

Jocelyn Bartkevicius and Mary Hussmann

A CONVERSATION WITH TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

On a cold spring day in central Iowa, the interviewers traveled with Terry Tempest Williams to the small town of Kalona, home to an Amish community. On the perimeter of that community, we had lunch at a home-style café and visited an antique store, a converted church where we discovered among the dry sinks, oak tables, tinker toys, depression glass, and familiar quilt patterns, a red and white Hopi-design quilt with such a history of being mistaken for a Nazi pattern, it was kept folded inside-out, on a lower shelf. Later, we visited writer Mary Swander at her home in a converted one room schoolhouse surrounded by Amish homesteads. We drove down dirt and stone roads, flying past school children in simple home-made pinafores and trousers, past horse-drawn buggies. After herbal tea overlooking the farm fields and broad sky at Mary's wall of windows, we visited sites from her poems and memoir—the Amish phone booth and the paddock with the one-eyed goat among them. We ended our day in Kalona with Mary at an Amish fabric and quilt store where we looked at display quilts and watched a woman and girl at work on a new quilt.

We talked with Terry that evening at The Iowa House on the Iowa River.

Jocelyn: Today in Kalona, at Mary Swander's house, you spoke of journeys to the interior of places, how, over time, seeing first-hand the way people live, your initial idea of a place is transformed. It's a transformation that obliterates all memory of a first impression or any preconceived expectation of that place.

So much of your writing centers on place, the fine nuances of place. In *An Unspoken Hunger*, you are being guided through a place, from the perimeter to the interior, just as we were today in Kalona. In *Pieces of White Shell* and *Refuge*, you open with the very feel of the place, the texture of sage on your fingers. Your latest book, *Desert Quartet*, moves even closer, into "an erotics of place," where touch becomes multi-layered, taking on an even greater significance. What is your relation-

ship to place—both the familiar and the new? And how do guides fit in?

Terry: I think each of us intuitively has a homeland, a landscape we naturally comprehend. We take those eyes with us wherever we go, whether to the farmlands of Iowa or the Plains of the Serengeti. I can tell you that my eyes are always first eternally rested on the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau where I live and that when the landscape translates differently, I start looking for cues or images. When I came to Iowa, the first thing that struck me was the over-arching sky, this confidence of sky, this wide sky that moves unencumbered. I was thinking these clouds have nothing to butt up against except each other. In the American West that's not true, especially where I live. In Basin and Range country the clouds are much more tentative. They have to contend with mountains. With my beginner's eyes in the Midwest, it appears to be a landscape of subtleties, subtle things like the quality of light in Iowa is different. It seems more discreet or diffused or dispersed because again, there is so much sky.

One of the things that has touched me so deeply here is this vast expanse of landscape on all sides, north, south, east, west. There is almost a sense of the sea. I'm used to more of a border country closer, adjacent to mountains or deserts. So I think these differences all play into one's perceptions. And yet, there are always the commonalities. For example, going out to Cone's Marsh just an hour or so from Iowa City, one can see great blue herons, cinnamon teals, and white pelicans even in the Heartland. On the shores of Great Salt Lake, you can see these same species. These magnificent birds call us home wherever that may be. The ground beneath our feet is not so different.

You asked about guides. Certainly today, I think we saw an example of a wonderful guide, Mary Swander. A place. Going out to her one room schoolhouse, having her take us to the fabric store. Place becomes a personal landscape; I felt as though she gave us our entree into the Amish community, she is trustworthy and therefore we ride in on her coattails. My first guide here in Iowa was you, Mary, taking me to lunch, explaining your family in Waterloo, how you always want to go north, yet this is where you remain, talking about the value of weather, giving me clues as to what it means to live here. And then when we

met three years ago, Jocelyn, knowing you were here in Iowa placed my imagination in Iowa as a possibility because you were bringing me stories. So, I think it's circular, it's almost like a kaleidoscope, you turn, you see, you turn again, you see differently.

Mary: We talk about the ways landscape affects and shapes culture, in that we can identify a western or southern sensibility, for example. Do you detect a midwestern sensibility?

Terry: I haven't been here long enough yet, only twelve days. (Laughter). I do think, however, there is an over-riding American sensibility. For example, Americans are open and curious and we share a humor. Even though our humor varies regionally, there seems to be a national humor which binds us together. Yet in many ways the Midwest is completely foreign to me because it's so domesticated. We can use the patchwork quilt metaphor of the Amish. Everywhere one looks, there is a different square, a pattern of tilled land, the designs of farmlands. It's not that way in the American West. In Utah, one can drive for miles (or walk for that matter), in dry, open terrain of sage or juniper with buttes and mesas on either side. Whether that translates to domesticated personalities vs. wild personalities, I don't know.

