

---

2002

## *Testimony, Refuge, and the Sense of Place: A Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams*

David Thomas Sumner  
Linfield College, [dsumner@linfield.edu](mailto:dsumner@linfield.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs)



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

---

### DigitalCommons@Linfield Citation

Sumner, David Thomas, "*Testimony, Refuge, and the Sense of Place: A Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams*" (2002). *Faculty Publications*. Published Version. Submission 6.

[https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac\\_pubs/6](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs/6)

This Published Version is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield, with permission from the rights-holder(s). Your use of this Published Version must comply with the [Terms of Use](#) for material posted in DigitalCommons@Linfield, or with other stated terms (such as a Creative Commons license) indicated in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, or if you have questions about permitted uses, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

**David Thomas Sumner**

## **Testimony, Refuge, and the Sense of Place—A Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams**



photo by Ann P. Tempest

*Terry Tempest Williams is a — work for which she has received national attention.*

*Having grown up in Utah, Williams has had a lifetime interest in the natural world that surrounds her. This is apparent in her education and work. She holds a B.A. in English and an*

*M.A. in environmental education from the University of Utah and has worked as a teacher at Navajo Reservation in Montezuma Creek, Utah, and as naturalist in residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History. She has also served as the Shirley Sutton Thomas Visiting Professor of English at her alma mater.*

*Williams has authored a long list of books as varied as the Mormon tea, Rabbit brush, and sage of the Colorado Plateau; yet, like these plants, her books all spring from the same arid western soil. Her books include Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajo Land; Coyote's Canyon; Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place; An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field; Testimony: Writers in Defense of the Wilderness (edited*



*David Thomas Sumner (Ph.D., University of Oregon) teaches in the English Department at Weber State University. His essays have appeared in Ecocomposition (SUNY Press, 2001) and In Our Own Voice (Allyn & Bacon, 1999). He is also contributing editor for The Shape of Reason (Allyn & Bacon, 2000). Sumner is currently working on a rhetorical study of American nature writing and its connection to environmental ethics.*

with Stephen Trimble); Leap;and Red.

Williams has also received many awards including the Children's Science Book Award from the New York Academy of Sciences; she was named one of the "Utne 100 Visionaries" by the Utne Reader; she is a Rachel Carson Honor Roll inductee. Williams received a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and the "Spirit of the West" award from Mountain-Plains Booksellers Association.

Williams lives with her husband, Brook, in Castle Valley, Utah, near the Colorado River.

As with the Stephen Trimble interview, this conversation grew out of the author's specific interest in the Testimony project.

This interview is part of a series of conversations with contemporary western writers about the ethical and cultural implications of nature writing. Other conversations by David Sumner include:

[Conversation with Barry Lopez](#)

[Conversation with David Quammen](#)

[Conversation with David James Duncan](#)

[Conversation with Stephen Trimble](#)

Are there collections similar to Testimony?

**First of all, David, I would like to say how heartbroken I am about the death of Neila Seshachari. She was a beacon of light and wisdom for all of us who knew and loved her. I cannot think of *Weber Studies* without paying my respects to her memory, the time and affection she brought to this journal.**

**In answer to your question, yes, there are several collections that have been inspired by *Testimony*. It has been very moving to see this simple form adopted by other regions in need of voices speaking on behalf of conservation. The most recent one is called *Arctic Refuge* compiled by Hank Lentfer and Carolyn Servid from Sitka, Alaska. It elucidates the fragile and enduring beauty of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. It was distributed to Congress in anticipation of the Bush-Cheney Energy Bill and their desire to drill for oil there.**

**There have also been chapbooks created for Petroglyphs National Monument in New Mexico, the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, the Blackfoot River in Montana, and I believe there was one made in Florida. Rick Bass has just published a collection of essays on behalf of the Yaak, and there was also a fine collection on the Tongass National Forest.**

