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Terry Tempest Williams is an American writer, conservationist, and activist. Author of fourteen books, she is the recipient of numerous awards, including a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship and a Lannan Literary Fellowship in creative nonfiction. Grounded in her training as a wildlife biologist and the arid landscape of her native Utah where she was raised as a Mormon, she probes the interrelations between ecology and wilderness preservation, women's health, and our relationship to culture and nature, with her signature poetic and spiritual depth.

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place (1991) has become a classic. In the spring of 1983, Williams learned her mother was dying of cancer.

That same season, The Great Salt Lake began to rise to record heights, threatening the herons, owls, and snowy egrets by which Williams, a poet and naturalist, had come to gauge her life. One event was nature at its most random; the other, human intervention at its most horrific: Terry's mother, and Terry herself, had been exposed to the fallout of atomic bomb tests in the 1950s. Written as a memoir, *Refuge* juxtaposes a narrative of family and the natural world, through a season of death and renewal.

When Williams discovers that all her mother's journals, bequeathed to her on her mother's deathbed, are blank, she is confronted with a profound mystery. Twenty years later, she takes up the themes of *Refuge* in *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice* (2012). Composed of fifty-four sections, the age of her mother when she died, she contemplates a deeper understanding of her mother and her motivations, while charting the evolution of her own voice in relationship to her Mormon heritage, her marriage, the environment, her role as a writer, her place as a woman in the world, and much more.

1,000 TONGUES: A CONVERSATION WITH TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

PATRICIA REIS

“She lets the other language speak—the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death. To life she refuses nothing. Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.”

—Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of Medusa*

Patricia Reis (“PR”): Terry, first of all, thank you so much for the opportunity of having this conversation with you. Because you are a lover of words, I know you are precise in your use of them. You write, “Words have a weight to them” and that weight can be as heavy as uranium or as light as “a feather on the breath of God,” as the mystic, Hildegard de Bingen once claimed. I want to focus our conversation on *voice* by using words that begin with the sinuous, riverine letter, “S.”

STORY

PR: In her classic 1976 work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the poet Adrienne Rich has written: “Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of

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energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other.” She has called it the great unwritten story.

When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice (hereinafter “*Birds*”) opens with two women on a bed, your mother and you. Touch is what connects you. She is dying and you are, in a sense, being born. In the intimacy of this moment, she bequeaths her legacy of blank journals to you, and you will spend years laboring to deliver stories back to her and to us, your readers.

I sense how deeply subversive and transgressive this moment is because what is being transmitted from one body to another, in the ebb and flow of energy between two women—mother and daughter—is a story of hunger, of the body’s knowledge, of suffering, of incarnation itself. In *The Laugh of Medusa*, Hélène Cixous, one of your “mentors in words,” has said, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.” As you tell it, women’s bodies hold many great unwritten stories.

At what point did you become aware that a woman’s body story is the original site for dangerous and passionate illumination?

Terry Tempest Williams (“TTW”): When I was a child, I remember watching my grandmother bathe. She had invited me into the steamy-tiled room of hot water and lavender to talk with her. She was a beautiful woman, a sensual woman, unashamed of her nakedness. It was all a matter of fact. She bore the radical scars of a mastectomy and they remained a violence across her chest. Her right breast was full and lovely. I noted the imbalance; what had been cut and thrown away, and what remained. I read her body as a landscape.

The body does not lie.

The bodies of my grandmothers, my mother, my aunts, all shared this geography of loss, mapped with similar lines and contours. Nine women in my family have all had mastectomies. This is my legacy. I belong to a Clan of One-Breasted Women.

If we write out of our bodies, our stories will find a physical truth born out of flesh and blood, the pain and joy of being human. We feel immediacy on the page. Our words can transmit the electricity of our nervous system, a muscularity of form. The authority of our voice becomes akin to bone.

I recall a bone whistle made from the hands of a desert dweller that now resides in the Natural History Museum of Utah. It was made from the hollow bone of a bird in the aridity of the Great Basin adjacent to Great Salt Lake. I knew the sound of that whistle, “a dangerous and passionate illumination” of both the sorrow and beauty of our lives. My voice is born out of silences bared. Writing has saved my life.

SILENCE

PR: In your work, Silence has many tongues. You make a distinction between privacy and silence, saying, “Mother was a private woman, not a silent one.” When I read Variation I in *Birds* about the blank journals, I said, “Wait, wait!” and immediately re-read my worn original copy of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. Written in 1991, over twenty years ago, *Refuge* tracks the arc of your mother’s dying from cancer alongside the apocalyptic rise and fall of the Great Salt Lake and subsequent threat to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. In it, you portray the strong red thread of your maternal lineage, the generations of Mormon women who had minds and thoughts of their own.