Jocelyn: So far you've spoken about place visually, as with the image of a kaleidoscope, which I love. You opened *An Unspoken Hunger* with that image. And yet in several of your books place is tactile, especially in your new book, *Desert Quartet*, where it's not only tactile, but erotic. It seems to me that you cross a border there, depart from what a lot of people feel safe talking about, depart from just using our eyes—we're such a visual culture—and move into touch. How important is touching a place? Do you feel that your writing is becoming more tactile?

Terry: I think first we have to ask ourselves: How do we define erotic? Our culture has chosen to define erotic in very narrow terms, terms that largely describe pornography or voyeurism, the opposite of a relationship that asks for reciprocity. One of the things I was interested in with *Desert Quartet* was to explore the use of language in its pure sense, to use the word "erotic" to intensify, to expand our view of Eros, to literally be in relationship on the page. When we're in relation, whether

it is with a human being, with an animal, or with the desert, I think there is an exchange of the erotic impulse. We are engaged, we are vulnerable, we are both giving and receiving, we are fully present in that moment, and we are able to heighten our capacity for passion which I think is the full range of emotion, both the joy and sorrow that one feels when in wild country. To speak about Eros in a particular landscape is to acknowledge our capacity to love Other.

Another impulse: Hélène Cixous talks about the importance of writing out of the body. What does that mean? I wanted to play with that idea. What would it mean as a writer to bypass the intellect and feel the words before we understand them? That makes us uncomfortable. Not only, Jocelyn, do you say we're a visual culture, I think we're a very linear culture, very rational culture. So what happens when we write in a more organic form where it is circular, not linear, where it is tactile, not simply on the surface? Again, I think that makes us uncomfortable. Intimacy makes us uncomfortable, so there is another issue here; I really believe our lack of intimacy with the land has initiated a lack of intimacy with each other. So how do we cross these borders? How do we keep things fluid, not fixed, so we can begin to explore both our body and the body of the earth? No separation. Eros: nature, even our own.

Mary: What's been the reaction to *Desert Quartet*? It's very different from your other books in that it reads very much like a prose poem. It seems to arise out of a very intimate and lyric sensibility, not an intellectual one. I can see how that would make some readers uncomfortable.

Terry: I don't know. Often the writer's the last to hear. I can tell you it has not been reviewed much, perhaps because people don't know what it is. It doesn't fit a particular genre. Is it fiction? Is it nonfiction? Poetry? Memoir? I wanted the book to be like a landscape one must enter on its own terms. I wanted the structure to mirror the desert. It is also a correspondence between Mary Frank, the artist, and myself, a correspondence through image and narrative. We were both exploring the erotic in very different ways, yet with convergences and confluences. We wanted *Desert Quartet* to be a marriage of text and image.

Mary: The four elements, earth, fire, air, and water, which are the chapter titles in *Desert Quartet* were first published in the *New England Review*. In reading those versions I noticed that the “water” chapter was written from a “he” persona. In the book that persona is a woman. What happened there?

Terry: Well, you’ve done your homework. Writing engages the creative process, metamorphosis; I change all the time. For *Desert Quartet* there were hundreds of drafts. It kept being a distillation, both of the idea that was holding the language together as well as the language itself. Here’s the long version. When I was asked to be “essayist-at-large” at the *New England Review*, I thought it would be an intriguing assignment because I didn’t know anyone in New England. I thought I was free to write in a way that I wasn’t free to write within my own community, which is Mormon, at least in my imagination. I thought, This is perfect, I can write four essays, stories, about the erotic landscape set inside the Colorado Plateau. I can send them off to New England where there are lots of trees, where I don’t know anyone who will read them, and I can play, experiment with both the internal as well as external landscape. The assignment actually created the structure of the four pieces, hence “quartet.” “Desert” was the subject matter and also a subtext of “elements of love,” which was the initial title. I wanted to explore what it means to live and love in the world with a broken heart, what it means to live with a divided heart. I wanted to explore these questions through metaphor, the land, itself. The initial structure differed from the final version. The first essay was “Earth” and it used the first person narrative. The second piece was “Fire,” written through “she,” then came “Water” which was “he,” and finally “Air” written as “we.” I wanted to explore each one of these sensibilities beginning with the personal, moving through the feminine and masculine and then ending with the collective. That is how they were originally published at the *New England Review*. After I had gone through this year’s work, I showed the pieces to my editor at Pantheon. He read them and said, “Will you please do me a favor? As a gift to me, will you rewrite this in a first person narrative?” I said, “No, absolutely not, because the reader would believe I was the narrator.” The other pronouns were self-protection. I was also thinking about the issues of masculine and

feminine, singular and plural. He asked again. Finally I said, "I'll try it and yes, I'll send it to you for New Years."

