

WHEN WOMEN WERE BIRDS

FIFTY-FOUR VARIATIONS ON VOICE

by

TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

"I thought I was writing a book about voice. I thought I would proclaim as a woman that we must speak the truth of our lives at all costs." —Terry Tempest Williams in When Women Were Birds

On her deathbed, Terry Tempest Williams's mother told her, "I am leaving you my journals. But you must promise me that you will not look at them until after I am gone." Weeks later when Williams went to read them, longing to hear her mother's voice again, she found each one was blank—three shelves of blank journals. Throughout *When Women Were Birds*, Williams meditates on why her mother might have left the journals unfilled. What did that signify to her mother? What was her mother telling her?

XII

In the arid foothills of the Wasatch Mountains, the Milky Way arched over us. It was the nightly path our eyes crossed before we went to sleep. This was my personal universe, with its own inherent truths. Truth, for me, was based on what I could see and hear, touch and taste, more trustworthy than any religious doctrine. Indoor religion bored me; outdoor religion did not. Rufous-sided towhees scratched in the understory of last year's leaves; lazuli buntings were turquoise exclamation marks singing in a canopy of green; and blue-gray gnatcatchers became commas in an ongoing narrative of wild nature. My inspiration was winged. Magpies, evening grosbeaks, and scrub jays were family. Turkey vultures soared overhead, casting unexpected shadows during summer heat. Rattlesnakes were our complication to a life lived outside. We heard them first; saw them second, coiled; and before we counted to three, we ran. Clouds became our focal point for change.

The minute school ended, our game of "Capture" began. It was our form of *Treasure Island* in the mountains. Children in the neighborhood begin building and rebuilding last year's tree houses in the scrub oak.

I cannot tell you what the point of this ongoing game was, only that it consumed us from the moment we awoke until dinnertime. We spied on one another, girls against boys, from the vantage point of trees. The sweet pleasure of imagining I was someone else living somewhere else was enough to capture me for an entire summer.

We made up our own language. We drew maps. We buried them. We created a community with our own currency from found pieces of glass. Green and brown shards were common. Lavender was sought after, blue glass was rare, but red was the gleam you looked for beneath the hot desert sun shining through the understory of sage.

One day, however, as I was sitting in our tree house, I spotted a white bird perched directly above me. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. I went into the house to call my grandmother, still watching the ghost bird through the glass sliding doors that faced the trees. I explained the size and shape of this mysterious bird to be that of a robin, only without a brown back, black head, and red breast. She listened carefully. We both had our bird books in hand. "Perhaps it is an albino," she said. "A bird without pigmentation, even its eyes without color." That very word, *albino*, was a revelation to me. She might as well have said *of the spirit world*.

It was indeed a robin, the most common of birds, free of its prescribed dressings, white with red eyes. I was inspired and called her "the Holy Ghost."

When I reported this finding to our local Audubon chapter as an eight-year-old bird-watcher, the president said that because of my age, he could not legitimately count it as "a credible sighting."

My grandmother simply shook her head and said, "You know what you saw. The bird doesn't need to be counted, and neither do you."

XIII

What needs to be counted on to have a voice? Courage. Anger. Love. Something to say; someone to speak to; someone to listen. I have talked to myself for years in the privacy of my journals. The only things I've done religiously are keep a journal and use birth control. My first journal had a lock and key. It was a diary made of light blue leather embossed with a gold border. My thoughts and secrets were safe from my brothers. It was a gift from my great-grandfather Lawrence Blackett, Mimi's father, to commemorate my eighth birthday and baptism into the Mormon church.

A diary differs from a journal in expectations. A diary asks for a daily entry. This I could not do. Almost immediately I transformed my diary into a journal, where I could write in its pages at will. I still recall one entry in particular because it was written in code:

Decisions . . .

Decisions . . .

Decisions . . .

We finally made it to Jackson Hole.

It conveyed a descending sense of disappointment, and then resolution. The reason I can retrieve this passage almost five decades later is because of the dilemma it posed. Do I tell the truth on the page or disguise my feelings in words that will be understood only by me? This required skillfulness. I would protect myself and those I loved, giving nothing away. I didn't want to criticize my father.

I didn't want to whine (forbidden in our family). But I needed to define my frustration. I called on style, symbols, and shorthand. I learned early how to cover myself as a writer should the lock be picked and my words read.

What I wanted to say was that in our family, work came first. We never knew one minute to the next whether we would ever go on vacation until we were actually in the car. Uncertainty was certain. Everything depended on the state of the Tempest Company, a family-run pipeline business. If Dad was

needed, we stayed home. When he was free, we were on the road. Tense negotiations between our parents often surfaced beyond their bedroom. Would Mother drive us up alone? Would Dad come up later? Or would they drive up together the next day, with my brothers and me traveling earlier with our aunt and uncle and cousins?

