

then goes on to catalogue some of the things she enjoys: "A new collapsible pair of glasses," the "Clean up window" on her new computer, "a young mare / and gelding frolicking like kittens," the sound of "the brook getting in with / the white swans at the black pond" (p. 66). The account of what pleases seems random and list-like—and those are qualities of many of the poems—but that very randomness can be attributed to Thayne's great powers of observation and her appreciation for every aspect of life it is humanly possible to enjoy.

The hopefulness of the poems is bal-

anced by an awareness of mortality. Aging or death is the background of many of the poems and the foreground of a few. But the eventuality of death serves, in fact, to make our human experiences all the more precious. As a whole, the poems of this volume are an affirmation of life. They celebrate sensory pleasure, the small touching gesture, physical and emotional contact with others, moments of variety and beauty in the natural world, and allege again and again how much of experience can be relished. In final analysis, one can learn from these poems not merely how to survive but how to flourish.

## Unnatural History

*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 304 pp., \$21.

Reviewed by Helen B. Cannon, a member of the English department at Utah State University, a freelance writer, and an editorial associate for *DIALOGUE*.

SOMETIMES WHEN I GO to readings given by *Nature* writers, that new and popular set exploring their private, half-mystical genre, I think for a moment that I'm listening to LDS general conference talks—the histrionic intoning of truth on automatic pilot—the sincere, paternalistic, sing-song of lesson.

In the first paragraph of Chapter 1 of Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, at first I thought I heard that familiar tone of sanctimony and awe, even when the words gave only geographic, not spiritual, directions:

When I reach Foothill Drive, I turn right, pass the University of Utah, and make another right, heading east [sic] until I meet South Temple, which requires a left-hand turn. I arrive a few miles later at Eagle Gate, a bronze arch that spans State Street. I turn right once more. One block later, I turn left on North Temple and pass the Mormon Tabernacle on Temple Square.

From here, I simply follow the gulls west, past the Salt Lake City International Airport.

These direction-giving words (the bane of geographic dyslexics, of whom I am one) came to me as a reverential reading about spiritual *landscape*, where "red-rocks . . . bleed" (Williams 1989, 16) when you cut them. Come on, Terry, I thought. This is too much "sense of place," as *Nature* writers call their orienting-on-earth penchant. This is too literal a cartography.

But I was wrong. *Refuge* is unquestionably not a formulaic book. It is, rather, a book where the author, in spite of herself, transcends the camp genre of nature writing and, for the most part, moves beyond the distraction of language calling attention to itself. Oh, nature is there all right, once we get past Temple Square and the freeway—not nature tooth and claw, nor nature as fey or awesome, but nature closely observed, drawn with a fine artistic, scientific, and personal precision. No tricks. No sentimentalizing. No histrionics.

Nature here is "bedrock," to use Williams' own choice of metaphor. "I could not separate the Bird Refuge from my family. . . . The landscape of my childhood and the landscape of my fam-

ily, the two things I had always regarded as bedrock, were now subject to change. Quicksand" (p. 40). But this is not *Nature* writing, nor even nature as center. It is nature as counterpoint to another primary subject. Go back to the book's subtitle, "An Unnatural History of Family and Place." That direct taxonomic clue should have given me accurate expectation. As it was, once past that first incongruous paragraph, I realized that my initial prejudice was not justified—that this was, in fact, a book so honest and without pretense or artifice that I would not be able to put it down. (Friends to whom I've given *Refuge* swear it's an "all-nighter," impossible to leave. Impossible to leave, even after the last page is finished and the book shut.)

But if it is not mainly about nature, what then? The answer to that question is no more simple than the book is simple. For one thing, *Refuge* is about death, and dying that is not in the natural course of things; it is about the landscape (to borrow a metaphor) of critical, untimely illness—a lonely landscape where only a few intrepid companions can follow the dying and still return to bear witness. And the witness Williams bears is in league with famous sorties into that dark kingdom—James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, Susan Kenney's *In Another Country*, Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days*, Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, and Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*. I put *Refuge* with the best company I know. It is that strong. Like the others, it is a book written toward consolation, healing. "Volunteers are beginning to reconstruct the marshes, just as I am trying to reconstruct my life. . . . Perhaps I am telling this story in an attempt to heal myself. . . . I have been in retreat. This story is my return" (pp. 3–4).