When I started writing *Desert Quartet* in first person, the male configuration of the "water" section didn't work anymore. Something interesting happened. Writing it from the "I" perspective took me closer to the truth of the story which became a story about a woman with frogs. It became simpler and more complex, at once, certainly less literal. I was forced to go deeper, dive deeper into the water where the bloodwork of the writer occurs. I realized that in our culture we have no protection when we choose to enlist a first person narrator because readers naturally assume it is you. The criticism is that it is solipsistic, self centered, indulgent: all of those things that make me want to run and hide under a rock forever. But I believe there is something larger at work, the "I" becomes the universal "I." In Japan they call creative nonfiction the "I" novel and everyone reads it as fiction. There's always the speculation that it could be personal, but because readers call it fiction they allow the writer to save face. I think that is a very gracious way to read.

Jocelyn: And you said that it deepened the work to speak in the "I" voice?

Terry: Yes, I believe it did because I was forced to confront my own tensions, conflicts, passions, fears in a way that I didn't in the first published versions. I removed the masks and faced the elements themselves. It forced the language to be tighter—more restrained. I think the pieces then became more suggestive than literal. In that sense, ironically, it opened up the text to the subtleties of the desert itself. Often times we think when we use first person narrative, it closes the text, but I think once we have the courage to put "I" on the page we are free to work with the language and the ideas. Perhaps it is the difference between primary and secondary experience. I don't know.

Jocelyn: In writing *Desert Quartet* and its many drafts, you're not only expressing the land, the place, the self, and all our different personas, but also challenging the boundaries of genre. You write from—and for—so many communities: you're a scientist, a naturalist, you work in

a museum. It seems to me that for a long time the tradition of nature writing was very similar to the tradition of science (as I understand it, that is): the self observes the other. The self remains detached and objective. Instead of going out and being in the land, being *with* the land, they seem to be voyeurs. You were talking before about our narrow definition of erotics as voyeurism. . . . Have you come to writing as a scientist or do the two, writing and science, brew up together with you?

Terry: I think it's about passion, whether it's passion for birds or passion for the connectedness of things, the embodiment of landscape, even our own bodies; whole, no separation. I think my first relationship to the natural world is as an animal. That's how we respond until *we think* it gets bred out of us. One of the first images I have as a very small child was sitting with my mother and grandmother on the beach in California and feeling the waves circle around us, even the foam around my legs, my body's impression on the sand. The sand shifts as we shift. Being there with my mother and grandmother on either side was very female, very porous, very tactile. I think about that image in our own evolutionary nature.

Jocelyn: How did that way of being not get bred out of you?

Terry: Maybe it has, again, I don't know. I do, however, believe the culture I come from which is Mormon, is in many ways a magical religion. Magic has been part of the theology's evolution. I'm sure the Hierarchy would disagree with me on this, but our Church was founded by Joseph Smith, a fourteen year old who had a vision. We were taught as children that we could have visions too. Add to this notion my family's love affair with the land where most of our time together was spent outside, and I became a prolific daydreamer. To imagine over a landscape came quite naturally. The natural world was the spiritual world. There were many times when I'd pretend to be sick just so I could stay home and watch birds in our back yard. I knew that there was something there and I knew that my grandmother—you talk about guides, she was always there with the field guide in her hand, always there with binoculars—understood those yearnings. And so it was a spiritual ex-

perience being in nature, it was a safe experience because we were largely with family, it was an intellectual experience because we were learning the names of things, were learning what was related to what, and what we might see, and it was fun. It never stopped being fun for me, so it's a simple response. And it was most always in a context of love and respect for the land and for each other.

Mary: Do you ever feel any tension between your two identities—your scientific, naturalist self and your writerly self? Have you melded those two identities?

Terry: I can see my own evolution when I look at the books I've written. For example, the first book I wrote was *The Secret Language of Snow* with Ted Major, an ecologist who started the Teton Science School. That book is a dialogue between science and the perception of language. The book takes twelve Kobuk Eskimo words for snow—you know how we always hear there's a hundred words for snow?—and elucidates these words in terms of boreal ecology. For example, the word, "pukak" translates to mean "sugar snow" or "snow that can cause an avalanche." Skiers understand this snow as "depth hoar" or "snow that is created by a large temperature gradient." Another example is "Api" or "snow on the ground." "Siqoq" translates to "swirling snow." One word creates an environmental image. The keen perception of the Kobuk People have helped illuminate the winter for scientists who study snow. I wrote the poetry at the beginning of each chapter, Ted provided much of the information, then I worked with the text in terms of language. It was a real education, to see what bores, what excites. To see how language and a sense of lyricism can lighten the density of scientific facts so that the reader can move through them easily and with pleasure was a great apprenticeship. I also learned how difficult it is to write for children. It is a rigorous exercise in clarity and precision. Nothing can be taken for granted.

