

Terry Tempest Williams

TO BE TAKEN

The revolutionary question is: What about the Other? . . . It is not enough to rail against the descending darkness of barbarity . . . One can refuse to play the game. A holding action can be fought. Alternatives must be kept alive. While learning the slow art of revolutionary patience.

—Breyten Breytenbach, “Tortoise Steps”

Tortoise steps.

Slow steps.

Four steps like a tank with a tail dragging in the sand.

Tortoise steps—land-based, land-locked, dusty like the desert tortoise himself, fenced in, a prisoner on his own reservation

teaching us the slow art of revolutionary patience.

It is Christmas. We gather in our grandparents’ home: aunts, uncles, cousins, babies—four generations wipe their feet at the holiday mat. One by one, we open the front door, “Hello,” “We’re here,” glass panes iced are beginning to melt from the heat of bodies together. Our grandfather Jack, now ninety, presides. His sons, John and Richard, walk in dressed in tweed sport coats and Levi’s, their polished boots could kill spiders in corners. My aunt Ruth enters with her arms full of gifts. Jack’s sister, Norinne, in her eighties, sits in the living room with her hands folded tightly, greeting each one of us with a formality we have come to expect.

Tradition.

On this night, we know a buffet is prepared: filet mignon, marinated carrots, asparagus, and cauliflower, a cranberry salad, warbread (a recipe

our great-grandmother Mamie Comstock Tempest improvised during the Depression when provisions were scarce and raisins plentiful), and the same silver serving piece is obscene with chocolates.

The Christmas tree stands in the center of the room, “the grandchildren’s tree,” and we remember our grandmother, Mimi, the matriarch of this family whose last Christmas was in 1988. We remember her. We remember all of our dead.

Candles burn. I walk into the dining room, pick up a plate and circle the table.

“What’s new, Terrence?” my uncle asks ribbing me.

“Not a thing, Rich,” I respond. We both look up from the buffet smiling.

I take some meat with my fingers. He spears vegetables. We return to the living room and find a seat. The rest of the family gathers. Jack sits in the wing-backed chair, his hands on both arm rests. My father sits across the room from his brother.

“So how did the meeting go last week?”

“Terrible,” Rich says.

“What did they decide?”

“Simple,” my uncle says. “Tortoises are more important than people.”

Heads turn, attention fixes on matters of the Tempest Company, the family construction business that began with our great-grandfather in the early part of the century, a company my brothers all work for, cousins, too.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Where have you been?” my father asks incredulously. “We’ve been shut down eighteen months because of that—(he stops himself in deference to his aunt) that *stupid* Endangered Species Act.”

I look at my brother Steve who nods his head who looks at our cousin Bob who looks at his sister Lynne who shakes her head as she turns to Brooke.

“I attended the public meeting where they discussed the Habitat Management Plan,” Rich says to us.

“And?” Lynne asks as she walks over to her father and offers him a piece of warbread.

“They ruled in favor of the tortoise.”

“Which job is this, John?” Brooke asks, who at the time was working for the governor’s office of budget and planning as the liaison between environmental groups and the state.

“It’s the last leg of the Information Highway,” Dad says. “Seven miles of fiber optic cable running from the town of Hurricane to St. George linking rural Utah to the Wasatch Front.”

“We’re held up in permits,” Rich explains. “A construction permit won’t be issued until USWest complies with federal agencies.”

“The government’s gone too far,” my great-aunt interjects.

“Too far?” my father says his voice rising like water ready to boil. “Too far? We’ve had to hire a full-time biologist at \$60 an hour who does nothing but look for these imaginary animals. Every day he circles the crew singing the same song, ‘Nope, haven’t seen one yet.’”

“The guy’s from BYU and sits in the cab of his truck most of the day reading scriptures,” adds Steve, the superintendent.

“Thou shall not kill a turtle,” someone mutters under his breath.

“Sixty bucks an hour,” Dad reiterates. “That’s twice as much as our foremen make! It would be cheaper to buy a poolside condominium for each mating pair of tortoises than to adhere to the costs of this ridiculous Act.”

“The government’s gone too far,” my aunt restates like a delayed echo.

“And on top of that we have to conduct a ‘turtle training course’—”

“Tortoise, John,” his granddaughter Callie interrupts. I wink at my niece.

“A turtle training course for our men, OUR MEN, so they can learn to identify one and then remember to check under the tires and skids for tortoises looking for shade before turning on the backhoes after lunch.”

Rich stands up to get some more food.

“\$100,000 if we run over one,” he says making himself a sandwich.

“Is that worth a hundred grand?” my father snaps.

“From the tortoise’s point of view . . .” Lynne says pushing.

“What’s St. George now, the fourth fastest growing community in the country?” Brooke asks.

