

# **A Burning Testament**

by

Terry Tempest Williams

With these ashes in hand that have fallen from near and far on the drought-cracked desert of Utah, I raise my fist to a smoke-choked sky to honor the holy creatures, human and wild, who have lost their lives and homes to the galloping flames like rider-less horses burning through the West.

We are witness to ghostly horizons lit with the scalding colors of, red, orange, purple, black, the blowout of close to five million acres of land being ravaged by fires with such velocity it is melting our capacity to feel the full magnitude of what is happening – We are not okay.

We are anxious. We are scared. There is no place to run. There is no place to hide. There is only our love and grief to hold us in the terror of all we are seeing, sensing, denying. We can't touch the source of our despair because we can't touch each other. And so we retreat inside when everything outside is screaming. We are sitting in rooms watching screens alone, waiting, as if this is a pause instead of a place, the place where we find ourselves now.

The facts do not tell the story of how our hearts are breaking, nor do the photographs of blackened forests or lone chimneys standing as monuments to homes once inhabited, or does the news speak to the terror of fleeing fires lapping at our heels that we can never outrun only pray for a change in the wind.

No one is reporting the smells of burnt fur or feathers or leaves and sap or the cold hard truth of those who find the missing frozen in their last gestures of escape beneath a blanket of ashes, ashes -- not even the stories reported by biologists in New Mexico who are picking up the bodies of hundreds of thousands of migrating birds in mixed flocks of warblers, flycatchers, sparrows, and finches found dead on the ground in Great White

Sands with no explanation but the conjecture they died from exhaustion, forced to flee the forests before their bodies were fattened ready to make the long journeys south.

Our valley is a steady stream of birds who stop and drink from our well, our bird baths and tubs we have waiting for them. And there are nine known bears in our valley who have come down from the mountains looking for food and water. They wander through our community in shrouds of smoke they have been unable to shake off from last month's epic fires in Colorado, a few wing beats away as the raven flies.

Unable at times to distinguish day from night, we have only a blood red sun and an orange-faced moon exchanging places in the sky to orient us as temperatures rise, fires rage, and before our eyes, in a flash, a neighboring national forest becomes the charred citadel of a vibrant world – gone. We are saying farewell to what we love and why we stay.

How can we stay? The landscape of the American West is burning and we are burning, too.

We have been living a myth. We have constructed a dream. We have cajoled and seduced ourselves into believing we are the center of all things; with plants and other sentient beings from ants to lizards to coyotes and grizzly bears, remaining subservient to our whims, desires, and needs. This is a lethal lie that will be seen by future generations as a grave, a grave moral sin committed and buried in the name of ignorance and arrogance.

It is true, we have mismanaged our forests and suppressed fire for decades. We have ignored and failed to listen to the wisdom of Indigenous People who have understood and lived with fire for generations. We have built our homes within the woods when we should have respected the necessary breathing spaces between the domestic and the wild. We have overbuilt and overridden the carrying capacity of arid landscapes and underestimated the

limits of water in times of drought. We have sacrificed the integrity of fragile and iconic landscapes for the development of oil and gas to fuel “the American way of life.” This is freedom unmasked. We have a right to live as we wish. Until we can’t. Our reckless history of human habitation in the American West is on a collision course with the climate crisis. Climate Change is not a hoax. It is real and it is a fire-breathing dragon blowing fire at our doors.

We cannot breathe. This is our mantra in America now. We cannot breathe because of the smoke. We cannot breathe because of a virus that has entered our homes. We cannot breathe because of police brutality and too many black bodies dead on the streets. We cannot breathe because we are holding our breath for the people and places we love.

I was asked to write an obituary for the land – but I realize I am writing an obituary for us, for the life we have lost and can never return to – and within this burning of western lands, our innocence and denial is in flames. The obituary will be short. The time came and these humans died from the old ways of being. Good riddance. It was time. Their cause of death was the terminal disease of solipsism whereby humans put themselves at the center of the universe. It was only about them. And in so doing we have been dead to the world that is alive.

To the power of these burning, illuminated western lands who have shaped our character, inspired our souls, and restored our belief in what is beautiful and enduring—I will never write your obituary— because even as you burn, you are throwing down seeds that will sprout and flower, trees will grow, and forests will rise again as living testaments to how one survives change.

It is time to grieve and mourn the dead and believe in the power of renewal. If we do not embrace our grief, our sadness will come out sideways in

unexpected forms of depression and violence. We must dare to find a proper ceremony to collectively honor the dead from the coronavirus as we approach 200,000 citizens lost. We must honor the lives engulfed in these western fires and the lives we will continue to lose from the climate crisis at hand —Only then can we begin the work of restoration, respecting the generations to come as we clear a path toward cooling a warming planet.

This will be our joy.

Let this be a humble tribute, an exaltation, an homage, and an open-hearted eulogy to all we are losing to fire to floods to hurricanes and tornadoes and the invisible virus that has called us all home and brought us to our knees -- We are not the only species that lives and loves and breathes on this miraculous planet called Earth— May we remember this—and raise a fist full of ash to all the lives lost that it holds.

Grief is love. How can we hold this grief without holding each other? To bear witness to this moment of undoing is to find the strength and spiritual will to meet the dark and smoldering landscapes where we live. We can cry. Our tears will fall like rain in the desert and wash off our skins of ash so our pores can breathe, so our bodies can breathe back the lives that we have taken for granted.

I will mark my heart with an “X” made of ash that says, the power to restore life resides here. The future of our species will be decided here. Not by facts but by love and loss.

Hand on my heart, I pledge allegiance to the only home I will ever know.

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