

KATHERINE HENGEL FRANKOWSKI

Blasphemy

I AM ON A GREAT HILL in San Francisco, some 900 feet above sea level, in a third-story apartment. It's quiet up here. There's no traffic on the street below yet. No sun in the sky either. Above me is a thin roof, then black sky; the night is hanging on, as we all tend to do. The Pacific Ocean is near and to my left. My childhood—somewhere off to the right. My husband sleeps soundly, safely connected to our bed down the hall, and I am at the kitchen sink prepping ten pounds of fresh peaches.

I bought these peaches yesterday. I drove down this hill, down along the edge of a deep gorge, until I reached that place on the south side of the city where the two freeways converge. That's where the fruit vendors set up their booths. A present-day temple. Noisy and crowded. Cash only. It's stone-fruit season, so the market was full of apricots, cherries, and plums. But I like the peaches best—from the skin to the pit. I elbowed my way towards them yesterday, fingering all the yellow and pink beauties available for sale. I chose many of the older, softer peaches. The riper the better. They need preservation the most, don't they? But I picked some young, firm peaches too. Out of boredom or haste, I am not sure.

Now, at the kitchen sink, I am quite pleased with each of the peaches I picked. I wash each one carefully, a slow stream of cold water running constantly as I work. Each peach is lovely in its own right and worth preserving, though not a one of them compares to a certain peach—the single, solitary peach given to me for my twenty-sixth birthday by a younger version of the man now sleeping down the hall. Oh, that peach. It was so soft and fuzzy! It was perfectly ripe, too, and without blemish. “Your favorite fruit,” he had said as I accepted his delicate gift. Then he touched the blonde fuzz on my arm and said, “You have the skin of a peach, you know.” I ate that peach, fresh and perfect, right after he gave it to me. Funny: I didn’t even think about preserving it. That was nearly five years ago now.

But I can still see the two of us, at that German beer hall, with all of our friends from that time, laughing and clanging heavy steins together, toasting the coming year of my life, my twenty-sixth. It was a good day. Almost perfect.

I look east, out the window to my right. The sun is threatening to rise, but my mind is not. It wants to go down, to dig up bones. It often does. I run my hands under the cool water. Yes, I know what a perfect day is. The perfect day took place more than twenty years ago in rural Minnesota, a couple hundred yards off of a two-lane highway.

The highway runs straight west and east through flat but wooded country. My family lives in a home at the end of a long driveway on a plot of land where the trees have been cleared away. Our home is a good deal off of the highway; we never hear the trucks flying by. But when a train passes along the railroad tracks that run parallel to the highway, we hear its whistle. Not too loud, just lonesome and lovely, powerful and perfect. You can measure time against each whistle.

On the perfect day, my brother and I are playing baseball in our backyard. We are protected by woods so thick we can’t see through

them. It is summer, early August, and a handful of neighbor boys have made their way through the thick woods to our baseball diamond. They are all about eleven years old, and I am nine. We aren't expecting them. They just show up. The boys are just enough older this summer; their mothers are just willing enough to let them go off on their own without having made any formal arrangements with my mother. It is summer's end—a time for transitions. Or maybe it's the light—the perfect daylight shining in our backyard that has drawn them.

Our baseball diamond is humble but accurately measured. A particular spruce tree marks first base (just get your foot as close to the base of the tree as you can, my brother says when I complain about the sharp blue needles of the spruce poking my arms and legs). The edge of the garden's boundary where the huge nail sticks out of the wood beam is second. The smaller of the two crab apple trees marks third. Home base and the pitcher's mound are obvious; grass never grows on them. My brother and I have been stomping on those two areas, day after day, taking turns at bat, one of us pitching to the other, all summer long.

But now here are the neighbor boys, over to our diamond! We are able to rotate, each taking a turn fielding, pitching, catching, and hitting. The variety is sheer joy, but so is the exhibition of the whole thing. I'm a lot better at baseball than I used to be. I am a year older. My limbs are stronger. I am growing. I have improved since they last saw me.

I have my brother to thank for this. All summer long he's thrown endless ground balls at me. Pop flies. He's watched me run bases, and he's thrown his up his arms in disgust when my outside foot hits the base at the wrong point in my stride. We've fought a good amount, of course, and I've gone inside to tell on him many times. My mother ignores this, and I never stay inside long before swinging the kitchen door open and going back out so my brother can hold the end of the bat while I stand, pretending to prepare for a pitch, until he is certain that I understand that I must initiate my swing with my lower body.

“Your sister’s not bad,” one of the neighbor boys says after I hit a hard line drive in between second and third. It lands just before the garden and runs well past it on the perfect day. I am flourishing. I’ve never been so happy. I could play baseball with these boys for the rest of my life.

We play together for hours, right into the evening, right up until the sky is pink and yellow, like peach skin stretched over the tops of the tall trees that surround us and almost contain the perfect day.

I step away from our perfect diamond to steal a quick drink from the hose. As the cool water hits my lips, I hear my father’s truck pulling up the drive. I look at my brother, I look towards the house. Through the kitchen window I see my mother peeling potatoes—this is usually my job. It’s time for dinner, and there is nothing we can do about it. My brother and I say goodbye to the neighbor boys. We put our bats and our gloves in the garage, and head into the house.

I see my mother at the sink—all legs and young and lovely—looking us over to see how dirty we are. I see my father, sitting on the stool near the garage door, muscled and strong, undoing the crisscross of the laces that run up the high top portion of his work boots.