“Not if the enviros have anything to do with it,” Rich says.

“What do you kids want? To stop progress? You and your environmentalist friends have lost all credibility. One local told us, a bunch of radicals actually planted a tortoise in the parking lot of the WalMart Distribution Center just to shut it down.”

“How do you know it didn’t walk onto the asphalt by itself?” I ask.

“They had its stomach pumped and it was full of lettuce,” Rich replies. We all roll our eyes.

Steve asks his cousin Matt who is a first-year medical student, “Have you performed an autopsy on a desert tortoise yet?”

“Not yet,” Matt responds. “Just human beings.”

“Can I get anyone anything?” Ruth asks holding her granddaughter Hannah on her hip. She looks around. No response. “Just checking.”

“And you wonder why people are upset,” my father says turning to me. “It’s easy for you to sit here and tell us what animals we should protect while you write poems about them as a hobby—it’s not your pocketbook that’s hurting.”

“And is yours?” I ask fearing I have now gone as far as my father has.

I was not aware of the background music until now, Nat King Cole singing, “Have a Merry, Merry Christmas. . . .”

“I don’t know,” Jack says clearing his throat, pulling himself out of his chair. “Why don’t you boys tell them the real story?”

John and Richard look puzzled.

“What story?” Rich asks.

“Hardpan,” Jack says.

“Never mind,” my father says grinning. “Just keep that quiet.”

Richard starts giggling like a little boy.

“Tell!” We beg our grandfather.

He places his hands on the back of the lounge. “We had twenty-two crews during the war, put all the piping in the airbases at Tooele, Salt Lake, Hill, and Ogden. I never went to bed for five years: 1941, 42, 43, 44, 45, just dropped dead on this lounge from exhaustion every night. We even had work in Las Vegas putting in a big waterline to the north. I was away for weeks, missing Kathryn and the boys. Then one day, I was walking along the trench when I spotted what I thought was a helmet. I bent down. It moved. I realized it was a tortoise. I picked it up, its head and feet shot back into its shell. I put him in the back of

my truck and brought him home for the boys. We named him Hardpan.”

He looks at his sons, smiles and walks out of the room.

“Everybody else had a dog—” my father says. “German shepherds, Doberman pinschers, black labs. We drilled a hole in his shell and tied a long cord to it and walked him around the block.”

We all look at each other.

“No kidding,” Rich says. “Every day we walked him.”

“Hardpan?” I ask.

“You know, the desert without rain—hardpan, no give to the sand.” Dad’s voice is tender.

“He was reliable, old Hardpan, you have to say that about him,” Rich adds.

“Until he disappeared—” Jack says returning to his chair.

Gopherus agassizii. Desert tortoise. Land turtle. An elder among us. Even among my family. For some of us he represents “land-locked” like the wildlands before us. Designate wilderness and development is locked out. Find a tortoise and another invisible fence is erected. The tortoise’s presence compromises our own. For others, tortoise is “land-based” a sovereign on earth, entitled to his own desert justice. He is seen as an extension of family—human and non-human alike—living in arid country. His presence enhances our own. The tension tortoise inspires calls for wisdom.

These animals may live beyond one hundred years. They walk for miles largely unnoticed carrying a stillness with them. Fifteen acres may be home range and they know it well. When they feel in their bodies that it is about to rain, they travel to where water pools. They wait. Clouds gather. Skies darken. It rains. They drink. It may be days, weeks, months before their beaks touch water again.

If native mythologies are true and turtles carry the world on their backs, the carapace of the desert tortoise is designed to bear the weight. It is a landscape with its own aesthetic. Three scutes or plates run down the vertebrae, hexagons, with two larger scutes on top and bottom. Four plates line either side of center. The shell is bordered by twenty-four smaller ones that seem to hold the animal in place. The plastron or bottom of the shell fits together like a twelve-tiled floor.

The desert tortoise lives inside his own creation like a philosopher who is most at home in his mind.

In winter, the desert tortoise hibernates but not in the manner of bears. Hibernation for reptiles is “brumation,” a time of dormancy where cold-blooded creatures retire, rock-still, with physiological changes occurring independent of their body temperatures. Much remains mysterious about this time of seasonal retreat but brumation among turtles suggests it is sparked by conditions of temperature, moisture, photo-periods, and food supply. They stir in their stone-ledged dens when temperatures rise, dens they inhabit year after year, one, two, maybe five individuals together. They leave. They forage. They mate. The females lay eggs in supple sands, two dozen eggs may be dropped in a nest. Buried. Incubated. Hatched. And then the quiet plodding of another generation of desert tortoises meets the sands.

It is a genealogy of evolutionary adaptation until *Gopherus agassizii* suddenly begins bumping into real estate developers after having the desert to himself for millenniums.

