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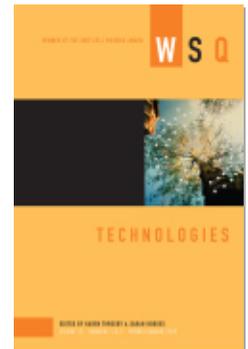
## Peaches

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It took only seven hundred and thirty days to grow to such lengths. Roots, deep, thrusting, and gluttonous, burrowed into a mixed breed of clay, sand, and silt, which had dehydrated after two entire years of a continual, slow suck. The soil, once a densely rich brown, plump with moisture, had faded to a sickly shade of yellow, whose anemic loss of water left each grain coarse and fragile, a hollow shrunken bead that easily succumbed to the weight of footsteps, which upon forward momentum, crushed billions with a *crunch*, a forgettable weak sound traveling into the air, up, up, against blinding sunlight, within a field of towering peach trees whose individual foliage weaved a vast, dramatic canopy. Unusually warm and pleasant, winters came and went with no concern; under normal circumstances, days upon weeks would develop into months where Northern winds flirt with the freezing point, innocently massacring countless buds, one at a time, with their courting process, a slow wander through photogenic acres of aligned trees whose branches, exposed to this suffocating weather, turn solid, from a liquid cellular center, out, to the tip of a green immature fruit. The frost would exit casually, within the arms of cool temperatures, who with backs turned, leave in their wake the faces of young peaches sealed shut, or open, perpetually awake but very much deceased. Limbs heavy with the dead would detach, falling to the earth with a frozen thud, or elaborate shatter. Upon spring, bodies melt, hydrating the granulated soil, feeding what had survived. Under such normal circumstances, there is no need to thin the harvest, to actively reduce the number of peaches being born, to seek out buds overpopulating wispy branches, which despite their exceptional length, cannot feed and tend to all. For two years, migrants from Southern lands, farther south, a little more, to the left, and south, yes, there, burrow their way up, up, to these hyperrich fields to prune branches by hand. No tools are used except for the twelve bones in each wrist, twisting with the demand of pinched fingers around buds on the verge of a blushing, lively hue. With a forgettable *snap*, their necks easily separate from branches after one clockwise turn, and the bulbous remains are tossed into a burlap sack tied around a familiar waist.

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Those taken and discarded simply end on the unfortunate side of a leapfrog pattern of leave, twist, leave, twist, leave, so as to give the attached room to grow, to expand into mouthful of proportions.

Humidity is the distinguishing factor between winter and summer, moving into the land upon a warm, constant breeze from the West. Its sudden, rude arrival is announced with various sizes of condensation beads dotting the landscape, a deep green collection of fanned leaves every now and again intersected by twigs and developing fruit, whose two swelling globes meet at a tucked crevasse running from top to bottom; a broad smile it seems, expressing delight, as a plentiful supply of sweet water filters into its sinuous flesh, a syrupy mix of rainfall and synthetic vitamins. Their range of vowels and consonants spell out vitality, to hurry the maturity process, helping the skin fade from a newborn green, to an awkward red, fading, to a yellow twilight wrapping all three hundred and sixty degrees about the peach, and even out, out and around more curvaceous corners, say, dipping into the nook where this large peach dangles precariously by a thin stem, covered in soot and dead earth uprooted by the uncomfortable breeze. This elegant display suggests the fruit is ripe, the meat within matches the dress, and it is ready for migrants, those from the South, yes, there, no, a little farther still, yes about there, to gather in impressive numbers upon the field, to swarm, pinch, and twist. A system of harvesting rotates the laborers, a leapfrog pattern, deploying a quarter of the workers for a quarter of a day, wherein a tree is identified, approached, and arms are extended, straining at the shoulder blade to fill each open hand with fruit. As a palm makes gentle contact with the arc of a peach, fingers clasp, respectfully, so as not to leave any marks or imprints of this event. Driven by muscle memory, the wrist twists.

Detached, the peach is now a valuable product, released from fingers with a conscious, courteous effort into a worn burlap sack. For six continuous hours, arms are vertical, wrists rotate, and the sack bloats with weight one detachment at a time. Tied around one hip and the other, a thick rope of tan straw digs into flesh, beginning as a noticeable burn near the spine and comic poke about the abdomen. Not until the third and fourth hour, after six or possibly seven peach trees have been left vacant, the incremental weight of the sack squats upon muscles in the lower back, muscles every now and again intersected by capillaries, clumps filled with pale green and oxygenated blood, suddenly, silently, burst, releasing their contents into an organized body as a spill, inking out and sideways and into the other, wandering into layers of skin frayed by coarse straw, filling pores and the space between

veins their combined color of bruise. The sack's nagging tug has become a continual jab along the lower vertebrae and the path of the large intestine, a jab here and there and here felt as if, say, a pair of index and middle fingers were tapping a rhythmic melody, gaining in speed and ingenuity, so that upon the sixth hour all possible combination of notes have been played, and the muscles, the skin, its layers and the innards below those, are marked up with commerce. The sacks are carried off, into an aluminum warehouse, hugged between arms moistened with fatigue and sweat, an acidic smell easily identifiable among the pleasant, sugary fragrance of well-grown peaches, a gathering that will increase in six hours, as the following round of workers exits to swarm, pinch, and twist.