In *Refuge*, your mother appears as such a vivid personality, your relationship enviable in its intimacy; she says and writes things to you that are strongly felt and deeply meaningful. And your grandmother, Mimi, is even bolder and more outspoken. You recount a three-way conversation between you, your mother, and your grandmother while looking at your astrological charts. The talk is about giving up personal authority because it’s easier, how women have been taught to sacrifice, support, and endure. Your mother comments, “I think I paid a price physically.”

Refuge speaks of your dawning awareness of the price paid by being a “downwinder” of the atomic testing done in the desert. Not only had your mother died of cancer, nine women in your family had, including your beloved grandmother. I go back to H el ene Cixous who says, “To begin (writing, living) we must have death.” I have always thought that writing *Refuge* must have radicalized you. It feels like a blood relation to *Birds*, because the same themes are woven into its DNA. There are thirty-seven chapters named for birds. And at the close of *Refuge*, you declare yourself to be “a woman with wings,” an augur of *When Women Were Birds*.

How has your voice changed in the intervening years between *Refuge* and *Birds*?

TTW: When I chose to cross the line at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site in opposition to the testing of nuclear bombs in the desert, and commit civil disobedience in the name of the women in my family, members of The Clan of One-Breasted Women, I found my voice as a writer.

I remember the moment. An officer frisked my body. Inside my boot, she found a pen and a pad of paper. “And these?” she asked. “Weapons,” I replied. I had not only crossed a physical line, a political line, but a metaphorical one. There was no going back.

If my voice has changed through the years, evolved through time, I hope it has grown in empathy. I am not sure it has grown in confidence. I believe I was more confident in what I knew when I was a younger writer. Now, as I approach sixty, I am acutely aware of all I do not know, especially in these dramatic, changing times. But I trust my instincts. My questions continue to guide me. My dreams continue to instruct me. And I have fallen more passionately in love with this beautiful, broken world. Perhaps, my voice on the page has not changed as much as deepened. Humility is the word that comes to mind. Age humbles us. The Mysteries become more profound. We embrace the complexities that surround us, even as we try to embody the principles that allow us to stand upright. Conscious experience creates a path of wisdom. Listening becomes part of that path. Listening creates empathy. Love remains the base note of my voice.

SILENCE: THE OTHER SIDE

PR: In the Jeffs’ school vignette in *Birds*, you describe how you learned to live within highly repressive (ridiculous?) constraints by using your maternal lineage’s coping manual. You find ways to teach, to express to the children what you passionately believe in, you don’t completely lose your voice, you keep your values, and you actually learn from Mrs. Jeff, who feels like a character straight out of Dickens! You learn many important lessons. But this learned strategy takes you only so far.

This is such a powerful vignette, speaking as it does about how we accommodate, how we try to live within a limited range of motion, how our lessons come in the strangest of packages. On behalf of yourself

as a teacher and the children, you make deals with the Jeffs. You quote Rachel Carson, “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.” Certainly your grandmother, Mimi, was one of those who gave you such companionship and you wished to be that one adult for the children you were teaching.

Women often justify living in repressive circumstances by saying it is just easier, they can get by, they are learning a lot, they can manage etc.

How can we know when we have learned enough, when we should leave situations where our voice is confined, our wings clipped, our passions held in check?

TTW: What a great question. Again, I trust my instincts. Mimi always said, “The universe is energy. We are made from energy. Pay attention to what gives you energy and what takes your energy away.” This has been a wonderful gauge for me throughout my life. Using my tenure at the Carden School as an example, as long as I was receiving energy from the children, I was able to give energy back to them in my classroom. When Carden stopped being a living place for me, when I started to feel as if the energy was stagnating around me and that my own energy was stagnating, I left. I also had the luxury of being able to leave and pursue graduate school. And this is no small thing. Many times, the circumstances in our lives do not allow us to leave a situation “where our voice is confined.” There are bills to be paid, mouths to be fed, and we have to wait until we feel safe enough, strong enough, to walk out as the door opens. Patience may be required. But risk is also required and the trust and belief in ourselves to know that however uncertain it may feel, we will be okay. To have a voice in the world is to risk our voice, repeatedly. Fear so often gets in our way. To replace fearfulness with fearlessness is part of the process of individuation. And so is imagination. We must be able to imagine ourselves differently and in so doing, we emerge with new wings.

SILENCE: ANOTHER VARIATION

PR: You write in *Birds*, “I am afraid of silence. Silence creates a pathway to peace through pain, the pain of a distracted and frantic mind before

it becomes still.” Certainly anyone who has meditated, even for ten minutes, knows what you are talking about. You say, “Within silence our voice dwells.”

What does it take to befriend such an enabling silence?

TTW: Silence for me is oxygen. Without it, I cannot breathe. Silence is also like water. Without it, I become thirsty and experience a withering of my spirit. And yet, silence is demanding, difficult, even terrifying at times. Silence is a force that animates my fears and dances with my demons. Distractions will protect me from the pain of silence, the truth of being alone. This I know. But I also know that I need the tonic of silence if I am to live an authentic life in contact with my highest and deepest self.

