The Perfect Mango

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Preface

I wrote *The Perfect Mango* over nineteen days in July 1994. Living had always been hard, but I had hit an impasse. The lure of ending it all was very strong. Suicide was always close, had always lived on the edges. Today it is more a lurker than a temptation. Then it felt more like a command, and while much of the time I could resist attempting it, there had been more than one occasion where I couldn’t. The nineteen days through which I wrote my body, the days of bringing *The Perfect Mango* into the world, were days I gave myself fully to the possibility of life.

The words written here, breathless, are not the words I would compose today. I hesitated deeply before republishing the book, afraid that the words would haunt me, afraid of their unrelenting rawness. I wanted to sculpt them, to orient them, to write in pauses where a distance could be crafted that might mute the messy scream I hear when I return to them. But these are not words that can be edited. These are words that gave me nineteen days, that gave me life. They are words that bear witness to the struggle of finding a way to speak of the moreness that is a body, the fissure where pain and desire meet. For the body that says I throughout this work is never a single body, never a body that stands alone, that knows itself as an individual, and this is, I think, what can be heard
in the unrelenting sentences, in the breathlessness of a composition that asks how else life might be lived.

To allow words like these to find their way back into the world is to want to give voice to those moments of messy survival that call for a proposition such as this one. These were the conditions: to write one chapter a day, fully edited, and write until the living became possible. When I read these words, these imperfect, grasping, gasping calls for new modes of existence, this is what I hear. I hear a call for other ways of listening to the urgency that is living.

It took me almost twenty-five years to return to *The Perfect Mango*. Relieved by its disappearance, I preferred to have it in the shadows and to craft the life I have lived since with more distance from the pain and the terrible brokenness that comes with sexual assault and all that follows from it. It was Brian who said the book was ready to reappear. And it was Julietta who gave me the courage to read it again. What I have learned from this encounter with those who hear the words I wrote so long ago is that it may not be my decision to make whether this imperfect and deeply honest book finds its place in the world once again. For *The Perfect Mango* is in no real sense mine: it is the force that gave me life, the springboard through which I could begin to speak.

The speaking has not been easy, but I’ve noticed that over the past few years it has come more fluidly, the stories intertwined with the concepts crafted over years of asking how else living is possible.

In February 2019 I will turn fifty. This turn will mark twenty-five years since I wrote *The Perfect Mango*. In 1994 and for many years afterwards every year that was marked by a birthday felt like a surprise. I didn’t think I would know the world from this vantage point. But I have moved in the spiral of time, have lived another cycle and here, close to fifty, I am moved by what age can do. Many of us are taught that age reduces us, that it depletes us.
This is not my experience. Growing older has come with a sense that the multiplicity of I which was so difficult for me as a child is truly the richness life brings. There is no single identity, only a policing of the category. This is what changes: we may become less willing to fit into the categories imposed on our bodies.

With that comes the joy of not being a victim. Joy here is meant in the Spinozist sense. Joy is not happiness. It is the capacity of the world to bring with it what exceeds the actual. It is the more-than of experience in the making. I think I always knew this joy, and it was this unwieldy moreness that I was trying to touch in The Perfect Mango. I had no words for it then, though Nietzsche certainly was a muse, as he remains for me today.

I say “not being a victim” not to deny that terrible things happened or that I suffered. I mean that to be a victim is to stand still, to hold oneself to a frame, a category. What The Perfect Mango gave me was a way to move, a way to find a rhythm that could pull me into new directions.

These directions did not come easily. There were many years after The Perfect Mango that were difficult, and the threat of suicide never completely leaves me, even now. But much has changed, and this change has come through years of practice. I think of practice here as a mode of experimentation that produces orientations life can unfold. Practice includes art and writing, it includes working with materials and crafting concepts. But it also includes the work of the quotidian. I learned to compose with others for whom the collective is more-than the sum of its parts. I learned to seed collaborations that welcomed a more-than-I, collaborations that could give life without reducing life to a single living being. I needed this: to be in excess of myself.

To be in excess of myself is to be embroiled in a process that makes me. It is to feel the world moving me, shifting the contours of what me might be. There is no victimhood here. Certainly there is inheritance and with
it there are directions best not followed. I am careful to collaborate with the forces of existence and not the categories, not the frames that would return me to a cage I have worked so hard to leave behind.

At almost-fifty I no longer struggle as much with self-destructiveness because I am not as close as I was to a notion of self. Much of the time I is elsewhere, captured by the lure of an orientation too rich to pass by. This is also what comes with age, I think – the precision of orientation. Today I follow the lead that takes me where the world worlds.

When Brian and I met, he saw me like no one had ever seen me. Shortly after we got together, he gave me a book: *When Rabbit Howls* by Truddi Chase and her alters. It’s been many years since I read the book, but what struck me most was the force of rabbit. Rabbit is the unspeakable force that cleaves a body open, that keeps it alive. It is that wild interloper that accompanies those who have been broken and haunts them, the force that unrelentingly expresses that which cannot be spoken.

Re-reading *The Perfect Mango* I could hear rabbit. Rabbit is less present now. Sometimes I feel the force of rabbit still, especially on the nights when the nightmares return or in conditions of violence when the body closes down and moves like a terrorized animal in flight. I don’t mind rabbit so much anymore. I recognize that it is rabbit that kept me alive. It is rabbit that saw what so few others were prepared to see.

Sexual abuse and abuse of all kinds breaks the body. It cleaves experience into a before and after. In my case, though, time was much more crooked. What is an experience that takes you with it? How to speak of acts that multiply, of ways of living that seem to call them forth? How to speak of a life poised for the unraveling?

In the intervening years I have found few answers to those questions. It turns out these are not the questions that most trouble me today. What I want to know today
is how to create conditions for living beyond humanism’s fierce belief that we, the privileged, the neurotypicals, the as-yet-uncathed, the able-bodied, hold the key to all perspectives in the theatre of living. The conditions for living I seek are those that facilitate a more-than-human encounter with a life lived in the kind of creative activity that deeply challenges the normative standards that enable the violence I experienced as a child and continued to experience throughout my adolescence and early adulthood. This violence is lived everyday not only by those who are abused, but by all for whom the world as we know it remains out of reach – those whose subjectivities are excluded from the category of the human. I don’t want to participate in that world. I want to live at the interstices where black life and indigenous life and neurodiverse life and all ways of living that invent ways of encountering the force of what living can be are celebrated. I want to live in the fierce celebration of a world invented by those modes of life which tear at the colonial, white, neurotypical fabric of life as we know it.

In the mix, no category will remain untouched. Categories imprison bodies. The me-ness of the intervening twenty-five years has sidled many identities, many forms. But what is clear to me now is that the freedom of aging is the recognition that these forms are much more temporary than we might have thought, and the staging of those forms much more brittle than we might have imagined. There is a world to be invented, a world always being invented, and this is the world that keeps me alive today.