

Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough

Terry Tempest Williams

It is the shortest day of the year. It is also the darkest. Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough is serene. I am here as an act of faith, believing the sun has completed the southern end of its journey and is now contemplating its return toward light.

A few hundred miles south, the Hopi celebrate Soyalangwul, "the time to establish life anew for all the world."

At dawn, they will take their prayer sticks, pahos, to a shrine on the edge of the mesa and plant them securely in the earth. The pahos, decorated with feathers, will make prayers to the sun, the moon, the fields, and the orchards. These prayer feathers will call forth blessings of health and love and a fullness of life for human beings and animals.

And for four days, the Hopi will return to their shrine and repeat the prayers of their hearts.

My heart finds openings in these wetlands, particularly in winter. It is quiet and cold. The heat of the summer has been absorbed into the core of the redrocks. Most of the 150 species of birds that frequent these marshes have migrated. Snowy egrets and avocets have followed their instincts south. The cattails and bulrushes are brittle and brown. Sheets of ice become windowpanes to another world below. And I find myself being mentored by the land once again, as two great blue herons fly over me. Their wingbeats are slow, so slow they remind me that, all around, energy is being conserved. I too can bring my breath down to dwell in a deeper place where my blood-soul restores to my body what society has drained and dredged away.

Even in winter, these wetlands nourish me.

I recall the last time I stood here near the Solstice-June 1991. The Moab Slough was christened the Scott M. Matheson Wetland Preserve. The Nature Conservancy set aside over eight hundred acres in the name of wildness.

A community gathered beneath blue skies in celebration of this oasis in the desert, this oxbow of diversity alongside the Colorado River. A yellow and white tent was erected for shade as we listened to our elders.

"A place of renewal..." Mrs. Norma Matheson proclaimed as she honored her husband, our governor of Utah, whose death and life will be remembered

here, his name a touchstone for a conservation ethic in the American West.

"A geography of hope..." Wallace Stegner echoed. "That these delicate lands have survived the people who exploited this community is a miracle in itself." We stood strong and resolute as neighbors, friends, and family witnessed the release of a red-tailed hawk. Wounded, now healed, we caught a glimpse of our own wild nature soaring above willows. The hawk flew west with strong, rapid wingbeats, heartbeats, and I squinted in the afternoon sun, following her with my eyes until she disappeared against the sandstone cliffs.

Later, I found a small striated feather lying on the ground and carried it home, a reminder of who we live among.

D. H. Lawrence writes, "In every living thing there is a desire for love, for the relationship of unison with the rest of things."

I think of my own stream of desires, how cautious I have become with love. It is a vulnerable enterprise to feel deeply and I may not survive my affections. Andre Breton says, "Hardly anyone dares to face with open eyes the great delights of love."

If I choose not to become attached to nouns—a person, place, or thing—then when I refuse an intimate's love or hoard my spirit, when a known landscape is bought, sold, and developed, chained or grazed to a stubble, or a hawk is shot and hung by its feet on a barbed wire fence, my heart cannot be broken because I never risked giving it away.

But what kind of impoverishment is this to withhold emotion, to restrain our passionate nature in the face of a generous life just to appease our fears? A man or woman whose mind reins in the heart when the body sings desperately for connection can only expect more isolation and greater ecological disease. Our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild.

Audre Lorde tells us, "We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves ... our deepest cravings. And the fear of our deepest cravings keeps them suspect, keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, and leads us to settle for or accept many facets of our own oppression."

The two herons who flew over me have now landed downriver. I do not believe they are fearful of love. I do not believe their decisions are based on a terror of loss. They are not docile, loyal, or obedient. They are engaged in a rich, biological context, completely present. They are feathered Buddhas casting blue shadows on the snow, fishing on the shortest day of the year.

Pahos. Prayer feathers. Darkness, now light. The Winter Solstice turns in us, turns in me. Let me plant

my own prayer stick firmly in the mud of this marsh.
Eight hundred acres of wetlands. It is nothing. It is
everything. We are a tribe of fractured individuals
who can now only celebrate remnants of wildness.
One redtailed hawk. Two great blue herons.

Wildlands' and wildlives' oppression lies in our desire
to control and our desire to control has robbed us of
feeling. Our rib cages have been broken and our hearts
cut out. The knives of our priests are bloody. We, the
people. Our own hands are bloody.

"Blood knowledge," says D. H. Lawrence. "Oh, what 'a
catastrophe for man when he cut himself off from the
rhythm of the year, from his unison with the sun and the
earth. Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love
when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling,
taken away from the rising and setting of the sun, and cut
off from the magical connection of the solstice and
equinox. This is what is wrong with us. We are bleeding
at the roots..."

The land is love. Love is what we fear. To disengage
from the earth is our own oppression. I stand on the
edge of these wetlands, a place of renewal, an oasis
in the desert, as an act of faith, believing the sun has
completed the southern end of its journey and is now
contemplating its return toward light.

Terry Tempest Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger*