

Meridel Le Sueur Essay

Terry Tempest Williams

A BRIDGE OF BONES

for Ann

Shortly after my brother died, I made a doll. I walked down to the Colorado River – it was early March – and found the body of the doll in a piece of driftwood.

The driftwood had been weathered white and measured from the tip of my finger to the bend in my arm. Its shape reminded me of the pictographs painted on canyon walls, the human-like figures with small heads, broad shoulders, the torso tapering to a point.

What was the point of making this doll? I cannot tell you except to say that the next thing I did was to cut three red willow twigs. They were long and thin – over two feet tall. I attached these red spirit lines to the back of the figurine with an inconspicuous piece of thread I found in my pocket.

Rabbitbrush caught my eye. I cut a piece the size of my finger and arched it over the head as a halo. The red willow shoots fanned out from the halo like rays of fire.

Lastly, I placed a sprig of sage, grey-blue, diagonally across the doll's body. Its fragrance was a jolt of ritual.

My doll was complete. The abstract form spoke to me. She said, "Make your brother a bridge of bones."

I looked around the pink sandy beach, still moist from the rain, and improvised. White sticks would do, becoming bones of intention. 1, 2 – I picked each stick with care and interest. Some were straight, some gnarled and twisted, others more bark than stick.

3, 4, 5, 6, 7 – I counted them out, hunting and gathering my brother's bones that were sticks bleached to look like ribs, placing them flat on the sand, one next to the other, vertically set, side by side.

8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 – They came fast and easily through the river's generosity, gifts left from high water. What had been broken and carried away, I retrieved. I would bend down, pick one stick, then another, and continue making the bone bridge.

16, 17, 18, 19 – I saw each stick-bone as a day, a day that my brother had been dead – 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 – One month to the day, call this stick-bone February 21.

A Buddhist friend told me that Steve's spirit was still in transition here, near, for 49 days – 32, 33, 34, 35, 36 – I am counting the days, seeing them as bones – my brother's bones – 37, 38 – bent over – my back still aching from trying to lift him from the floor when he fell on the day of this death – January 21, 2005, at 11:11 in the morning – We are mourning – 11:11 is the time when you can legitimately make a wish, my niece, his daughter of fourteen, whispered in my ear.

I wished my brother peace in the moment of his passing. Now I wish he were here with me in the desert helping me build this bridge of bones.

39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47 – Stephen Dixon Tempest was 47 years old, a beautiful man who, five months prior to his death, stood on a summit in the Wasatch Range, smiled on the summit and said matter-of-factly, "We are all terminal."

He died from Diffused Large B-Cell Lymphoma fifteen months from his diagnosis on October 1, 2003.

"Something had to give," he said to me that day as we stood in the corner of his library. "I've been working too hard, moving too fast."

"I want to live. I want to live. I want to live." This was his mantra walking down the hall after his first CT scan when he was told he most likely had lymphoma.

X-rays. I think of all his X-rays, the internal renderings of disease, seen and not seen, that we tried to visualize. To visualize lymphoma leaving, Steve made a sculpture out of stone. It was granite. Take nothing for granted. He cut the stone into six sections and vertically placed them between one-inch slabs of black granite. It looked like matter pulled apart, moving upward.

At night, in moonlight, it appeared as a backbone of hope. It stood on a steel triangular post that Steve welded with his hands. With his own hands. He visualized his tumors breaking up, but the one near his heart never did.

He wanted to live. He died at 47. 48. 49. I am his older sister at 49 years.

49 days.

Steve, I am building you a bridge of bones that will carry you across the river, this river of light, golden light, and, once on the other side, may I sing your words back to you with my desert doll in hand, my little brother, my lovely, wise brother, my beloved brother:

What is a body but a house –

What is a soul but a light –

What is heaven and earth but the same

shared radiance.

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