

**The Accidental Orchardists
or
How We Became Fruit Growers**

I used to be one of them: the people who walk the produce section lamenting the high cost of organic cherries or Bartlett pears. Usually, I'd still buy them for ethical and health reasons, albeit begrudgingly. And I'd be sure to pick the biggest, least pock marked fruit there was.

Now I'm one of the other them: the people who grow organic fruit.

Being a fruit grower was never our dream. We didn't set out to save the world. But in the past three years, my husband and I have learned a lot: About what sustainability really means—and how elusive it is. About the cycles of fruit trees and the fickle, picky nature of American consumers. And about letting go, how to simply be with the things beyond our control.

In our first growing season, I confided, tearfully, to my friend, Salida poet Jude Janett, "I feel as if everything is breaking."

She laughed. "Breaking open," she said, "Not down."

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I Have Found No Better Teaching

than May's ripening apricots,
rose cheeked and hail pocked,
unsellable & sweetening anyway.

**

It was the middle of May, 1997. In our red canoe, my husband and I paddled the Gunnison River from Delta to Bridgeport. I recall little from that day trip except these three things: It was very windy. We ate Pringles for lunch. And we paddled past an orchard deep in the canyon and said to each other, "Wow, look at that! Who would ever do that?"

How do any of us choose to do what we do? Every day, so many choices. Should I wear the red shirt or the green? For dinner, shall we have stir fry or burritos? And shall we buy that 184-acre orchard?

What are we capable of? What's our willingness to risk? And what kind of life do we want to live? These are the questions that really matter. And so it is that without knowing squat about trees,

fruit, labor laws, Spanish language, or marketing produce, my husband and I chose farm life in 2007, purchasing the orchard we'd seen ten years before.

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And Shall We Cross It?

Between tonight and starlight
10,000 times 10,000 choices,
like this one fallen on the floor in front of us,

a thin red stripe that invites.

Was it here yesterday, flouncing along
the invisible edge of no and yes?
Where did it hide in the accordion folds of now?

And shall we cross it?

So we toe the moment.
And what? Retreat?
Run headlong and leap?

Or waltz another round
on the shrinking stage of maybe,
this once-comfortable place

where the feet still know
which step
comes next.

**

We never thought we'd be farmers. I am a poet and writer. Eric was a builder and project manager. Our fruit growing career began by circumstance: we fell in love with a piece of land.

The orchard is a green dominion alongside the muddy Gunnison. Dominguez Canyon's red sandstone walls dominate every horizon with their slowly eroding slopes. Tucked between cliffs hide small dunes of flesh-colored sand, gulches littered with volcanic rock and petrified wood, and walls pocked with barely visible rock art. Though the orchard itself feels abundant and fertile, all around it are reminders that everything transforms. Surely we have, too.

We initially looked at the property—named Peeples on old maps—as a real estate investment. It was dramatic, remote, had plenty of water rights, and boasted three decrepit houses, a barn

stuffed with trash, heaps of rusted cars, an inventory of unusable tractors and implements, and piles of dysfunctional irrigation parts. It was perfect.

This is my husband's specialty. He finds forlorn and fatigued properties and works with the land and infrastructure until they're revitalized. The only drawback to the orchard: trees. Nearly 20,000 fruit trees on 70 irrigated acres. Apricots. Apples. Nectarines. Peaches. Pears. Cherries. Intimidated, we pulled back.

A year later, venture-less, our ignorance about growing fruit seemed less daunting. We could learn. We would hire a manager and continue to live in our home on the San Miguel River in Placerville, two hours south of the orchard.

That's how little we knew.

Our neighbor upstream on the Gunnison, a second-generation orchardist who had just passed his orchard on to his son, heard our plan to operate New Leaf Fruit remotely. He raised an eyebrow. He didn't say then, "We'll see about that." He saved his words until later. Until after my husband had moved there.

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Seeing I am the Problem, I Look Out the Window

I want to swallow the rainbow
and learn how to bend like that.

**

The move had been gradual. First Eric's clothes were gone from our bedroom closet. Then his tools vacated our garage. Then his computer left our office. Eric had leapt headlong. I spent longer waltzing the shrinking stage of maybe. It was months before I fully grasped the obvious. The orchard was not an investment; it was a total lifestyle change. Our summers would have nothing to do with climbing San Juan mountains knee-deep in lupine nor running rivers nor camping in snow-cradled alpine cirques. That was the old life. Summer's new activities involved hanging pheromone mating disruptors in apple and pear trees, fixing tractors, thinning apricots and repairing micro-sprinklers.

In the months leading up to the orchard purchase, Eric had worked on cleaning up the contract, researching water rights and untangling access issues—especially with the non-communicative Union Pacific. To get to the property, one must cross the tracks, and the rail bisects the orchard rows, its yellow engines carrying coal, scrap metal, sawdust and empty freight cars all hours of night and day. The railroad administration doesn't want to be reached and has constructed a nearly impenetrable wall around its higher ups. Eric was duly persistent, and in March, 2007, we signed the dotted line.

Meanwhile, I'd researched the world of fruit growing, making contacts with other orchardists, soil scientists, marketers, packers, government officials and potential employees. I learned about organic certification and cultivation—how every grower does it differently. I learned why Colorado's peaches are sweeter than those from California—cold nights help. I learned it was as romantic as it sounded—making sweetness out of sunlight, water and soil. But. And. Like all successful romance, it takes a lot of work.