A constant mechanical moan emits from the belly of a narrow conveyor belt, covered discreetly by a roll of thick, black plastic. Its recycled movements are plagued by a pattern of dry spots, periodically disrupted by several feet of damp material, slick with a syrupy liquid all too familiar, clumped with chunks of fibrous, attractive yellow steaks here and there. Vacant and repeating, the belt awaits, where at the foot of this conveyor, cascading from the bottom lip of a sack, peaches pour, strewn about; their limbless forward momentum held back only by a series of latex hands attached to female workers, sitting along the length of the conveyor, in silence. The moan is too great to gossip over in a native tongue and all concentration, then, is placed on the produce thrusting forward. Left and right hands extend above the forward momentum, clasping each digit around a mature fruit and placing it, upside down, with its rounded bottom filling the air, its filthy stem dug into the plastic, awaiting a file of machine knives pulsing at a speed swift enough to deceive the useless human eye, a comic blur to mouth through the thick, dense exoskeleton of a useless seed found at a peach's very center. With intelligible, pitched squeaks the vibrating knives, up to down, down to up, saw through the smug grin connecting a peach's two globes, releasing upon the plastic mat below two years worth of liquid stored inside the sugary flesh, liquid soaked from soil whose only purpose in its hollow existence was to carry a raindrop.

Laytexed and sterile, fingers of silent workers nudge the separated globes, making certain the mechanical teeth have successfully chewed through the flesh and earthy brown seed of a whole peach. The tap is gentle, a polite nudge into the remains, as though inquiring, after witnessing such a physical event, if all is well, despite the obvious visual of a knife slicing through thousands of bellies and strands of yellow innards caught between little steel teeth.

The globes, bled and physically handicapped, shrunken in size from bulbous fruit to awkward sliver, welcome the touch, yielding slightly to the minor pressure point of an index finger. A dent is absorbed by the skin, a final intake of the surrounding world before sheets of cold solution, discharged from nozzles hung above the conveyor, rain upon the halves. Their wide, thin spray pattern condenses water molecules, releasing a compacted stream with such force the impact against the produce swiftly undresses the flesh, ripping away the skin and twilight colors in shoved tears, a constant beating that leaves the wrappings as scattered puddles of wet clumps along the belt. They are collected and discarded immediately, plucked by familiar hands whose dampened gloves have tainted from their original shocking white to the mild rouge coloring a peach. Or the color once coloring a peach, as now, passing through the aluminum warehouse, before the eyes of indifferent strangers, the fruit is an exposed chunk of flesh for sale, flesh bordering between a pleasant yellow and deep orange.

To dry the flesh and get rid of the broken seed embedded within, the conveyor spasms violently. The additional movement elevates the moan to a growl, an aggressive sound produced between the clenched teeth of a focused mammal. The vibrations from noise and the irrational motion shake the flesh free of excess water droplets, leaking over what curvature of the fruit remains, and down the side of its naked cheek. The seed, split, is of no use and slips out, onto the plastic sheet of the belt, with a hollow knock, a sound to signal an additional removal by palms and the inner padding of fingers stained red. Empty and naked, dry and halved, the fruit is quartered, knifed one additional time by a team of slicing blades peeking up and through the conveyor from below, spinning counterclockwise. The backward direction of the blades and forward progression of the belt forces the fruit into a devastating corner. The bits created are industrial bite-size morsels, easily slipped into a glass jar for viewing, for a shopper to witness the color and health of the product suspended within, whose shine and plumpness persuade thought patterns into more optimistic areas of the brain, lulling a convincing argument for freshness, though the bits had been jarred weeks prior to being stacked, say, in aisle five alongside distant cousins such as canned tomatoes and pineapple slices. After their quartering, the divided fruit are carried off, several additional and final feet into the distance, where, meeting the end of the conveyor's length, the bits unevenly cascade into a line of open jars below, clinking along a separate conveyor schematic. Side by side and held tightly at the waist, jars are led by a series of rolling rollers

stepping to a set waltz whose *1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3* is in exact relation with the time for a bit to drop from a designated height. The result is an equal distribution of weight, a piling of chunked peaches from the base to neck of every jar, adding up to sixteen delicious ounces.

The sweets are made sweeter still, farther down this new path, where into the mouths of jars an injection of sugar syrup is squirted. The needle, thin, long, and bulimic, hurls a swift shot of liquid, flooding what elbow room had existed between layered pieces of peach. The liquid is clear and of a thin consistency, resembling pond water; the jar has become an enjoyable aquatic moment, a world for peaches to wade though blindly, paddling naked and free, spinning rambunctiously with laughter until it is time for air, where, upon rising to the surface, a panicked mob of peaches is crushed against a lid. Floating silently and immobile, their sinuous fibers are to be continually washed with brine, flowing within and out, loosening their yellow hues and tenderizing the meat, until, after days upon weeks, the pond water is a thick orange of polluted goop. Its goal is preservation, sealing the fruit at a youthful age, a time of purity and taste, as meat exposed to an outside world of horrors and disease leads to swelling, weakness, discoloration, various contractual conditions where flesh slowly decays, as bacteria, continuously draining minerals and life from its host, leaves pockmarks and foul-smelling holes throughout the body, with infection paddling freely from tip to tip. Inside the jars, time has stopped, encapsulating a grove of trees flowering at their peak, a harvest plucked after two continuous years of direct exposure to sunlight and suckling of rainwater, a product prepared by many Southern hands and twisting wrists, a little farther, south, and left, yes, there, assembled, to arrive in aisle five without a flaw.

For a biography of Jillian Ciaccia, please see page 255.