Silence becomes my healing grace.

To befriend silence is to commit to its discomfort and all it exposes and amplifies.

To befriend sustained periods of silence is to endure a period of detoxification that allows the outer noise to cease enough to hear the inner voice speak. It is not easy, but in time, an uncommon peace ensues. Silence is not simply void of sound, silence is a place of presence. Call it soul-retrieval. We are no longer running from the self, but sitting in harmony with the self: awake, alert, and alive. This is the silence that speaks to me. This is the silence I long for and would go mad without. Silence allows me to be in relationship to the world. To retreat and withdraw from community is to rejoin and rejoice with others in the return.

The nature of silence is the nature of solitude. In solitude, I find my creative pulse.

In nature, I find my universal bearings and remember the interconnectedness of all things. Through the stillness of a forest, the meanderings of a river, the rhythm of the tides, awe is awakened in me. I am listening. I am watching. Silence is both heard and felt between the intervals of thunder. Silence holds the space for loss and joy. It is where our conscience and consciousness is found. A meadowlark singing in the desert is in dialogue with silence, that ringing silence, my beloved paradox.

SOVEREIGNTY

PR: We have inherited various psychological theories, master-narratives that describe the self in terms of unity, totality, wholeness, the union of opposites, etc., the same meta-notions inherent in all monotheistic systems. You seldom use the word “self,” or even the word “autonomy,” which theoretically urges and implies a separation from the maternal bond. You use the word “sovereignty.” In your *Fifty-four Variations on Voice*, the many voices, like Cixous’ 1,000 tongues, are far from total or unified, or univocal. Like the birdsongs you learned from your grandmother, the sovereign voice has variation and range: melodic, shrill, a whisper, sociable, raucous, used to call a mate, voice alarm, raise a mobbing. You ask, “What is birdsong, but truth in rehearsal?”

Can you open that word, “sovereignty” for us, and the reasons you choose to use it?

TTW: Sovereignty can be defined as a “self-governing state.” Its origins are found in Middle English “soverain,” an alteration of “reign.” I would define sovereignty as self-rule, a reclaiming and a restoration of our own power, our own authority.

In America, tribal sovereignty is the inherent authority for indigenous tribes to govern themselves. I think of Ada Deer and her leadership in pushing for the Menominee Restoration Act signed into law by President Richard M. Nixon on December 22, 1973. Ada Deer’s vision was not to restore things as they once were, but to forge a new relationship: federal protection of their lands without the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs’ domination. “By expressing our tribal values, we changed our history,” she said.

This is instructive for all of us. We can forge a new relationship with society and ourselves through our own sovereignty. The freedom to govern myself—this is a core value. By expressing our inherent values, we can change our own personal histories and not be dominated by or dependent upon the oppressor, in my case, a patriarchal religion. I was told repeatedly that a woman’s place is in the home. I was told that my value and voice were contingent upon being a mother. I didn’t believe that was my only choice. Sovereignty implies choice, the choice to govern myself. I chose a different path.

I choose to use the word sovereignty because the word holds dignity. Dignity is how we conduct ourselves in relationship to others. To use

the word “autonomy” implies we are separate. This is an illusion. Sovereignty is deeper than separatism. Sovereignty has dignity. It is about self-respect. I am my own sovereign, not separate from the women who gave me birth, but individual, unique, determined. The women in my family had dignity. They respected themselves and they respected each other. Sovereigns. This, too, is my legacy.

SEPARATION

PR: You write, “At the heart of my emerging voice was the belief that nature held the secret to harmony and unity, not just outside us, but inside us, no separation.” And later you quote your grandmother saying to you, “We are nature.” So much of your writing is about the kind of deep listening that dissolves the boundaries between a woman’s body and nature. But thinning the membrane between ourselves and the sensate world we inhabit is not done without consequences.

In *Birds*, you tell of a radicalizing moment when you saw a living coyote taking in the view on Gannett Peak mountaintop. You write, “Any boundaries I felt as a human being toward other creatures dissolved. We, too, were partaking of the view.” Later that day you came upon another coyote, this one dead, skinned, hanging by its neck on a crossbar. Lynched. I can’t help but think of Matthew Shepard, the victim of a similar hate crime.* Your companion cut the coyote down with his buck knife, the same kind of weapon used to skin the animal. At that moment, you made a vow to the coyote, “I would not remain silent.” Once a vow is made, it is indelible to the soul.

You wrote of this to your grandmother, Mimi, who responded: “However hard it must have been for you to see this act of cruelty, view it as an insight into those who wielded a knife.” She was telling you, in effect, do not separate yourself from any part of what you encountered. Use it all.

In what ways has your vow and your grandmother’s instruction challenged you?