**The Bolsa Chica Land Trust in southern California has also put together a book with writings by local people on why these wetlands of the Bolsa Chica Ecological Preserve should be protected from the ravages of development. Those people are an astonishing group of activists in Huntington Beach, California, who have preserved over 800 acres, a sliver of endangered marshlands between the Pacific Coast Highway and huge oil wells and billion-dollar developments. The initial projection by the developer was 4,700 homes, and the Land Trust has negotiated that number down to 1,000. This is one example of what a few committed and imaginative people can do to protect their own valley. Very inspiring, against all odds.**

*(The conversation then shifts to my and Terry's relationship with Mormonism. I mentioned that she seems to be walking a line that refuses the orthodoxy but that also refuses to give up on the culture and the people.)*

**I am convinced there is a broader vision within Mormonism. There is something beautiful and meaningful here on the edges of this "American religion," as Harold Bloom has called it. I do not believe that a fundamental viewpoint is all that is available to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.**

**I was reading the Dalai Lama's book, *Ethics for the Next Millennium*. He writes that it is a very dangerous premise to suppose there is only one true religion. He says, "I am not advocating Tibetan Buddhism. I am simply sharing my desire to speak about compassion." While growing up, how many times, I thought to myself, had we heard that Mormon phrase: "This is the only true church?" Something inside of me, very early on, just kept saying no.**

*The world is too big.*

**Exactly. And what about our own family members who are not LDS? Does that mean my beloved grandfather does not go to heaven? These were my thoughts as a child. I remember thinking, "Well, I doubt I'll make it to the Celestial Kingdom, but that's okay because how could anything be more beautiful than this Earth?" [The Celestial Kingdom is the highest in the three-tiered Mormon heaven, reserved for the most righteous. The Terrestrial Kingdom is the middle level, reserved for good people who did not recognize the truth of Mormonism. The Telestial Kingdom is to be on earth and like earthly existence in many ways.]**

*(We return to our conversation about Testimony). First of all, could you tell me how Testimony all came together?*

**It was a collaboration with Stephen Trimble. The atmosphere we were working in was very contentious—politically. It was 1995. You are familiar with the issues surrounding the Utah Wilderness Bill, right?**

*Yes, I testified before the panel you were on at the Indian Walk-In Center in Salt Lake City, down by the old Derk's Field.*

**Wasn't that an amazing night, David? That was truly one of those moments in time I will never forget. It went on until—what? Two in the morning? That's the kind of thing that could never happen in an "official" hearing before Congress, nor in any local or state government. It was a kind of deep democracy inspired and carried out by "the people."**

**Some quick background: After the 1994 Republican sweep in the elections, the Utah Congressional delegation, led by Jim Hansen and Orrin Hatch, announced it was going to come up with a Utah wilderness bill, once and for all. Hansen and Hatch believed they had the political power to get what they wanted. To Governor Leavitt's credit, he did say they had to open it up to a public process. This was in January 1995. For the next five months**

**local hearings were held in every county that had proposed wilderness in it. We were told that the voice and will of the people were heard. And then, in June, Hansen and Hatch presented the 1995 Utah Public Lands Management Act.**

*Right, and they proposed only 1.8 million acres out of the 22 million acres of available BLM lands.*

**That's correct. It was a slap in the face of democracy. Over 70 percent of the people in Utah wanted more wilderness, not less, most advocating for the Citizen's Proposal which at the time was asking for 5.7 million acres of wilderness.**

**Those of us within the conservation community were outraged. It felt like an enormous betrayal of public trust in the name of our public lands. We immediately went into a defensive posture. I was on the board of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and we were having intense discussions on strategies and how to launch a full-fledged campaign on behalf of America's Redrock Wilderness.**

**Privately, I kept thinking, "What can I do as a citizen? What can I do as a writer?"**

**That is why we went into the citizen's hearings, as a protest to the way we were being shut out of formal discussions with our own delegation. That's why we had the meeting at the Indian Walk-In Center.**