And Terry Tempest Williams is an unflinching witness. "When most people had given up on the refuge, saying the birds were gone, I was drawn further into its essence. In the same way that when someone is dying many retreat, I chose

to stay" (p. 4). This statement is touchstone and thematic, the image recurrent. Terry does not retreat from her mother's death journey. She does not flinch in the face of death, and she no more sentimentalizes that process than she sentimentalizes what is happening to the shores of the Great Salt Lake and her threatened, beloved Bear River Bird Refuge. T. S. Eliot's lines from *Prufrock* come to mind: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead / come back to tell you all. I shall tell you all."

What Terry Tempest Williams, the messenger, tells is of her mother's long, untimely sufferance. We see how cancer transfigures Diane Dixon Tempest, how she suffers radiation, but also herself becomes a radiance. We see how dying concentrates the mind and the life, not only of the one dying, but also of those who love her best. I think Diane, with her attentiveness to life, must have wanted to be sure she was alive when she died. That is a strange comment, I know, but in our culture most of us would rather hide our deaths from ourselves and hide ourselves from others' deaths. We view illness and death as shame. We refuse to set limits, having become brainwashed by our own anything-is-possible medical hubris. Death sets a limit for each of us, but we would deny that, and in our denial, banish the dying. We don't want to believe in death. It's not even a matter of our raging "against the dying of the light"—it's our denial that each life's light will be extinguished. Only a few refuse to turn away; only a few return to testify of death and critical illness as capable of endowing life with its deepest meaning. Terry learns from her mother to put by denial—and willingly accompanies her mother on the necessary path. Terry returns from the journey with her mother to tell us.

Importantly, she writes as a daughter. That fact, too, is more central to the book than nature. This is a book about mothers and daughters. What Simone de Beauvoir writes as daughter, Terry Tempest Williams also testifies. De Beauvoir's

words could be Terry's as well: "You do not die from being born, nor from having lived, nor from old age. You die from *something*. The knowledge that because of her age my mother's life must soon come to an end did not lessen the horrible surprise. She had carcinoma. Cancer. My mother encouraged us to be optimistic. . . . She asserted the infinite value of each instant. . . . There is no such thing as a natural death" (1973, 123). And from Terry's mother, "Terry, to keep hoping for life in the midst of letting go is to rob me of the moment I am in" (p. 161). The emotional urgency in dying, the hard work it involves, is the subject of *Refuge* too.

Terry is the one who cannot turn away, even from the horrors of unnatural death. She is the one who cannot lie. Ever. That, too, is more central than nature. Her words do not lie. She writes—not as a "watch me writing" writer, but as one who bears testimony of power in the accurate word, the telling metaphor, the informed story. This is her articulation of grief and sometimes of palpable written rage (though never rant). This book presents words and storyline as a way of communing with death—of doing something that most of us refuse to do—facing and rehearsing our own inevitable deaths. In his poem "Spring and Fall," Gerard Manley Hopkins suggests that even as we cry for what is dying, it is our own eventual deaths we mourn. The child Margaret cries, ostensibly over falling leaves—the death of a season, not knowing that she mourns her own relentless progression towards death. "Margaret are you grieving / over Golden grove unleaving? . . . / Now, no matter, child, the name: / Sorrow springs are the same, . . . / It is the blight man was born for / It is Margaret you mourn for (1979, 86). Like Hopkins, Williams uses nature as image for human blight, plight, and sorrow—as reflective of self sorrow. "But this time I was not crying for Mother. I was crying for me. I wanted my life back. I wanted my marriage back. I wanted my own time. But most of all I wanted the suffering for

Mother to end" (p. 164).

And there's her singularly honest use of metaphor. Not only are her own metaphors good and true and revelatory, she also rejects metaphors that cloud or discolor our ways of seeing.