*In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a University of Wyoming student, was beaten, tortured, and left to die while tied to a fence near Laramie, Wyoming. Targeted because he was gay, the murder resulted in the 2009 Matthew Shepard Act, a Hate Crimes Prevention legislation.

TTW: In my grandmother's turquoise study, a large portrait of the Buddha's face hung above the bed where we slept. Its eyes were slits, half opened, half closed. Below the Buddha's chin were a man and woman dancing. They were naked. Mimi introduced them to us as "the anima and animus." She was a Jungian scholar. She taught us that we house both the masculine and feminine inside each of us. It is a dance. Various figures danced around the Buddha, angels and murderers, alike. Mimi spoke to us about "the collective unconscious," introducing us to a humanity, interconnected and interrelated. The world was not something outside us, but inside us. We were not "the chosen people" as our religious upbringing would have us believe. We were one with the world.

So when Mimi wrote back to me saying that the hand that skinned the coyote was also the hand that freed it, she was amplifying her belief that we as human beings are capable of great cruelties and great kindnesses. The question becomes how do we bring these two hands together in prayer?

This was the sobering realization I faced in Rwanda. The genocide was not something outside of me, but inside me. If a human being raised a machete to kill his neighbor, I, too, was capable of such an atrocity. If a human being hid a family of Tutsis from Hutu extremists, I, too, was capable of that kind of courage and compassion. We are not separate from any human act, large or small, heinous or helpful. We are the full expression of the human experience. To be human is to own our shadow, both personal and collective. There is little room for judgment, perhaps the most difficult lesson of all. "The Buddha is the Divine Self," Mimi would tell us as children, "who does not judge or avenge but holds the open heart of compassion."

Try to imagine how radical this was to Mormon children growing up in Salt Lake City, Utah. Mimi was a transformational figure in our lives with Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to Western Birds* in one hand and Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols* in the other.

My grandmother did not challenge our world-view as much as expand it. In truth, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell were so much a part of our upbringing they might as well have been Mormons! In fact, Mimi and I went to hear Joseph Campbell speak at Brigham Young University. We made a special pilgrimage to hear him. I was working

on my thesis which would become “Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland.”

It must have been 1981. After his lecture, we approached him. I asked him what role he thought story played in our relationship to the Earth.

“Story is how we perceive the world around us,” I remember him saying. “We need new stories to forge a new relationship with the Earth. Find them.”

Mimi and I talked about this all the way home, what stories we tell to evoke a sense of place, what myths inspire us and what myths diminish us. We were always probing the depths. I miss her terribly. After she died, I didn’t dream for several years because without her to interpret them with me, they weren’t worth remembering.

Today, however, twenty-five years after her death, I am greatly challenged by her intellect, how much she read, how conscious she was, and the psychological courage she had to break set with her Mormon conditioning. Mimi spared us from the stranglehold of orthodoxy by infusing our spiritual education with Marie-Louise von Franz’s “The Way of the Dream,” J. Krishnamurti’s concept of a “choiceless awareness of the moment,” and the power of active imagination. She went to Ojai and Esalen to study with Krishnamurti. She went to lectures by Alan Watts. And she contemplated taking LSD under the supervision of a doctor to see how it might open up her own awareness. Of course, my grandfather put his foot down on that one. Nevertheless, she challenged us to believe that if Joseph Smith had visions, our visions were no less valid. She played with the Tarot and read *Suicide and the Soul* by James Hillman, believing each person had the right to live and die by their own will. The world is just now beginning to catch up with her.

SECRETS

PR: In *Birds*, you quote the poet, Muriel Rukeyser: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.” The poet implies that a woman’s truth is also the source of her power and that the act of telling can change the world.

As women, we hold secrets for as many reasons as there are secrets to be held: from shame, from being silenced, from fear, for our safety,

from being told not to tell, and hardly ever from a sense of empowerment. In confronting your mother's blank journals, you write, "What my mother wanted to do and what she was able to do remains her secret." You also write, "We all have secrets. I hold mine," a sentence implying choice—in both cases—your mother's and yours. Further on in *Birds*, you write, "If my marriage is a secret, it is also large enough to hold secrets that I have learned not to tell. This is the nature of intimacy; discretion."

Can you talk about the various moral imperatives involved in speaking the truth and holding secrets?

TTW: I believe in the paradoxical relationship between truth-telling and secret-keeping: both involve choice; both engage power; both involve risks. Awareness of their medicine is key. As I write this sentence, a small spider is crawling across my fingers, so I will use the word web in my next sentence. As women, we spin a web of stories around us for protection. It is what feeds us and sustains us. It is also what threatens to kill us. The silk strands of our stories are created from our own bodies. Again, not outside us, but within us. Sometimes our stories are true. Sometimes our stories are false. Sometimes, the stories we tell are told without knowing what we reveal until they are reflected back to us, violently. The web breaks. We are vulnerable. This is why discernment is necessary. This is why discretion is essential. It is also why we must reflect and begin to understand what is behind our actions and why.

