have a habit of appearing during moments of distress. You wonder if this is something that happens to other people.

Last year, you ate yours alone, sitting at the kitchen table. It was late spring, and the room was radiant with light, beaming off the steel sink. Your flat: newly empty; your partner: now former. He'd left days before, but his presence still haunted the place in the language of stray hairs in the bathtub drain, a suit jacket left behind in the closet. A shopping list, found half-wedged under the refrigerator, written in his elegant hand. Eggs, strawberries, milk, it said, loo roll, toothbrush, chocolates. How many times did you read this simple catalogue, making a poem of it? Wondering if it was your absent mind, your inability to remember when the milk had run out, that had done it, had sunk your life together?

Before you ate the peach, you pressed it to your swollen eyelids. You thought fleetingly of William Carlos Williams, and his icebox full of plums, though plums were never your

style. Against your face, the peach's down was almost human, but deathly cold. You cried at its sweetness, which felt like more than you deserved.

You didn't finish it. A first.

Instead, you opened the door to your flat's tiny balcony, where a few scraggly plants struggled to survive, underwatered, in your window boxes. You plunged the bitten peach into the dark embrace of the dirt, twisting it until it was wedged deep down, like the bulb of a daffodil, full of future potential. It could grow into a tree, yours alone.

Of course, it didn't. Peach trees, like all things, need the proper conditions in which to flourish.

Your mother never liked peaches, though they made your state famous.

Your small, otherwise unremarkable town was home to a soaring water tower sculpted and painted into the shape of an enormous, cloven peach. As a child, you would plead with her to drive by the Peachoid, though it wasn't on the way home and required a lengthy detour. When she was feeling indulgent, and when no one was behind you on the road, she'd slow to 15 miles per hour, crawling by the Peachoid while you pressed your nose to the window and took in its great goldenness.

Once, she pulled over and parked the car in a dusty depression along the side of the road. You'd been given a disposable Kodak camera for the occasion; perhaps, your mother must have thought, if you had a chance to immortalise the Peachoid, you'd require fewer detours. Though the photos taken by your eight-year-old hands all came out blurry and sun-blasted, you kept one pinned to the bulletin board above your bed.

(When you grew into an adolescent, the Peachoid turned into a filthy joke among you and your friends, gratuitous in its shapeliness and size, its deep cleft hilarious. Still, you never stopped feeling affection for it.)

Though your mother's distaste for peaches baffled you, it was also a gift: growing up, she'd buy you whole punnets from the farmers who sold their wares from small, hastily assembled tables near the side of the highway, "PEACHES, SWEETCORN, CUKES" scrawled on big panels of wood that were propped up along the shoulder of the road. You never had to share.

It was this sheer volume that taught you your connoisseurship. You could spy, from feet away, when the down on a peach had grown too white and bearded, a sure sign of intruding rot. You grew sensitive to any stringiness of the flesh, any latent sourness located just underneath the skin.

Each fruit would be subjected to a quick appraisal, fingertips feeling for soft spots in the surface.

(You still admit to liking these bruised areas for their heightened sweetness, though they will never be confused with perfection.)

Underneath the 21 perfect peaches you can remember consuming over the course of your life—there have almost certainly been more, but you were too young to know—lie vast swaths of fruit, acre-spanning orchards and plantations, crates upon crates.

Most perfect peaches appear in the summer, but once, the year you moved to New York for university, yours didn't appear until late October, when it should have been too late. That first year in the big-shouldered, swaggering city, you felt lonely and clueless, hadn't yet learned the corporeal urban language of navigation, of boarding the subway or simply coping with more people than you'd ever been surrounded by before.

That was also the year that you subsisted almost entirely on refectory food, feeling desperately homesick. Rubbery omelets made to order, chickpea curries that tasted ashen, endless bowls of cereal unleashed in clattering flows from the plastic dispensers.

Meanwhile, the city taunted you with its aromas.

There was the Chinese noodle shop next to campus; though its windows fogged up in the winter, you could make out groups of people bent over their bowls of broth, easing the noodles into their mouths with chopsticks. There was the coffee shop that roasted its own beans, suffusing the block every morning with heady fumes. There were the food trucks parked in a row outside your dormitory, where an order of chicken and rice meant a laden styrofoam container, warping under the weight of the chopped chicken and turmeric-dyed rice, splattered in comingled chili and white sauce. You ate out just once a week, conscious of your wallet, its thinness. Every walk to class was an exercise in self-restraint and denial.

It was against this backdrop that your October peach arrived. For months, you'd hardly thought about peaches.

This one was plucked from a bowl in your dormitory, fatally out of season, certain to disappoint. But it didn't. You ate it bent over your desk, well after midnight, while struggling through an essay for your Intro to Philosophy class. Perhaps it was because Plato's Theory of Forms was on your mind, but you didn't experience that peach as just a piece of fruit.

No—its aroma was a ticket to those childhood car rides, sitting with a new crate of peaches in your lap, their scent swarming through the vehicle as your mother drove on. Its

flesh was the precise shade of South Carolina sunlight. Its taste was a blazing postcard from home. You ate it in small nibbles, holding it in both hands.

At the end, you clenched its stone in your palm for a moment, letting the grooves make an impression on your skin, before placing it in the rubbish bin under your desk. You picked at a shred of peach skin that had lodged itself between your front teeth, and wiped the stickiness from your chin. You stretched, raising your arms above your head and lolling your head from side to side. You stood, observed the room, its cinderblock walls, its laminate floors, its wide windows, beyond which the dark, barely visible silhouettes of skyscrapers were etched into the night sky by floating units of light.

You pulled the peach's pit out of the bin, wiped it on your skirt, and slid it into your pocket. You understood that it was a gift.