*Right, I tried to testify in several places but was not allowed.*

**It was unbelievable. You wonder what kind of a democracy we really live in, especially now, in the post-911 world in which we find ourselves. But I refuse to be too cynical. I do believe we still have a voice in this country and that numbers do count. A bedrock democracy requires rigorous and relentless participation.**

**The next day, after the citizen's hearings, were the formal Congressional Subcommittee Hearings in Cedar City. The whole point of the hearings the night before was to glean testimonies from people that could then be relayed to Representative Hansen. I was asked to deliver those testimonies in person. I remember staying up all night transcribing the beautiful words of people such as yourself. The challenge was to put something down that was meaningful and succinct. We had five minutes to speak.**

**We flew down to Cedar City, and the process began. There were three panels: the political panel, the extractive industry panel, and the conservation panel. We would testify last.**

**Congressman Jim Hansen and his colleagues sat on a riser above us. I remember how his glasses were perched on the end of his nose, how when I began to speak he was shuffling his papers, yawning, coughing, anything to show his boredom and displeasure. I was half-way through reading the citizen's testimonies—speaking on behalf of those who were at the Indian Walk-In Center the night before. He wasn't even listening—that was clear. Finally, I stopped mid-sentence and said something to the effect, "Congressman Hansen, I have**

been a resident of Utah all of my life. Is there anything I could say to you that will in some way alter your perspective so that you might consider wilderness in another way?"

What I remember is how he leaned over his elbows and looked down on me over the tops of his glasses and said simply, "I'm sorry, Ms. Williams, there is something about your voice I cannot hear." It was chilling—personal. I don't think he was referring to the quality of the microphone. And then, it was over.

I'll never forget that moment. To me, it became a metaphor, a symbolic representation of our delegation's inability—no refusal—to hear what we were trying to say about wildness.

But you keep at it, day-after-day, even in the face of opposition and public opinion. What choice do we have when it comes to the preservation of the land? So often, someone will come up to me and say, "Why don't you find another story? How many times can you say the same thing over and over?" What I would like to say is how can we divorce ourselves from life, from nature which is the very stuff of life? We are the embodiment of both the domestic and the wild. One informs the other.

After the hearing in Cedar City, I wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, entitled "Open Up For Business," outlining the atrocity of this bill sponsored by the Utah Congressional delegation. I wanted to expose in a national forum why the Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995 was a radical betrayal of our public lands, lands that do not just "belong" to Utahans, but to all Americans.

The campaign for America's Redrock Wilderness led by SUWA was in high gear. In July there was a hearing before the Senate in Washington. Again, there were three panels. Senators Hatch and Bennett both testified. The conservation panel, once again, was last. I was fortunate enough to be invited by the environmental community to testify alongside Bill Smart, a Mormon in good standing, for years an editor of the *Deseret News*, and a member on the board of the Grand Canyon Trust. Bill is an incredibly thoughtful and wise man. Phillip Bimstein, the mayor of Springville, Utah, also testified, as did Ray Wheeler, a man who knows Utah wilderness as well as anyone. He is a writer and photographer who has devoted his life to its preservation.

The panel on industry had finished its testimony—representatives ranging from the Farm Bureau to the oil and gas companies. The conservation committee was next. Mayor Phillip Bimstein was the first to speak. Halfway through his sentiments, Senator Larry Craig, a republican from Idaho, chair of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources, stood up and said outloud, "This one is yours, Senator Hatfield." Hatfield was a lame duck from the state of Oregon. Craig continued, "Will you come and take this—? I have an appointment." Phillip had to stop his testimony while this "changing of the gavel" occurred, and then Senator Hatfield said, "Your time is up—next!"

It was so rude and ill-mannered. For the rest of the hearing, Senator Hatfield just sat there and read other papers during our testimonies. Basically, we ended up speaking to the wall and for the Congressional Record.