As women, we must learn when to speak and when to house our truth inside. Neither is easy. We pay a personal price whether we speak truth to power or withhold it. Our task is to understand what is required in order for us to thrive. Loyalty, fidelity, and integrity are most often worn as loose clothing. Honesty to the self is a tightly worn garment.

Spider teaches us to respect our calling as weavers, honoring the strength of the narratives we create. I am not talking about deceit. I am talking about the right to choose what we tell and what we do not. A woman's heart is attentive to the Mysteries. It is our practice to live with insecurity and uncertainty. We know what it means to exist with fear. Courage rises out of that fear. Too often we live for everyone else. Too often we worry what others may think. What matters to me is how I interpret my own behavior making my own map using my own moral compass to navigate. Each of us makes myths of our lives.

John Berger writes about “the secret of visibility.” This intrigues me because the very idea of a secret is that something remains hidden. But what if our visible self, the light we reflect out into the world, finds its source in what we choose to keep to ourselves and for ourselves? Our secrets become our points of illumination, the candles we keep lit to see through the dark.

Holding our own counsel is nothing to be ashamed of, but something to honor. What remains unsaid becomes a private prayer, the place within us that remains humble. We can act from the center of our creation or we can hide when necessary. Spider is adept at both. A woman is feared when she opens her mouth. And she can be terrifying when her mouth is closed.

My mother left me her journals and all her journals were blank. In these empty pages, she told her truth and she kept her secrets. Power resides in choice. Every choice is both a blessing and a burden. When the burden becomes too great, and the cost too high, we must release the truth as a secret shared, a silence broken, a story freed.

A secret shared by two is a trusted conversation.

SECRET CODES AND THE UNSPEAKABLE

PR: At the end of *Refuge*, after your beloved grandmother, Mimi, died of cancer, you write: “Mimi and I shared a clandestine vision of things. I could afford to dream because she could interpret the story. We spoke through the shorthand of symbols: an egg, an owl. And most of what we shared was secret, much like the migrations of birds.”

In *Birds*, you talk about *nushu*, the secret written language developed by women living in Imperial Japan, and how the women who lacked formal education wrote for themselves and to each other in this way. There are only two photographs in your book; one is of *nushu* script that resembles bird tracks on sand. You remember, too, how you mother showed you how to write in “invisible ink” with lemon juice where only a flame held against parchment would reveal the message. As a young girl, you wrote in a secret code in your journal. You say, “I learned early how to cover myself as a writer, should the lock be picked and my words read.”

For me, the best example of a secret code is when you describe how you learned to find your true voice by writing a line, then writing over

it and over it—so no one, not even you, can ever decipher it. This makes me think of Emily Dickinson’s poem “Tell all the Truth /but tell it slant” that closes with the lines, “The Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind.”

You say that you “buried” the memory of your mother’s blank journals and only when you were fifty-four, the age she was when she died, did it come back to you. Do you think that over time, through courage or for other reasons, some things we once thought unspeakable rise to the surface and demand a hearing?

TTW: Yes.

SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL

PR: You write in *Birds*, “Leaving one orthodoxy means leaving all orthodoxies.” I found it striking how you manage to stay connected to your Mormon family despite vast differences in views and beliefs; you don’t evade or deny your religious and social history, or the bonds with the people you came from. Love, friendship, care, loyalty, even devotion are evident in your writing. The bonds may be stretched, frayed, but are not broken.

These relationships are also the crucible for establishing your sovereignty as the vignette of lunch with your father-in-law reveals. You approach him personally, drawing on kinship bonds, and ask him to use his influence to raise money for a cause that you care passionately about, something that would benefit the wider world, something that would be consistent with his beliefs—and he asks something of you in exchange, something deeply personal: that you bring your husband, Brooke, back to the Church. Instinctively you know this would compromise not only your personal ethics but would altogether taint the enterprise you want to support.

Emily Dickinson is quoted as saying, “No, is the wildest word we consign to language.” In saying “No” to your father-in-law’s terms, you risked your sense of belonging, of being embedded in networks that offer social protections and rewards, for the sake of sovereignty. Traditionally, women have been expected to make the preservation of relationships their highest concern, regardless of the cost to themselves. You were not willing to make the bargain or pay the cost.

No longer willing to accept the terms of religious and cultural conditioning, what are the ways you have learned to spiritually survive?

TTW: My spiritual health is directly tied to beauty, the beauty of solitude, the beauty inherent in wild nature, the beauty of art, and the depth of my relations are all a conveyance of beauty. Beauty translates to peace. And I find my peace in writing. Writing is my spiritual practice. Paying attention, being curious, courting the questions all contribute to a spiritually rich life. I believe in being spontaneous. I believe in the power of synchronicity where the outer and inner worlds converge in moments of magic. It's the pattern that connects that allows us to celebrate the interrelatedness of all things.