This is cancer, my mother's process, not mine. . . . Cancer becomes a disease of shame, one that encourages secrets and lies, to protect as well as to conceal.

And then suddenly, within the rooms of secrecy, patient, doctor, and family find themselves engaged in war. Once again medical language is loaded, this time with military metaphors: the fight, the battle, enemy infiltration, and defense strategies. I wonder if this kind of aggression waged against our own bodies is counterproductive to healing. Can we be at war with ourselves and still find peace? (p. 43)

How can this book not be about nature when its very anatomy turns on bird names and precise lake levels? The chapter titles read as a taxonomy of water birds, with subheads giving measurements of the levels of the Great Salt Lake, levels crucial for the existence of these birds' refuge and habitat. Bird imagery here turns on human plight. Birds are the perfect metaphor—they "who mediate between heaven and earth" (p. 95). "There are those birds you gauge your life by" (p. 8). The birds' almost weightless bodies present poignant image of "the unbearable lightness of being" that Diane Tempest moves painfully toward. Starving and emaciated at the end, she becomes as Isak Dinesen envisioned her frail self: "And by the time I had nothing left, I myself was the lightest thing of all, for fate to get rid of" (in Thurman 1982, 443).

I must cite the strong image of the dead swan, taking it as just one example of how skillfully woven is this tapestry of birds and life and death; of water, sand, and sky. Here is the writer planting symbol, a prefiguration of how she will dress and care for her own mother's body:

Small waves hissed each time they broke on shore. Up ahead, I noticed a large, white mound a few feet from where the lake was breaking.

It was a dead swan. Its body lay contorted on the beach like an abandoned lover. I looked at the bird for a long time. . . .

I knelt beside the bird, took off my deer-skin gloves, and began smoothing feathers. Its body was still limp—the swan had not been dead long. I lifted both wings out from under its belly and spread them on the sand. Untangling the long neck which was wrapped around itself was more difficult, but finally I was able to straighten it, resting the swan's chin flat against the shore.

The small dark eyes had sunk behind the yellow lores. It was a whistling swan. I looked for two black stones, found them, and placed them over the eyes like coins. They held. And, using my own saliva as my mother and grandmother had done to wash my face, I washed the swan's black bill and feet until they shone like patent leather.

I have no idea of the amount of time that passed in the preparation of the swan. What I remember most is lying next to its body and imagining the great white bird in flight. (p. 121)

*"Es druckten deine lieben Hände / Mir die getreuen Augen zu."* Maureen Ursenbach Beecher quotes these words to Mary Bradford upon reading Bradford's touching essay, "The Veil," on the tender obligations of ritual dressing of her mother's body. The German lines express the idea that "one might go in peace if it were the loved one's loving hands which pressed the eyelids shut" (Bradford, 1987, 81).

In the mortuary, Terry does not shrink from serving her mother's body, with a tenderness similar to that prefigured in her service to the dead swan. Only here she rages against violation of the face she loves: "Mother's body, now a carapace, naked, cold, and stiff, on a stainless steel table. Her face had been painted orange. I asked him to remove the makeup" (p. 235). He doesn't. She does.

But of all the themes contained in this rich book—themes of solitude, rage, the Church providing both solace and dismay, both comforting and disturbing rituals, the land and its unnatural desecration, death and its process, the power of words—the

theme that for me is strongest is that of the mother/daughter relationship. This is the one natural fact amidst all that is unnatural and wrong with the world. It is the constant. The book is, after all, dedicated to Terry's mother. This family revolves about that mother/daughter center, and with the generational and genetic circle come all the natural and simple rituals. Racked with nausea and diminished by weakness, Diane performs a heroic gesture in preparing the family's traditional Christmas brunch. Her refinement and exquisite good taste are unmarred. That is ritual. That is Diane saying, we are family, no matter what, and we will sit down together, and we will celebrate in the midst of sorrow, and we will love each other in the fragility of a traditional meal.