We all left completely disheartened and discouraged. It was hard not to ask, "What is the point?" No wonder America has become so cynical of government and the political process.

When I returned home, Steve [Trimble] and I met for coffee. Our conversation circled around what we could do as writers. I remember thinking, "Perhaps Congress can't hear one voice, but maybe they can hear a community of voices." Earlier that winter, Steve and I had talked about the possibility of a little chapbook on behalf of Utah Wilderness. If my memory serves me, Steve said, "Perhaps now is the time. We can do this." That was the spark that lit the fire for us to write an impassioned letter to our friends that simply began with the sentence: "We need your help." The letter went on to say, "Here's the political situation we are up against. We know you love Utah's wild country. Will you please write the most eloquent, beautiful piece you have ever written? We cannot pay you, and we need your essay in three weeks." Something like that. And in three weeks, we had twenty-plus pieces of writing from all over the American landscape, essays as heartfelt as anything we had ever read.

*And you got heavy-hitters.*

I suppose you could look at it that way. For us it was a circle of friends, our community of writers who were committed to language and landscape. Steve and I were genuinely moved by the response. You don't know the strength of any community until you ask for help in times of need.

The roster of writers included John McPhee, author of *Basin and Range*; Charles Wilkinson, one of the leading experts on water law in the West; Barry Lopez, Bill Kittredge, Ann Zwinger, Richard Shelton, all powerful voices within American letters. Karen Shepherd, who was serving as a Congresswoman at the time, contributed. Mardy Murie, who along with her husband, Olaus Murie, helped craft the 1964 Wilderness Act, allowed us to publish a piece of hers regarding wilderness—she turns 100 this year. The other end of the spectrum, age-wise, was Rick Bass, a potent writer and wilderness advocate who was in his thirties at the time. We asked the distinguished writer and lover of Utah, Tom Watkins, if he would consider writing a foreword to place this gesture in an historical context, which he did.

From there, we sought a designer, again a friend of ours, Trent Alvey, who graciously agreed to work on this project. He agreed to do it *pro bono*. We found funding from the Cummins Foundation for \$6,000, a local foundation sponsored by Annette and Ian Cummins, great supporters of conservation efforts here in Utah. This paid for the printing costs of one thousand chapbooks.

Steve and I had the pleasure of putting these essays together in a sequence we felt was the most powerful progression of their ideas. We had to work quickly. We knew the biographies were important to show the standing and reputations of the writers involved. We wanted signatures from each of the writers to add solidarity and depth. I recall the flurry and frenzy of all the writers faxing their signatures to us so we could incorporate them into the design, adding power and presence to the book. I remember the thrill of

receiving Scott Momaday's signature. That signature was a piece of art—so beautiful is his script. We were so excited, feeling the momentum of it all. Good work is a stay against despair. We included a map and list of all the proposed wilderness areas. We picked out individual pictograph designs for each writer. The whole chapbook is full of secrets—I will tell you that—stories tied to each writer, the unspoken connections that bind us together. Again, our work must be fun as well as meaningful. Steve and I had a ball creating *Testimony*, even though—you must know—we were a bit crazy with the speed and rapidity of this project. We basically had a bit more than two weeks to put it all together.

It is important to note that the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance had a critical role in teaching us—helping us to place *Testimony* in the halls of Congress. Again, this is the power of collaboration, one community supporting and helping another. Mike Matz, who was director at the time, was an incredible help, and without the brilliance and political savvy of Cindy Shogan, who was SUWA's congressional liaison in Washington, *Testimony* would never have found its way into the hands of our lawmakers. Dozens of volunteers helped distribute the chapbooks on the Hill.