Mimi would always say, "Follow the golden thread..." And I have. Each day is a creative act. Each morning, I listen from the dreamtime to what is speaking to me, what is required of me, and I make plans accordingly. I prefer to keep my days open. In fact, I schedule open days as fiercely as when I schedule my travels.

Creativity is my soul's path. If I am creatively engaged—be it in my writing, my teaching, or drinking a cup of tea on my front porch with a friend—I am present. And in presence, god dwells, however we choose to define that force, that energy. To be present is to be transformed.

You ask how I survive. It's not so much that I have learned how to spiritually survive as I have learned how to live with pain. I have learned that to embrace our pain is easier than avoiding it because when we avoid pain, it stalks us. If I can look death in the face, or not turn away from a pelican drenched in oil, I can be of use to the one suffering, even if it means just holding that space together. A grief shared is a grief endured. This has been one of the gifts of being with many of my family members throughout their dying process. It has allowed me to trust that what is hard and sad and difficult is also, tender, true, and revelatory. And often, very funny. The full range of emotions is available to us when we are broken open. To not avert our gaze is to dare to be touched by life.

What are we afraid of?

I am afraid of being numb.

I have learned that to be alive is to dance with my intuition, including not succumbing to someone else's dogma or religion. I have learned free agency nurtures my soul. I like making my own decisions,

which includes making my own mistakes. Freedom is at the core of my beating heart. Perhaps it is at the core of all of our hearts. When freedom is diminished, our souls shrink.

My marriage to Brooke Williams for close to forty years has been the most immediate and enduring site of my spiritual evolution, the place where my soul has been cared for, loved, and supported. It has also been my greatest challenge to live with another sovereign. To love each other, to forgive each other, to wake each morning anew. I think it is fair to say we have been protectors of one another's solitudes and encouraged each other's growth. Our marriage has been very free. It had to be in order for us to survive and individuate, not always at the same time or interval, not always easy, but so worth "the vitality of the struggle."

Our marriage has been an ongoing transformation from taking our vows in the Salt Lake City Temple to making new vows before the wide-eyed gods of the Great Barrier Canyon mural, the pictographs and petroglyphs located in Canyonlands National Park. In a very real sense, we are Mormon refugees. Our relationship has been a sanctuary. We have given birth to each another.

I want to be of use. I want to help create community. And I need to be in the service of something larger than myself. To be of service is a deeply spiritual act. What am I in the service of? Finding beauty in a broken world is creating beauty in the world we find. This is my spiritual work.

SUBVERSIVE

PR: One of the funniest and most subversive moments in *Birds* is your description of how the word "Fuck" arose spontaneously in your mind during a sacred rite of passage in your marriage ceremony. It feels like the word was also sacred, but in an irreverent coyote way. "Fuck," an unbidden, sacrilegious mantra, created an opening, an exit, a foot in the door, so to speak, so your mind and imagination would always be wild and free.

In writing about Eve and the apple, you say, "She, (Eve) exposed the truth of what every woman knows: to find our sovereign voice often requires betrayal." This brings you to write movingly in both *Refuge* and *Birds* about your choice not to bear children, one of the Mormon's

two major expectations for its women, that and the injunction to keep a journal. You say simply, “Birth control gave me my voice.” I am struck by how choice and voice are inseparably linked.

You go on to write about abortion and the “conversation we are not having,” the conversation arising out of the deepest womanly knowledge of what it means to have a man enter her—the milk and blood mysteries. And you say, “If a man knew what a woman never forgets, he would love her differently.” I imagine by “man” you mean something more than the personal, something that includes our religious, medical, governmental institutions. In writing about these “unspeakables,” you purposely break taboos. As you say, “Transgression is transmission.”

I suspect there is a price you pay for your subversiveness, your willingness to transgress, to live according to rules you consider morally binding, that betrays the ones you have been given. Have you ever felt like the price is too high?

TTW: No.

SPEAKING UP

PR: There is a story in *Birds* that made me hold my breath, while my heart raced and my legs twitched from a need to run. This is the story of when you lost your voice in the Sawtooth Wilderness in Idaho; your inability to tell anyone about a terrifying predator-prey encounter with the delusional man, Joseph, even when he reappeared again, even when your team was out in the field and came upon all the evidence of madness, even when Brooke, whom you did tell, urged you to tell the police, you still did not speak out. This loss of voice, and the million reasons for not speaking (your own complicity being merely one of them), is one I am sure many women can identify with. I think of the poet Marge Piercy’s poem, “Unlearning to not speak.” What is striking in your account is identifying your withheld voice as “the violence of your silence.” You seem to imply that silence can act as an internalized perpetrator.

Can you bring this hard-won lesson to bear on other more everyday events we might encounter where not speaking up becomes an act of violence?