The family, and especially the mother/daughter rituals, are what bring my good and rightful tears of recognition. The words are in place, and the simple acts they describe are true. Why would I cry over a shopping trip to Nordstrom's—over Diane's slim form sheathed in a red holiday dress—Terry with her in the dressing room to approve and to observe her beauty. These are mother/daughter rhythms. I wept my way through these passages—these verbal embraces of mother and child, these death lullabies:

What is it about the relationship of a mother that can heal or hurt us? Her womb is the first landscape we inhabit. . . . Our maternal environment is perfectly safe—dark, warm, and wet. It is a residency inside the Feminine. (p. 50)

Mother and I are in Wyoming. . . . She gave me my birth story. . . . "I don't ever remember being so happy, Terry. Having a child completed something for me. I can't explain it. It's something you feel as a woman connected to other women." (p. 51)

Suffering shows us what we are attached to—perhaps the umbilical cord between Mother and me has never been cut. . . . (p. 53)

"Terry, I need you to help me through my death." (p. 156)

Dawn to dusk. I have spent the entire day with Mother. Lying next to her. Rubbing her back. Holding her fevered hand

close to my face. Stroking her hair. Keeping ice on the back of her neck. She is so uncomfortable. We are trying to work with the pain. (p. 157)

"You still don't understand, do you?" Mother said to me. "It doesn't matter how much time I have left. All we have is now. I wish you could all accept that and let go of your projections. Just let me live so I can die. . . . To keep hoping for life in the midst of letting go is to rob me of the moment I am in. . . ." Her words cut through me like broken glass. (p. 161)

She starts to sob. I hold her as we rock back and forth on the stairwell. (p. 205)

She rubbed my back. "I love you so. We don't need words, do we? Do you know how wonderful it is to be perfectly honest with your daughter? Do you know how rich you have made my life?" (p. 221)

I walk back into her room, kneel at her bedside, and with bowed head and folded arms, I sob. I tell her I can no longer be strong in her presence. I tell her how agonizing this has been, how helpless I have felt, how much I hurt for her, for all that she has had to endure. I tell her how much I love her and how desperately I will miss her, that she has not only given me a reverence for life, but a reverence for death. / I cry out from my soul, burying my head in the quilt that covers her. / I feel my mother's hand gently stroking the top of my head. (p. 226)

Our eyes met. Death eyes. I looked into them, eyes wide with knowledge, unblinking, objective eyes. Eyes detached from the soul. Eyes turned inward. . . . I took her right hand in mine and whispered, "Okay, Mother, let's do it. . . ." / I began breathing with her. It began simply as a mirroring of her breath. . . . Mother and I became one. One breathing organism. Everything we had ever shared in our lives manifested itself in this moment, in each breath. Here and now. (p. 230)

Where is the Motherbody? . . . My physical mother is gone. My spiritual mother remains. I am a woman rewriting my genealogy. (pp. 240-41)

All this.

Diane had planted marigolds, just as she did each springtime, when her journey toward unnatural death began. After her mother's death, Terry and her husband, Brooke, are in Mexico for the Day

of the Dead, *el Día de los Muertos*. Terry buys marigolds from an old woman "whose arms were wide with [them]. . . . 'Gracias,' I say to her. 'This is the flower my mother planted each spring'" (pp. 278-79).

Full circle. Back in Utah, canoeing toward Antelope Island, Terry strews marigold petals into the Great Salt Lake, her "basin of tears," her "refuge."

This book is simply beautiful and complexly beautiful as well. Only a few things mar the book's near perfection, and I feel crotchety and school-marmish and out of linguistic fashion to mention them. I do so because I think Williams deserves more careful editing. To list a few of the most egregious errors, the necessary distinction between "lie" and "lay" (pp. 29 and 113), between "counsel" and "council" (p. 239), questions of agreement (p. 134), use of the passive voice when the subject requires the strength of the active voice (p. 173), or accuracy in quoting sources (p. 90). For me these are like pimples on a beautiful face. And if you think errors don't matter, consider the glitch in the author's blurb in the journal wherein her now famous Epilogue to *Refuge*, "Clan of the One-Breasted Women," appeared: "[Terry Tempest Williams] is currently working on a book entitled *Refuse* [sic], to be published by Viking next year." Little things do matter. "*Refuse*." Hmpf.

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