In mid-September, Steve and I went to Washington. We had the thousand copies of *Testimony* mailed ahead of us. We held a press conference on the Triangle, next to the U.S. Capitol. Tom Watkins spoke. He was also working for The Wilderness Society at the time. Congressman Maurice Hinchey, sponsor of HR 1500, America's Redrock Wilderness Bill (The bill today is HR 1613; Congressman Hansen had it changed to dilute its familiarity.), was present. Congressman Bruce Vento from Minnesota, another sponsor of the bill, was also present. They publicly accepted copies of *Testimony* and also spoke on its behalf, creating the sense that this was, in fact, a literary bill being brought to the halls of Congress by American writers. They said they would carry these words to their colleagues with the view of wilderness as a gift to all Americans. Senator Russ Feingold was also in attendance and vowed he would carry *Testimony* to the floor of the Senate.

After the press conference, a reporter from *The Washington Post* came up to Steve and me—did Steve tell you this story?

*No.*

Well, anyway, Steve and I were standing to the side, and the reporter walked up to us with his pad and pen, saying, "What a waste of time—" I said, "Excuse me?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He said, "What fools you are. Do you have any idea how much paper gets passed around Congress? You are so naive. This will never see the light of day."

I was ready to punch this guy. Forgive me, I know that doesn't speak well of me. Fortunately, Steve had much more presence of mind. He stood there very calmly and said to the reporter, "Writing is always an act of faith."

Copies of *Testimony* were, in fact, passed throughout Congress and to the media. I was personally able to take a copy to Mrs. Clinton and also presented one to the President. We

had one placed in the hands of Vice President Gore and key members of the administration, such as Katie McGinty, John Lesly, and George Frampton.

It's hard to say what the impact of *Testimony* was, but as you know, the bill never got to the floor in the House. This was all part of a larger campaign to protect wilderness in Utah. There were so many people working together from so many different fronts. Again, that is the power and strength of community and collaboration.

In March of 1996, the Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995 finally found its way to the Senate floor. The Senate went into a filibuster. As you know, a filibuster is about taking up time. What is needed is words to take up that time. Senator Bill Bradley from New Jersey stood up and said, "With all due respect, Senators Hatch and Bennett, these wildlands belong to all Americans, and I would like to read from one of my constituents, John McPhee: "Basin, Range, Basin, Range...." At that moment, *Testimony* was entered into the Congressional Record. It was followed by other senators reading from *Testimony* throughout the filibuster. The bill eventually died.

Six months later, on September 18, 1996, largely due to the strength of the environmental community and the political atmosphere surrounding the 1996 presidential election, President Clinton designated the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, protecting two million acres of wildlands in Utah. Afterwards, President Clinton held up a paperback copy of *Testimony*, just published by Milkweed Press for a mass market distribution, and said, "This made a difference."

*So he held up a copy of Testimony?*

He did. There was a small luncheon held outside on the rim of the Grand Canyon after the formal ceremony. Bruce Babbitt, Mike Matz, president of SUWA, Robert Redford, Charles Wilkinson, and I were among those in attendance. It was very moving to hear the President's words. One usually never really knows the tangible effects of literature.

*Right, this is not exactly a measurable thing.*

I remember reading a comment from Mother Teresa when a reporter had come to visit her in India. The reporter asked, "How can you continue with so much failure all around you?—All this death!" She looked at him and said, "This is not about success. This is about being thankful."

This is how I feel about wilderness.

*Those are great stories.*

We all carry great stories, especially in the name of community. May I share one more?

One of the falsehoods that emerged from this contentious debate over Utah wilderness in 1995 was the polarity that you could be Mormon, Republican, and anti-wilderness; or you

could be non-Mormon, Democrat, pro-wilderness—but you could not be Mormon and for wilderness. (I suppose you could be non-Mormon, Democrat and anti-wilderness, as well.) Anyway, these were the assumptions being portrayed by our political leaders and the press.

After the Senate hearing in July of 1995, Bill Smart and I were so disgusted with the process and the lack of respect given to citizens, along with the careless comments being made publicly, that "Mormons did not want wilderness," which we knew was not true, that we wanted to do something to dispel these myths. Again, that question: "What can we do—? What can we do together?"