TTW: When one woman remains silent, other women get hurt. I have had to live with the violence of my own silence in not confronting this man, this event. And I am not alone. I have been so struck by the conversation that has emerged in response to Elliot Rogers' misogynous video prior to his killing six individuals in Santa Barbara, California, on May 24, 2013. Almost instantaneously, women began sharing their stories of misogyny on twitter using the hashtag #yesallwomen, and it has become an open forum voicing freely, honestly, what each woman has had to endure daily, privately and publicly. The tweeter feed has been endless, a sign of the epidemic of violence, be it verbal abuse, sexual abuse, assault, intimidation, or rape.

The Atlantic Monthly said, "The Twitter conversation around #YesAllWomen is a sobering reminder of how commonly women are robbed of a sense of dignity and full personhood."

The most widely shared tweet has been this:

"#yesallwomen She's someone's sister/mother/daughter/wife."

And here is another:

"Every single woman you know has been harassed. And just as importantly, every single woman you don't know has been harassed. #YesAllWomen"

And this tweet posted by the writer Margaret Atwood:

"Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them. #NotAllMen #YesAllWomen"

I followed with the sentence I led this answer with:

"#yesallwomen Because when one woman remains silent, other women get hurt."

It was met with this response, among countless other hostile attacks not fit for publication:

Al Fresco: "Because when one woman remains silent, other women get hurt." HA! Since when does a woman remain silent???

The question must be asked why this spontaneous action taken by women on social media has provoked such violent responses from

men. What is so threatening about half of humanity simply asking for respect and kindness?

We are finally having these conversations on our college campuses and within our own families and communities. As a Provostial Scholar at Dartmouth College, I have witnessed women coeds finally demanding that actions of accountability be taken by the administration. The women are calling for an end to abusive behavior sanctioned in many fraternities and the creation of a safer environment. With sexual assault occurring at an alarming frequency at this Ivy League school, President Phil Hanlan has been quoted as saying, “Enough is enough.”

The culture of violence in America and the underreporting of incidents such as my own is a violence internalized by women. We must come forward. We must shine a light on the darkness. It’s why I shared my own story in *When Women Were Birds*. As harrowing as it was for me to write, sharing my experience has been a healing. It is a perfect example of how a secret becomes a burning shame. I had to speak out of my grief for the harm I may have caused to other victims by remaining silent. Who knows how many other women Joseph may have hurt. And even as I write this sentence, I still question myself, “Did this really happen?”

It happened.

Why do we keep doubting our own experience? And who benefits?

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

PR: In *Birds* you write, “Democracy demands we speak and act outrageously.” Your work in Washington as part of the governing board of the Wilderness Society was personally depressing and depleting and helped you realize your activism needed to be local.

Your descriptions of speaking out at public hearings on Utah Wilderness bills on behalf of the land you know and love are crushing. You are told, “I am sorry, Mrs. Williams, there is something about your voice I cannot hear.” Your experience speaks to the loneliness of the solitary resister, the single voice.

Later, when testifying on behalf of America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act, you and a group of other distinguished writers quickly mobilize to produce *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah*

Wilderness. Senators read from it during a filibuster and *Testimony* became part of the Congressional Record. Bill Clinton said, "This little book made a difference." And from this, "one could believe in the collective power of a chorus of voices."

What forms do your activism take today? How do you discern when, where, and how to speak out?

TTW: My activism remains on the page and in community. I write a monthly column for *The Progressive*. Topics may range from tar sands development in Utah to fracking in Wyoming to a review of the Broadway play, *The Book of Mormon*. I love having an outlet in real time, where I can engage with an audience on a more informal basis.

A book is a slow and arduous process that withstands contemporary currents. An article or an opinion piece speak to the urgency of now.

I also write for *Orion Magazine*. In 2010, I wrote a long essay on the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. It was an act of witness. And I have learned as a writer that to bear witness is not a passive act but an act of conscience and consequence. "The Gulf Between Us" was one of the most difficult and rigorous stories I have ever written. In so many ways, it broke my heart. It wasn't the damage of what the oil spill wrought that undid me; it was the beauty that remained: the courage of the people who survived, their lost jobs, their ongoing illnesses from dispersants, and the white-beaded islands of birds, the rafts of golden rays, the pods of dolphins who watched from the edge of burning waters. This is what shattered me. And the lies, the ongoing lies of our government alongside British Petroleum, and the complicity of both, is an exercise in the abuses of power.

In terms of political activism, the climate change movement is a dynamic one. I have participated in several actions in Washington, D.C. and the Interior West. This fall, on September 20 and 21, there will be a large demonstration in New York City in response to world leaders gathering at the United Nations to confront climate change, yet again. Citizens will be gather to demand governments act responsibly on behalf of the planet. I am willing to commit civil disobedience if the opportunity arises. It is time to lay our bodies down.