We eat fish for dinner—Northern Pike that my brother and I caught out of a nearby lake and that my mother fried in a cast-iron pan. We say a prayer before we eat. *Bless us, oh Lord, and these Thy gifts.* The fish is served alongside the potatoes that I hadn’t had to peel, and my brother says, “She hit one past the garden today,” and my mother smiles at him for being kind to me, and my father says, “Is that so?” and my brother says, “Yes, past the strawberry patch even,” and it is all, as I said, nothing short of perfect as forks hit plates and fingers pick small bones off the delicious white fish.

I don’t like peeling peaches. I shift my feet, try to relieve the pressure that builds in a spine curled over a sink. Shoes would help. Canning

involves so much standing, so much time on one's feet. I should put on my slippers. But they are in the bedroom, and fetching them might wake my husband. I decide to let him sleep. These peaches aren't his problem; they are mine.

The peach skins are sticking to everything. They are wet and blanket-ing my hands and forearms. I'll turn into a peach before I'm done peeling all this fruit. There are other means of removing peach skins, but I prefer the control of the peeler. I stand over the sink as I peel, and as I discover any imperfections in the fruit, I can just cut them out. How simple! The peach is bruised here? Hurt there? Just cut the problem away.

I turn on the water in the kitchen sink and rinse the hundreds of pieces of peach skin off of my fingers and arms. Time to cut the skinless peaches to size. Little crescent moons—that's the shape I'm going for. I cut thousands, letting each little moon fall into a large saucepan. To these crescents I add an impossible amount of sugar and sour lemon juice. Such extremes. Onto the burner the saucepan goes.

I've piled all the pits on the counter next to me. Someone could plant them. Someone could take a run at raising them up. What will I do with all of them? Throw them out the window, that's what I'd like to do. Throw them out the window and let them roll down this hill. Let them roll like hell until they come to a stop in some concrete gutter where they will never grow up or flourish or have a chance to become strong, fruit-bearing trees. The trees surrounding the plot of land where I grew up used to be so thick when I was a kid. Now they are thin. Last time I was home, I could make out other houses in the distance through the trees. What's worse, home base and the pitcher's mound are green with grass, the only fish my mother fries come randomly as gifts from the neighbors, my father looks more of bone than muscle, and my brother has been dead some twenty years.

My hundreds of crescent peach pieces are fragrant now. They are simmering along with the sugar and lemon on the stovetop. I stir them

slowly. My brother wouldn't recognize the blue spruce now. It's grown so tall since he last saw it. I bet I could walk right up to the base of the tree without slouching even. Somehow, the blue spruce has flourished. I put my largest pot in the sink and turn on the water. I watch it fill up, the water level rising slowly up the steel sides on the pot. To the east I see the sun has taken over the sky; I can see San Francisco Bay. I am 900 feet above that water, up here on this hill. Funny to think that Minnesota is even higher—at a higher altitude—than where I am now.

In the sink I see that my huge pot is now full of water. I transfer it quickly to the stovetop. A cup or so of the water sloshes over the top of the pot onto my straining arms. Good thing the water is not yet scalding hot. I turn the burner to high and put the cover on the huge pot. I stir my peaches. I look back towards the bay.

I know the water in the bay moves constantly, that it sloshes in and out to sea every day. But from up here, the bay seems as still as the clear little lakes we used to fish in back home. I draw a line in my mind to that lake—the lake where we caught those Northern Pike. The line starts where I am now on this earth, on this hill. The line stays right at 900 feet above sea level, and it blasts its way east. It blasts through the Rockies, the Dakotas. It blasts through the last twenty years. The line keeps going, staying right at 900 feet, until it reaches a certain lake in Minnesota, on a certain day, late in that one last summer. The line stops underwater, in the middle of the lake. About 300 feet above the line's stopping point is a little fishing boat. My brother and I are in it, our lines hanging down into the clear water. "Let's leave 'em in a little while longer," my brother says. "Okay," I say.

To have that again.

The lid on my huge pot is rattling now. The water has reached a boil.

I lower each of the empty jars into the boiling water carefully. They clink together as the hot water scalds them clean. I bought these jars yesterday. I bought them fair and drove them up this hill. Pop! went

the unsealed lids as I drove. The higher up the hill I went, the less the atmosphere weighed on them—each pop a hymn of release. What if I could drive even higher? Up out of this world, up into the atmosphere. I do not know if things rot in space, but I know what happens here. You can't preserve anything here, not in this dirty container of blue and green. Not even the blue spruce will make it out alive. It will be different for my peaches though. My peaches will go into clean jars. I'll see to that.

Out of the scalding hot water I pull each of the jars and lovingly pour my warm peaches into them. You'll stay just as you are, I tell them. I top each jar with a lid and screw on the bands. Not too tight though—there is still something unclean in these jars.

It's the space between the fruit and the lid that matters. I push the air out of that space and I stop time. I create a vacuum—a sacred space, a protective layer. I dip each jar down into the scalding hot water and watch the surface expectantly. Yes. It is happening now. Bubbles are rising. Air bubbles are leaving the insides of the jars.

Sure, the Pacific Ocean is impressive. But look what I can do with this pot of scalding hot water! One by one, I pull the jars of peaches out of the water and set them down carefully on a clean white cloth near the sink. They are safe now. They are preserved.

My mother says we cannot keep what belongs to God. My brother belonged to God, and God retrieved what was his. God will retrieve my mother and my father too, I know. All will go the way of the perfect day. But I can keep these ten pounds of peaches. Look at them, cooling there on that white cloth. They are mine now. Don't I have the skin of a peach?

The handle on the bedroom door turns. I hear my husband coming slowly down the hall, taking his first few steps of this brand new day. "You're up early," he says kindly. I could turn towards him, towards my future. I could accept the terms and bear good fruit on this hill. But I am not yet done throwing stones.