

When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice

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The beloved author of *Refuge* returns with a work that explodes and startles, illuminates and celebrates

Terry Tempest Williams's mother told her: "I am leaving you all my journals, but you must promise me you won't look at them until after I'm gone."

Readers of Williams's iconic and unconventional memoir, *Refuge*, will remember that mother. She was one of a large Mormon clan in northern Utah who developed cancer as a result of the nuclear testing in nearby Nevada. It was a shock to Williams to discover that her mother had kept journals. But not as much of a shock as what she found when the time came to read them.

"They were exactly where she said they would be: three shelves of beautiful cloth-bound books . . . I opened the first journal. It was empty. I opened the second journal. It was empty. I opened the third. It too was empty . . . Shelf after shelf after shelf, all of my mother's journals were blank." What did Williams's mother mean by that? In fifty-four chapters that unfold like a series of yoga poses, each with its own logic and beauty, Williams creates a lyrical and caring meditation of the mystery of her mother's journals. *When Women Were Birds* is a kaleidoscope that keeps turning around the question "What does it mean to have a voice?"

Note: blank pages are intentional.

Terry Tempest Williams is the award-winning author of fourteen books, including *Leap*, *An Unspoken Hunger*, *Refuge*, and, most recently, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*. She divides her time between Castle Valley, Utah, and Moose, Wyoming.

Chapter 1

I AM FIFTY-FOUR YEARS OLD, the age my mother was when she died. This is what I remember: We were lying on her bed with a mohair blanket covering us. I was rubbing her back, feeling each vertebra with my fingers as a rung on a ladder. It was January, and the ruthless clamp of cold bore down on us outside. Yet inside, Mother's tenderness and clarity of mind carried its own warmth. She was dying in the same way she was living, consciously.

"I am leaving you all my journals," she said, facing the shuttered window as I continued rubbing her back. "But you must promise me that you will not look at them until after I am gone."

I gave her my word. And then she told me where they were. I didn't know my mother kept journals.

A week later she died. That night, there was a full moon encircled by ice crystals.

On the next full moon I found myself alone in the family home. I kept expecting Mother to appear. Her absence became her presence. It was the right time to read her journals.

They were exactly where she said they would be: three shelves of beautiful clothbound books; some floral, some paisley, others in solid colors. The spines of each were perfectly aligned against the lip of the shelves. I opened the first journal. It was empty. I opened the second journal. It was empty. I opened the third. It, too, was empty, as was the fourth, the fifth, the sixth--shelf after shelf after shelf, all my mother's journals were blank.

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