I was frustrated. We had been waiting all day. Finally a decision was made. Yes, we would be going to the Tetons. I had a record of my complaint.

“What’s in those diaries then?”

“They aren’t diaries.”

“Whatever they are.”

“Chaos, that’s the point.”

—Doris Lessing,
The Golden Notebook

Mormon women write. This is what we do, we write for posterity, noting the daily happenings of our lives. Keeping a journal is keeping a record. And I have hundreds of them, hundreds of journals filled with feathers, flowers, photographs, and words. Without locks, open on my shelves. I have more journals still with field notes from the Arctic to Africa, to days spent at the Prado, to time shared among prairie dogs. Day books with calendars, shopping lists, and accounting figures are strewn across our home. I cannot think without a pen in hand. If I don’t write it down, it doesn’t exist.

Mother knew this about me. She also knew and more than understood the Mormon promptings to become a scribe. In our possession, passed down from mother to daughter, we have many journals written in the most elegant script by your forebearers, especially women who practiced polygamy. I take personal pride in a journal entry made by my great-great-grandmother, who chastises her husband for taking a third wife who was “a pretty but sickly little thing, unfit to lift a hoe in the fields or bring in a bushel of sugar beets, adding to my burden of household chores . . . one can only speculate why she was brought home in the first place.”

Mother was a private woman. She would often say, “I don’t like people knowing my thoughts.” She was a Coyote, a trickster, a woman deflecting an interest in her to an interest in others. In my mother’s presence, you were heard. And she always left knowing a lot more about you than you knew about her. She preferred it that way. She was warm and gracious in public, but she was a master at maintaining her privacy. Intimacy was on her terms.

When Mother did share, and she shared deeply with those closest to her, her eyes were penetrating. “What do you think?” she would ask. It makes sense that what she bequeathed to me was a mystery.

My Mother’s Journals are an act of defiance.

My Mother’s Journals are an act of aggression.

My Mother’s Journals are an act of modesty.

To be read. To be heard. To be seen. I want to be read, I want to be heard. I don't need to be seen. To write requires an ego, a belief that what you say matters. Writing also requires an aching curiosity leading you to discover, uncover, what is gnawing at your bones. Words have a weight to them. How you choose to present them and to whom is a matter of style and choice. Yet the emptiness of my mother's journals carries the weight of a question, many questions.

My Mother's Journals are an interrogation.

XLIV

My mother's journals are a love story. Love and power. What she gave and what she withheld were hers to choose. Love is power. Power is not love. Both can be brutal. Both dance with control. Both can be intoxicating, leaving us out of control. But in the end it is love, not power, that endures and shows us the consequences of our choices. My mother chose me as the recipient of her pages, empty pages. She left me her "Cartographies of Silence." I will never know her story. I will never know what she was trying to tell me by telling me nothing.

But I can imagine.

"Most of my injuries come from the stereotype." These are not my words. I plagiarize. I will not tell you who wrote them. Instead, I will claim them as my own because I have so thoroughly inhabited them; they could be written by no one else but me.

We borrow. We steal. We purchase what we need and buy what we don't. We acquire things, people, places, all in the process of losing ourselves. Busyness is the religion of distraction. I cannot talk to you, because I have too much to do.

I cannot do what I want, because I am doing what I must. Must I forever walk away from what is real and true and hard?

When it comes to words, rather than using our own voice, authentic and unpracticed, we steal someone else's to shield our fear. And in my mother's case, she let me fill in the blanks.

This is my inheritance. I am my mother, but I'm not. I am my grandmother, but I'm not. I am my great-grandmother, but I'm not. Patterned behavior alternates like shadow and light. Pain in love is a pattern that repeats itself until we recognize it as destructive. *"No one lives in this room without living through some kind of crisis. No one lives in this room without confronting the whiteness of the wall."* We can change, evolve, and transform our own conditioning. We can choose to move like water rather than be molded like clay. Life spirals in and then spirals out on any given day. It does not have to be one way, one truth, one voice. Nor does love have to be all or nothing. Neither does power. What is positive and what is negative is not absolute.

"Let it go—" Mother would say whenever I asked her what I should keep or give away. Her answer was always the same.

Empty pages become possibilities.

LI

How is your shadow—your honorable shadow?” This was a customary greeting between friends in Japan, a recognition that what we reject is as important as what we embrace.

I walk with my shadow behind me, sometimes ahead, and often to the side. It is my capricious companion: visible, then hidden, amorphous. A shadow is never created in darkness. It is born of light. We can be blind to it and blinded by it. Our shadow asks us to look at what we don't want to see. If we refuse to face our shadow, it will project itself on someone else so we have no choice but to engage.

My Mother's Journals are a projection screen.

My Mother's Journals are a blinding light.

My Mother's Journals are a glaring truth.

My Mother's Journals are bleached.

My Mother's Journals are sanitized.