Once home, we met with the publisher Gibbs Smith, another member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and decided to put together an anthology of LDS writers asking the question, "What role has wildness or nature played in your beliefs as a Mormon?" Or conversely, "What role has Mormonism played in your view of nature?"

We solicited around forty different Mormon voices. Most of them were not writers but members in good standing from diverse backgrounds. The essays were as personal and varied as the contributors themselves: ranging from "The Natural History of a Quilt" by Martha Young Moench, to former Mayor Ted Wilson's narrative on climbing the granite walls of Little Cottonwood Canyon in the Wasatch Mountains, to Hugh Nibley's critique of air pollution as a sin against God, to world re-nowned biologist Clayton White's essay on walking through the AIDS ward in a New York City hospital to view peregrine falcons nesting on the roof of the building.

The anthology *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community* was published in the fall of 1998. It has given members of the Church cover, so-to-speak, to acknowledge their love of the land. I know this book is being used as a text at Brigham Young University. If nothing else, this collection acts as another point of discussion where we can begin to talk about an ethic of place as we try to "create a society to match a scenery," as Wallace Stegner has admonished us to do in his book *The Sound of Mountain Water*.

*I want to ask you a few theoretical questions about nature writing. First of all, are you comfortable with the term "nature writing"?*

I don't really know what that is. And I think what it does is run the risk of compartmentalizing, marginalizing and saying that that is all that's here. And I think the term is detrimental for the land. It marginlizes the land as something extra, instead of something integral to what we are doing. And I think, as Barry Lopez has eloquently said, and Stegner too, this is a literature of hope. It is also a literature of loss. I think that at the end of this century we are coming to grips with our mistakes and the prices we have paid. And I can only speak to my own experience, but to me this kind of writing that you see throughout the American literary tradition—whether it is Melville, or Dickinson, or Whitman, or Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Aldo Leopold, Steinbeck, or Hemingway—is a form of nature writing. I mean, let's talk about nature writers. What about Hemingway—*The Green Hills of Africa*, his sense of landscape, *The Nick Adams Stories*, all of those? I think it is an American question: "What is the correspondence between wilderness and our

own wild spirit?" And I think that at this point in time, especially in the late twentieth century, we are saying that we seriously need to question and critique the values that have led us astray. The lack of intimacy with the natural world creates a lack of intimacy in ourselves. Our body, the body of the earth—there is no separation. That was, for me, the revelation in *Refuge*—when I realized my mother's health and the health of the desert were the same story.

*There is this moment in Refuge that I really find interesting. In Desert Solitaire, Ed Abbey comes to the desert believing that the universe does not care for the individual, and he leaves the desert after this Havasu experience saying, "The universe may not care for the individual, and this heartbreaking beauty is going to be here whether there is a heart to break or not, but the individual cares about the individuals, and we are important to ourselves and to each other, and that itself is an important discovery."*

*As I read Refuge, and I am coming at it from Abbey, I almost see you coming at the same problem, but from the opposite direction. What I mean is that it seems that instead of coming at it like Ed Abbey, already thinking the universe is indifferent, you come at it from our Mormon tradition which tells us the universe does care about us, but when we go out in the world we have to face this realization that there is indifference there. And there is this moment in Refuge where you talk about how being able to accept change and indifference is really the route to healing. You seem to be addressing the same problem, but from a different tradition, so you come at it in a different way.*

**I see what you are saying. We never see our own work from the outside because we write from the inside. It is that paradox. That is why the Great Salt Lake is so fascinating—this huge body of water that no one can drink. In this universe that we feel is embraced through our tradition, there is this cold indifference. And it is in the detachment that I think the healing occurs—that you are part of something so much larger. You feel the vastness and the smallness.**

*You say that you are uncomfortable with the term nature writing—as am I, as are most—but I have yet to come across a term that works. It is the kind of nonfiction that involves landscape that seems to be this really important part of American letters right now.*