Hope has little to do with where we find ourselves now. Faith is helpful, faith and stamina and joy. I take inspiration from this haiku:

Insects on a bough
 floating downriver
 Still singing –
 Issa

And I am still singing about wilderness. America's Redrock Wilderness Act remains a bill before Congress. We remain hopeful. Time is on our side, even as our governor in Utah is trying to figure out a way to sell off our public lands! Never mind that they belong to all Americans, never mind it is unconstitutional.

We are hoping President Obama will expand Canyonlands National Park and create a new national monument in Utah as a stay against all the oil and gas development adjacent to wilderness study areas. It would be a fitting presidential proclamation to mark Canyonlands fiftieth anniversary.

Alaska, like Utah, is an ongoing struggle with public lands protection. If Utah's political leaders want to develop every square inch of wilderness, Alaska's leaders have just threatened to "invade" the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. You can't make these stories up. What I have learned as a wilderness advocate for close to four decades is that conservation is a generational stance. It is never over. It is an ongoing gesture of love in the name of social and environmental justice.

When I was younger, I used to wonder, "Am I an artist or an activist?" Now, I don't bother asking the question. I simply see my life as a life engaged. Each of us takes our turn in responding to an ethics of place.

SHADOW AND SIN

PR: You write, "My mother's sin was her secret." There is a photograph of your mother in *Birds*. It is piercing, in the same way the French theorist, Roland Barth, speaks of in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. He, too, was obsessed with a photograph of his long dead mother and the recurrent feeling of loss he experienced whenever he looked at it. He called a certain accidental detail in a photographic image "that pricks, bruises me," the *punctum*. For me, your mother's headscarf holding back her hair is that transfixing detail. You describe

the “lock of hair that has escaped confinement, creating a curl on her forehead” which brings to mind the children’s rhyme, “There was a little girl, who had a little curl . . .”

Having read your descriptions of your mother’s love for Nordstrom’s, the make-up counter, the blue satin robe with stars, the red dress for her last Christmas, I wonder why, of all the many photographs you probably had to choose from, this was the one you decided upon?

TTW: I chose this particular photograph of my mother because it embodies her strength. She is looking directly at the camera. There is nothing posed about it. She is standing in the place she loved most, the Tetons. There is a breeze. You see her fierce beauty, raw and exposed. You feel the depth of her character in that instant captured by the Polaroid.

SURVIVAL

PR: You have said, “Beauty is not an option. It is a strategy for survival.” *When Women Were Birds* is an argument for the beauty and survival of books; the size, the way it fits in the hand, the deckle-edged paper, the opening page with a signature line, “This journal belongs to ————,” the blank pages, the feathery cover, make the book itself a work of art.

How much say did you have over the book’s design?

TTW: The physical beauty of a book matters to me. People do judge a book by its cover. And in the hardback edition of *When Women Were Birds*, I had a great deal of input in its design. A friend of mine who is a book artist, Mary Toscano, hand painted the feathered end papers that we hoped could frame the book. Everyone at Farrar, Straus & Giroux loved the idea. This is where we began our design discussion. One of the great pleasures of working with Farrar, Straus & Giroux is that it feels like a family. My wonderful editor, Sarah Crichton, brought us all to the table. Together, we worked closely with the cover designer, Rodrigo Corral, and the interior designer of the book, Abby Kagan. We had many conversations and tried multiple cover ideas until we all

agreed that we had the right one, beautiful and evocative, like my mother's journals.

The bird in the margin that becomes a bird in flight when the pages are flipped was a gift!

It should also be noted that Farrar, Straus & Giroux took a risk in placing twelve empty, white pages in the body of the book. I wanted to give the reader the same physical sensation that I had experienced when discovering all of my mother's journals were blank. This was important to me, and they honored my request.

But in terms of the paperback edition published by Picador Books in 2013 that you refer to in your question, it was all a glorious surprise. I remember seeing the design for the first time—I was stunned by its beauty and the care in which each detail was rendered from the French fold binding to the deckle-edged paper to the feather motif they used on its cover. I loved it and, honestly, it was the first time in my history of publishing fourteen books that I did not have one suggestion, only praise. And when I held the book in my hands for the first time, it felt more like a prayer book than my story. I am so grateful that the Picador team understood what the book not only could be, but had to become—an object of beauty to be cherished and shared.

PR: A final quote from Hélène Cixous: “To fly/steal is woman's gesture, to steal into language to make it fly.” This is what your work feels like to me, stealing and soaring, the work of a trickster Raven that brings light to a darkened world. Thank you.

TTW: Thank you, Patricia. My gratitude to both you and Nancy. This has been an extraordinary experience to think through these soulful questions with you and the readers of *Spring Journal*. I am humbled. This is especially meaningful to me because Mimi read *Spring Journal* religiously, underlining each page with her red pen.

I have some of her worn copies. We both revered James Hillman and had the great pleasure of meeting him. His wisdom remains: “*The moment the angel enters a life it enters an environment.*” We are ecological from day one. With our hands on the Earth, may we remember.