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Meet Me There in the Cherry Rows

O and the cherries, arced boughs of cherries
past red, scarlet stain on our fingers,

palms, lips, and chin and the joy that rises then
and the walls—whichever ones we've built—

come down for the juice of it,
crimson sharp seize of it, blood singing yes

of it, wall-breaching mmmm of it,
blessings, such blessings, such blessings

take root and let's bow to brief sweetnesses
praise fleeting ecstasy,

give ourselves up to this garden.

**

Of course there are moments that feel torn right out of the storybook. Eating ripe Bing cherries from the bough. Walking through pale pear blossoms, like "little mist of fallen starlight," as poet James Wright once said. Listening to honeybees. Swimming in the river at the end of the day. Biting into peach after peach after tree-ripened peach.

And then there's work. Work. Work. Work. It is one thing to own an orchard. It is another to operate it day after day after long, long day. Starting out, we had three things going for us. One: We had no preconceived ideas of how an orchard "should" be run. There was no chance to fall into mindless tradition: "I prune that way because my dad pruned that way because his dad pruned that way..." We got a clean start, making our decisions by drawing on the experiences and research from other growers and scientists.

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Word Woman

Two: Eric can fix almost anything. The biggest job at the orchard is repair. Tractors. Pumps. Pipes. Sprayers. Everything breaks. Every day, Eric puts on his fix-it-man hands and makes the equipment run right. He hates it. He's great at it.

Three: Can-do attitude.

But knowing nothing had its problems, too—especially when solid answers were elusive. For instance, how best to fertilize an acre of peaches? A foliar application of fish oil? Spread chicken manure? Plant dwarf white clover as a green manure? No two orchardists or scientists gave us the same answer. Bottom line: one answer cannot fit all orchards. With variability in soils, pests, climate and trees, there's some science protocol, but then there's a whole lot of art (and luck) when it comes to generating one of what may be many partially right answers. There are no silver bullets.

What trees to plant? What rootstocks to use? How much water to apply? Which sprays? We are finally learning how to formulate our own answers based on our own brief experience. Amidst the ambiguity, however, everyone agrees on two points. If you are going to be a successful grower, you put growing first. And you can't control mother nature.

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Dominguez Canyon April 4, 2009

I wandered the canyon lined with snow,
through brown apricot blossoms that will not fruit

and startled the starlings, one hundred or more,
into swirls of black flight, oh shiver, oh low angled light,

oh world I am yours, I crumble like cliffs,
I am yours, I am praising your all that is:

these barren trees, this wind, these lips,
the song inside us that rises like starlings

regardless of chill, of petal turned dust.
Praise the soft laughter of purple mustard blooms,

this damp perfume that lingers
the morning after the killing frost.

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When it comes to learning to the fine art of letting go, running the orchard is a 70-acre doctorate degree. Sure, we can decide whether to plant our cherries on Mazzard or Gisela 6 root stock. We

can choose to use concentrated vinegar instead of hoes to control bind weed. But we can't control frost. We can't control late season hail. And when 4,000 new peach tree starts die, it does no good to point fingers. Salvage what's salvageable. Learn what you can. Give thanks for what you have. Move on.

When writing a poem, sometimes I think I know the end before I start. I try to steer the poem in a certain way toward a certain truth or discovery. These poems seldom succeed. As my friend, Denver poet Kathryn Bass says, preconceived endings are a kind of "emergency exit" that we create so that we might eject ourselves from the poem before the poem is necessarily ready to let us out.

I'm glad Eric and I haven't pressed eject on the orchard. In embracing this new kind of Colorado life where the days are measured by the opening stages of buds and the color of the fruit, I'm happy. I feel lucky to live so intimately with the land. And I think perhaps I'm finally learning to embrace the ways things break.

Open, of course. Not down.

**

Ohm or Om

I have tried to resist the killing frost,
to create enough heat in my defiance
to save a whole orchard of pear and peach.
As if worry could raise a May night one degree.

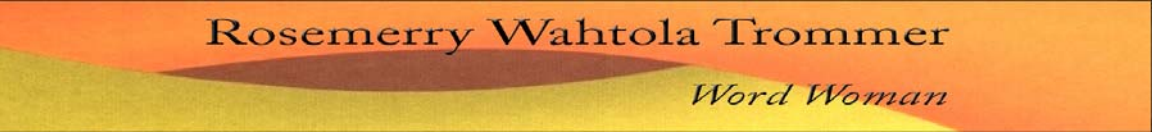
I invent new battle hymns in my blood—
but fervor has no effect on freeze
and friction cannot defend what browns.

The night has its way with me.
Surrender becomes my name.

Before we understand acceptance,
we must refuse to believe what is,
must wrestle with every bit of our lattice
the tide of blind inheritance

until all our nos are replaced by oms
and hum is the only law that sticks,

till we bow to the current ecstasy,
widen the scope, increase the flow,



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become the rare conductor
who knows how to let go.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer is poet laureate of San Miguel County. Her newest books include *Holding Three Things at Once*, finalist for the Colorado Book Award, and *Intimate Landscape: The Four Corners in Poetry & Photographs*.

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