**Perhaps that is your challenge as a scholar. I don't know what it is I do. I write about the questions that keep me up at night. In *Pieces of White Shell*, the question is "What stories do you tell to give a sense of place?" With *Refuge*, it is "How do we find refuge in change?" With *LEAP*, it is "How do we breathe life into the orthodoxies that we are a part of?" It's the questions that propel me. I don't know what categories they are put in. To me, that is the work of the scholar and the academy. In all honesty, I don't pay much attention to it. It is interesting to me, but that's not how I see my work. I have found my books in everything from occult, to feminist studies, to nature writing, to essays, to—who knows? I think the only thing I haven't found them in is whimsy. Again, it is our propensity to categorize the world. And I think if anything comes out of this literature it is that the world cannot be categorized. It is seeing the world as whole, or even holy. It is being mindful of the relations**

**that sustain us. The fragmented world we are part of can only be healed and brought together through this kind of ecological mind.**

*Meaning?*

**When Gregory Bateson talks about "steps to an ecology of mind," I think that's what this literature is addressing.**

*There seems to be this special relationship within nonfiction that is interested in the landscape and empirical observation. One of the things that makes *Refuge* speak is that it is clear you know birds. It is clear you have some knowledge. If you were faking that, it would lend a hollowness and become a framing device rather than an integral part of the narrative. So my question is what is the relationship between writing about the natural world and observing well and accurately? And what do you see as your obligation to the reader to have some integrity in that observation?*

**To me, writing is about how we see. The writers I want to read teach me how to see—see the world differently. In my writing there is no separation between how I observe the world and how I write the world. We write through our eyes. We write through our body. We write out of what we know. I guess I don't know how to answer that.**

*Well, let me take another tack. Because it is literature—and one of the great things about literature is that it is able to organize facts in a way to help us see things differently and to embody truth in a different way from other forms of communication—there is leeway. But literature that addresses the natural world is a really special hybrid. So, do you feel an obligation as a person who's writing about landscape to make sure you are within a certain empirical reality?*

**The integrity comes through the power of realization and what you see and how you convey that story. I remember I was terrified about writing *Refuge*. The first draft was called *The Bird Letters of Beverly Bliss*. It was fictional because I thought I was safer—I wouldn't have to expose. But then, as I was moving through it, I thought the world too remarkable, the world too miraculous not to tell the truth. If that book had been turned into fiction, into a novel—even though the structure is novelistic—I don't think it would carry the same weight because it would have to be imagined—where the fact is that it was true.**

**For me, I work on a very intuitive level—a very physical level. I was spending time with the birds; I was spending time with my mother. I didn't ask myself whether or not these two parallel stories worked together. At that time it simply was the truth of my life. I thought I was writing this book about the Bear River Bird Refuge, and I didn't realize that there was this correspondence, until, really, after my mother had died. I was at a family reunion—you'll appreciate this—and hundreds of people, and my Aunt Bea...**

*I have an Aunt Bea.*

(Laughter)

Well, you will relate to this. She is a total Mormon woman, totally stalwart, and she asked, "Terry, what are you doing with yourself?" (And then, she quickly looks at my stomach, wondering when I am going to have a baby.) And I said, "Aunt Bea, I'm writing a book." And she said, "On what?" And I said, "On the rise of Great Salt Lake and the death of my mother." And she looked at me as if I had gone utterly mad, and she walked away. I remember driving home, and I was so discouraged, thinking: "What am I thinking? Maybe I am going mad." And I had this easel downstairs; it was actually Mimi's. I just went down, and I thought, "What am I doing?" I hadn't really questioned it—it was so internal. I took two Magic Markers, and I wrote "Bird Refuge," you know, and "Mother." And I had "Great Salt Lake," "Cancer," because these were all my resources—"Mormon Church." And I circled them, and I stood back and said, "What is holding these together?" I thought, "The narrator—how I see." So I put "Narrator" and drew two lines and stood back and realized what I had drawn was a map of the female reproductive system. And I thought, "This is what I know in here." And the price of withholding that creativity is what I saw my mother and grandmother go through. At that moment I thought, "I can do this."

