

There Is Still a Mango Tree in the Backyard of My Childhood

Daniela Brasil

There is a mango tree in the backyard of my childhood.
It still exists somewhere inside me.

Every now and then it blossoms in my dreams. Sometimes it returns as the taste of the *manga-rosa*—plump, fragrant—the ripe fruit we reached after a small expedition into the canopy. During recess, we would climb toward that hidden corner to pick the most beautiful, mouthwatering mango: the one slowly blushing from yellow to pink, —the one that ripens like the sun rises.

Those warm, humid mornings beckoned us into a world of shade and leaves. The schoolyard was mostly concrete, softened by a broad patch of sand in the middle. From that sandy ground, our mango tree rose exuberantly, taking over the schoolyard with its generous canopy. A world of her own. A refuge. An adventure.

Beyond the school wall stretched Rio de Janeiro, suspended between the Atlantic Forest and asphalt, the dirty waters of the Maracanã River, the *bem-te-vis* and those who had "seen you well." The rattling buses, the invisible cicadas, and the murmur rising from every other street corner all coexisted within that tropical tangle. I did not know then that mango trees (or as the scientists call them *Mangifera indica*) had come from far away, crossing oceans and empires, carried from Asia along the routes of colonialism. To me, she was as Carioca as the hills after the rain, as inevitable as the salty smell that sometimes arrived with the wind. Perhaps because cities, too, are made of grafts, of traveling seeds, of unlikely encounters that eventually put down roots.

What remains is the bite into a mango still warm from the sun, picked in haste before someone could say it wasn't ripe yet. The fibers between my teeth, the juice running down my wrists, the thick perfume clinging to my skin. And then, without warning, everything returns. Not the orderly memory of facts, but that proustian memory—the one in the folds of the senses. The body remembers before words do. The tongue rediscovers a forgotten sweetness, and suddenly the calming shade of the canopy returns, the golden light filtering through the leaves, the buzzing of my school friends pretending to be bees. The children reappear, Luis, Marcela, Danielle, Guiga, Guga e Maringá, all suspended above the world, convinced that the forest began right there.

Perhaps it did.

Perhaps every childhood needs a tree to teach that there is a time different from the clock—a deeper time, a vegetal time, made of filtered light, of waiting, of climbing into the unknown and getting lost, and, before anything else, a time of abundance.

I wish I could write a letter to you, my beloved Mango Tree teacher.

Today, I see you as one of my most important teachers—not human, but a friend nonetheless. You were the mango tree growing from a patch of sand between the two houses that sheltered our little primary school. The school was called *Vivendo e Aprendendo—Living and Learning*. What a fitting name. That is exactly what we did.

Looking back, I recognize the privilege of having been sent to such an open-hearted, experimental place of learning. We wandered through the city, learning wherever life unfolded. Our human teachers were less instructors than facilitators, gently guiding our curiosity. Now, as I return to the moments we spent together beneath your canopy, I realize how much I learned when nothing was being taught. During recess, when no activity was planned, when no one expected anything from us, I simply stayed with you. And perhaps that was one of my deepest lessons.

Maybe it is a reinvented memory. Those were the years 1982, 83, 84, 85, and Brazil was still living under a fading military dictatorship. They were years of fermentation. And I was a happy child, growing, living, and learning with your steadiness. Maybe I was learning in the pauses.

Or perhaps in the silence.

A couple of years later, I started to grasp what the dictatorship had really meant. By the age of thirteen, I had joined the movement for democratization through the student association at my new school. That school, by the way, had no trees—only concrete and the hum of air-conditioned classrooms. I still remember my beloved history teacher, Ana Lúcia Iorio, who brought Luís Carlos Prestes to speak to us there, in the middle of that concrete courtyard.

But that is another story.

Now let me try to write you a letter.

A Love Letter to My Mango Tree

Graz – Wörthersee, June–July 2026.

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Why do I long for you?

Who is longing for whom?

I wish I could learn to grow
the way you do.
Upward and downward,
outward and inward.

To root myself in order to reach the sky.
To dance with the wind and weep with the rain.
To expand and retreat with every season,
without pretending everything is fine.

Without pretending I don't need to stop.

Yes, a long pause.

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I wish my body knew more about photosynthesis.
To turn sunlight into breath.
To open myself to warmth.
To be whole, even in pieces.
Green and alive, yet also dry, grey, and falling.

I wish I could learn with you
to let time strip away my petals and my leaves
scatter me across the ground
until I become part of it.

I wish I could learn to grow
the way you do.
Upward and downward,
outward and inward.

To grow without the violence of a straight line.
Without the illusion that living means moving forward.
To grow like someone who listens.
Like someone who knows that every height
depends upon an equal depth.

To root oneself
in order to reach the sky.
To sink into the earth
in order to take a bath in the clouds.

You know how to wait.
I guess, we have unlearned...

You know that time is not a ladder
but a spiral.
That returning is not failure.
That retreating, too, is a gesture of growth.
While we count days,
you count rainfall.

While we measure productivity,
you measure light, humidity, silence.

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Why do I long for you?
Who is longing for whom?

I wish my body knew more about photosynthesis.
To turn sunlight into air.

To receive warmth and give it back as breath.
To absorb heat without bursting into flames.
To open myself to it.
To receive light as daily practice.
To produce oxygen for whoever
might need it.

To become shelter.

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You do not pretend.

You do not pretend to stay forever green,
much less forever in bloom.
When the time comes, leaves, flowers, and fruit fall.
They do not bargain with the season.
They do not insist on remaining the same.
There is a radical honesty in knowing how to let go.
A gentle refusal to perform permanence.

I wish I could learn that too.

Not to hide my dry seasons or my winters.
To welcome movement without mistaking it for threat.
To bend without breaking.
To sway when the storm comes,
without confusing flexibility with weakness.

To receive the rain in its entirety,
without protecting myself from being wet.
To let the water run through the branches of memory
and find the places inside me that have grown dry.
To expand and retreat with every season
without pretending everything is all right.

A pause in which no one asks me for flowers
when my only work is simply to survive.

A long pause.

Deep.

Dark as the earth where the roots converse.
Because roots converse.
Perhaps through fungi. Perhaps through memory.
Perhaps through something that does not need to be named.
Beneath the ground there is an intelligence that cannot fit within human haste.

A profound intelligence of listening and reciprocity.
No tree grows alone. And neither do we.

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Why do I long for you?
Who is longing for whom?

I wish I could learn from you how to trust the invisible.
Only much later did I understand what you had been teaching me all along.
The elders say that every leaf carries its own axé, its own word.

You never explained the invisible.

You simply lived it.

Your leaves knew. Your roots knew.
The earth beneath you knew.

One day I understood your oldest secret:
nothing ends when it falls.

The leaf feeds the soil.
The soil nourishes the roots.
The roots hold the trunk.
The trunk lifts the branches.
The branches welcome new leaves.

Life continues.

Not despite the falling,

but because of it.

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Why do I long for you?

Who is longing for whom?

What is this force that keeps drawing me back?

Perhaps it is not I who longs for you.

Perhaps it is the child I once was, still sitting in your shade.

Perhaps I am not returning to you at all.

Perhaps I am returning to the places you planted inside me.

Thank you.

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Obrigada por me sussurrar tudo isso quando eu nem sabia que sabia te ouvir.

Thank you for whispering all this to me before I knew I was listening.