My Mother's Journals are clean.

My Mother's Journals are clean sheets.

My Mother's Journals are white flags of surrender.

My Mother's Journals see ghosts.

My Mother's Journals hear voices.

My Mother's Journals smell desire.

My Mother's Journals touch eternity.

My Mother's Journals are a charity.

My Mother's Journals are a cruelty.

My Mother's Journals are a paper cut.

My Mother's Journals are salt.

My Mother's Journals are made of gauze to wrap a wound.

My Mother's Journals are a scrim.

My Mother's Journals are a stage.

My Mother's Journals are scenes painted white.

My Mother's Journals are programs never printed.

My Mother's Journals are reviews never written

My Mother's Journals are a writer's block

My Mother's Journals are a writer's conceit.

My Mother's Journals are her vanities revealed.

My Mother's Journals are her colored hair left white

My Mother's Journals are the swirls of cold cream she rubbed on her cheeks.

My Mother's Journals are her teeth, called veneers.

My Mother's Journals are sun-blocked protection.

My Mother's Journals are the scent of gardenias.

My Mother's Journals are words wafting above the page.

My Mother's Journals are clouds.

My Mother's Journals are bones.

My Mother's Journals have been stolen.

My Mother's Journals are the Elysian Marbles.

My Mother's Journals are Michelangelo's David.

My Mother's Journals are Gertrude Stein's rose.

My Mother's Journals are the tennis matches she won.

My Mother's Journals are the cue ball in a game of pool.

My Mother's Journals are a white tablecloth not yet set.

My Mother's Journals are a white blouse not yet worn.

My Mother's Journals are diapers washed and folded.

My Mother's Journals are T-shirts washed and pressed.

My Mother's Journals are the letters never written.

My Mother's Journals are her "Treasures of Truth."

My Mother's Journals are her scrapbook of tears.

My Mother's Journals are ice, dry ice.

My Mother's Journals are a hoax.

My Mother's Journals are a tease.

My Mother's Journals are a puzzle.

My Mother's Journals tell me nothing.

My Mother's Journals tell me everything.

My Mother's Journals are a tattarrattat.

My Mother's Journals are a palindrome, to be read in either direction.

Backward and forward: I have a friend who was once my sister. Now we hardly speak, but she often appears in my dreams. I think of her. The other day I found a beautiful letter she wrote. I miss her. Terribly. We were undone by a death; our relationship was its casualty. In deep pain, we killed each other with judgments so no memory of closeness would remain, and now I mourn another death, the death of a friendship, another loss, another wound, unspoken.

The sin we commit against each other as women is lack of support. We hurt. We hurt each other. We hide. We project. We become mute or duplicitous, and we fester like boiling water until one day we erupt like a geyser. Do we forget we unravel in grief? So much can come between us, especially in silence. The simplest of misunderstandings becomes a jealousy overtime. I have found what I need most to heal a broken bond is time together—the very thing I avoid is the thing most desired.

Unexpressed emotion will be expressed somewhere, somehow, inside or out, most cruelly as unconscious aggression delivered with a smile or a poisonous cup of tea.

"It is not the sin that carries the shadow but the intent . . . the intent or drive or motive behind the acts we commit," writes Esther Harding in her essay "The Shadow," published in 1941.

The sin I have committed is the sin of adoption. I have adopted a different set of beliefs from the beliefs I was raised to obey. But this definition of sin over time has become my joy. I do have other gods before me, many, and none are a white elderly man sitting on a gilded throne in heaven. Pronghorn antelope holds authority for me, like a priest. Hermit thrush sings with the voice of an angel.

My betrayals have been many, accidental and deliberate, sins of omission and commission. My pen

can wound. My words can burn. I know how to disappear. But redemption is always possible. I pray. I repent. I forgive. I am forgiven. I keep a journal to converse with my shadow. And I believe in the power of a loving community to render miracles.

What was my mother's sin? (I do hate this word. Is this Shadow speaking?)

My mother's sin was her secret. Perhaps she had many, three helms full. Her secrets are well kept through her runic diaries void of words.

The Maya made certain you could stand in the center of the ball court and speak your secret and the only one who would hear it was the one intended to receive it. This was a construction of truth, not a corruption of sound.

Not everything is meant for all to hear.

Who can judge the intention of another?

What was the intention of my mother's journals?

My Mother's Journals ask me to turn the page.

Again, I recall them others I met in prison who mouthed the lyrics of lullabies each night before bed, gripping their own fingers, imagining their babies, the babies they gave birth to but never held, now adopted.

My Mother's Journals have been adopted by me.

One need not write in order to have a voice. A mother speaks to her children through the generations.

Excerpted from WHEN WOMEN WERE BIRDS by Terry Tempest Williams, to be published in April 2012 by Sarah Crichton Books, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC. Copyright © 2012 by Terry Tempest Williams. All rights reserved.