1996: a lone desert tortoise stands before a bulldozer in the Mojave.

My father and the Endangered Species Act. My father as an endangered species. The Marlboro Man without his cigarette is home on the range—I will list him as threatened by his own vulnerable nature. I will list him as threatened by my emotional nature. Who dares to write the recovery plan that regulates our own constructions? He will resist me. I will resist him. He is my father. I am his daughter. He holds my birth story. I will mourn his death. We face each other.

Hand over our hearts, in the American West united states do not exist even within our own families. “Don’t Tread On Me.” The snake coils. The tortoise retreats. When the dust devil clears, who remains?

My father, myself, threatened species.

I recall a statement made to me by another elder, a Mormon General Authority who feared I had chosen not to have children. Call it “Ode to the Gene Pool,” a manipulation of theology, personalized, tailored to move me toward motherhood, another bulge in the population.

“A female bird,” he wrote to me, “has no options as to whether she will lay eggs or not. She must. God insists. Because if she does not a precious combination will be lost forever. One of your deepest con-

cerns rests with endangered species. If a species dies out its gene pool will be lost forever and we are all the lesser because of the loss. . . . The eggs you possess over which your husband presides [are] precious genes. . . . You are an endangered family.”

I resist. Who will follow? Must someone follow?

Clouds gather. It rains. The desert tortoise drinks where water has pooled.

Who holds the wisdom? My grandfather, the tortoise, calls for the story, then disappears.

Tortoise steps.

Tortoise tracks.

Tracks in time.

One can refuse to play the game.

★

Across from where I sit is a redrock ledge. We are only a stone’s toss away from the city of St. George. I am hiking with my father. He has gone on ahead.

Today is the spring equinox, equal light, equal dark—a day of truce.

I have followed tortoise tracks to this place, a den. It is cold, the air stings my face, I did not dress warmly enough. Once again, the desert deceives as wind snaps over the ridge and rides down valley.

The tortoise is inside. I wish to speak to him, to her, to them about my family, my tribe of people who lose money and make money without recognizing their own threatened status, my tribe of people who keep tortoises, turtles, as pets and wonder why they walk away.

“Have you heard the news today?” I pull the clipping from the local paper out of my pocket, unfold it and read aloud:

If you’re a desert tortoise living in Washington County, take this advice: Start crawling your way toward the hills north of St. George, Utah.

Come March 15, any tortoise living outside a specially designated “desert tortoise reserve” could become subject to “taking”—a biological term for the death of an animal or the destruction of its habitat.

State and federal officials on Friday signed an interlocal agreement that will set aside 61,000 acres of prime tortoise habitat as a reserve that wildlife biologists believe will secure the reptile's recovery.

On the flip side, the agreement also provides permission and means by which developers and others may "take" some 1,200 tortoises and develop more than 12,000 acres of tortoise habitat outside the reserve without violating the Endangered Species Act, under which the tortoise is listed as a "threatened species."

Friday's signing ends six years of battles over the slow-moving animal, whose presence around St. George has created headaches for land developers and local governments.

"We feel confident that we're going to be able to work together and have a permit that provides for the recovery and protection of the tortoise," said Bob Williams, assistant supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Senator Bob Bennett, R-Utah, agreed. "This is clearly a very major step toward getting the endangered species issues resolved short of the trainwreck of the spotted owl."

. . . . Between 1980 and 1990, the Washington County's population increased 86% from 26,125 to 48,560. It is projected to have between 101,000 and 139,000 people by 2010.

Implementation of the Habitat Conservation Plan is scheduled to last 20 years and cost \$11.5 million.

There is no movement inside the den.

"Tortoise, I have two questions for you from Neruda: 'Quien da los nombres y los numeros al inocente innumerable?' *Who assigns names and numbers to the innumerable innocent?* 'Como le digo a la tortuga que yo le gano en lentitude?' *How do I tell the turtle that I am slower than he?*"

The desert tortoise is still.

I suspect he hears my voice simply for what it is, human. The news and questions I deliver are returned to me and somehow dissipate in the silence.

It is enough
to breathe, here, together.

Our shadows lengthen
while the white-petaled heart of Datura
opens and closes.

We have forgotten the option of restraint.

It is no longer the survival of the fittest but the survival of compassion.

Inside the redrock ledge, the emotional endurance of the tortoise stares back at me. I blink. To take. To be taken. To die. The desert tortoise presses me on the sand, down on all fours. The shell I now find myself inhabiting is a keratinous room where my spine is attached to its ceiling. Head, hands, feet, and tail push through six doors and search for a way home.

Tortoise steps.

Land-based. Land-locked.

Land-based. Land-locked.

Learning the slow art of revolutionary patience, I listen to my family.