I then literally picked up the manuscript, and—I think I was in my nightgown—I pulled on my Levis and cowboy boots and tore down to Kinkos. It was two or three in the morning. I started shuffling madly through the manuscript on the counter: "Refuge— Refuge— Mother— Mother— Mother— Birds— Birds— Birds." I saw it more clearly, and I took all of the section on mother and the family illness, and I told the guy behind the counter, "I want you to put this on the brightest color you have—turquoise or whatever." As I was waiting, I walk Mark Strand, former poet laureate of the United States and former University of Utah professor. And I was thinking, "Oh no, please don't hand me back my bright blue manuscript—not while Mark is here." But the guy says, "Here you go, Terry." And Mark just looks at me and says, "You writing for Hallmark these days?" And I looked at him and said, "Mark, are there days when you just don't think you can write one more word?" At that point, he just said, "Every single day." And, then, I knew I could go on.

So I took the manuscript and drove back up the canyon and started shuffling again. And I was thinking, "This is too intense. It needs more space. This, this, and this have too many birds—it needs more connection." And that's really how the balancing came. This is all to say that for me what holds the integrity of a book and of a vision is the structure. And at the very end there has to be something deeper that holds it together. It is not enough to have the birds as the headlines of the chapters, even though they are metaphorical. I was in my office in the museum and had the hydronomy charts. And I realized that the connection was the lake level. And when I charted the lake's levels for all of those months, I realized that, honestly, the lake level corresponded identically with the emotional levels. I mean, you can't make that up. And that is the faith I have in what it means to live in "place." I absolutely believe in that.

And, to me, that is the integrity of a literature of place—it is not a contrivance. It's simply paying attention to where we are at any given point in time, at any point in space. We must be willing to understand. I mean, those things happen. They really do. And that story could happen—it happens over and over again. I mean, you know, there really was an owl. My

**father is the biggest unbeliever on the planet, and I will never forget when we heard that owl. I don't know. Maybe there isn't any meaning in life, but we can create our own meaning. And that, to me, is my definition of faith.**

*In other words, taking hold of what we have here.*

**It is more than that. It is what you were saying. We don't need another world—we don't need the Celestial Kingdom. It is right here—right now. What does that say about us if we cannot see it?**

*And if we cannot preserve it and live well in it.*

**That's right. That, to me, is what writing is about—having to speak to place—having to speak to faith—having to speak to the darkest part of ourselves and embrace our own paradoxical nature. We see this paradox over and over again in the natural world: It is violent. It is tender. It is beautiful. It is awe—it is full of awe. It is all of this, and it is this kind of complexity that I think creates a sense of peace—a settling of the soul. And, ultimately, more than anything, it gives birth to compassion.**

*One more thing. Getting back to Testimony. It seems to me that the title itself is very important, in many ways, to that collection.*

**David, as one familiar with Mormon culture, you know exactly where the title of *Testimony* came from—from the Mormon practice of a monthly testimony meeting where members of the congregation share their personal spiritual experiences with one another in the sanctity of this communal ritual. Few people have recognized this connection. Perhaps this was the most subtle of secrets held within this little chapbook. But Mormon people recognized the connection. People like Congressman Jim Hansen, Senator Orrin Hatch, and Senator Bob Bennett certainly recognized it. You and I sat through those testimony meetings—still do. We listen to our friends and family share the open chambers of their hearts. You and I can remember that quickening of the Spirit, the desire to speak what we believe to be true and worthy of sharing—yes, this is exactly where the title of *Testimony* comes from. It is a gesture of gratitude and humility in the name of community.**