Then came *Between Cattails*, another book for children, which is a celebration of my childhood obsession with the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, dedicated to my grandmother, Mimi. It was the first place where I fell in love with birds. Again, I spent a year studying about marsh ecology since I wanted the text to be factually accurate. I also

wanted it to sing like the marsh sings, so it was another exercise in figuring how to braid these different voices—the scientific and the lyrical. The next book, *Pieces of White Shell*, explores Navajo mythology. It asks the question what stories do we tell that evoke a sense of place? I was starting to feel that somehow the stories science gives us aren't enough. I needed something more. In many ways the Navajo culture, the children in particular, sent me back to my own culture, Mormon. That's where a creative fusion really started to take place—in a crisis situation—my mother was dying, the bird refuge was flooding and I saw two stories—how could I bridge them together?

Jocelyn: Two stories that needed to be told?

Terry: The two stories that I was living, which in many ways were the two minds I was inhabiting. There were times when I thought I was completely schizophrenic, that I was living in two worlds. What pulls the scientific mind and literary minds together? Through the Navajo apprenticeship, I realized it was story, but I was looking at story from a distanced, exterior point of view. With *Refuge*, there was no distance whatsoever, and there were moments when I thought I was going mad. One particular moment is vivid: I had been to a family reunion, mother had been dead maybe six months and one of my great aunts said, "So what are you doing?" I said, "I'm trying to tell the story of the rise of Great Salt Lake and the death of my mother." She looked at me and walked away. I thought, Am I going crazy? Is there no correspondence here? I remember that night. I came home and got out a childhood easel that Mimi, my grandmother, had given me. It was the biggest paper I had, I found two black magic markers and with one hand wrote: "Bird Refuge," and with the other hand wrote, "Mother," then circled them, then wrote "Great Salt Lake," under Bird Refuge and "Cancer" under Mother. I realized that the only thing holding them together was the narrator, so I drew two lines and wrote "narrator" and circled it, stood back and realized I had created an image of the female reproductive system. At that point, I understood what I was really acknowledging—it wasn't the scientific mind or the poetic mind, but the feminine mind that I wanted to embrace. That was the language that I wanted to liberate. I had a visual map I could now trust.

Jocelyn: On other occasions, you've talked about Claudine Herrmann's *The Tongue Snatchers*. I think you once told me a story about speaking at a board meeting and having the book right in front of you, looking at the picture on the cover so you could continue to speak a woman's voice.

Terry: Yes. An extraordinary storyteller, Laura Simms, told me I had to read *The Tongue Snatchers*, so I found it at Strand's and read it on the train from New York to DC. I was on my way to the Governing Council meeting of The Wilderness Society, as male as you can imagine. I had it in my purse in the boardroom and I knew we were going to be discussing some difficult topics so I thought it might make things interesting to put it at the center of the table. I was sitting in the middle and I sort of inched the book up. On the cover is a woman screaming with her tongue being ripped out. I wish you could have seen some of the looks on the men's faces around the table. I'm not sure it made any difference in terms of how we talked about things, but it reminded me of a healthy form of indignation, that as women, we need to sit at any table mindful of what it means to be silent. Our silence is also our voice and our voice is also our silence. It depends on what a particular situation demands. On these occasions, we become shape shifters. Claudine Herrmann, Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector, and Chandralaka from India, these women give me tremendous courage.

Jocelyn: Did you start reading more works by those women after having read Herrmann's book?

Terry: Yes, many of the French writers have influenced me. I don't think you can read *Desert Quartet* without feeling their presence. I think we find our own evolution through the evolution of text.

Jocelyn: Having read French feminists, and thinking about their concept of writing through the body, do you consciously interrogate the category of nature writing? Is that something you are interested in doing? Do you read male nature writers and think they're way off somewhere else and you consciously want to move such writing into the body?

Terry: I'm not comfortable with the genre itself. I mean, what is nature writing? When I think about the writers I love: Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Melville—it goes beyond gender. They are writers whose language is the embodiment of the natural world, of those primal forces that create “the lightning region of the soul” on the page. To me that is so-called nature writing; but to many others, it wouldn't be classified as such. I'm interested in revolutionary language. I'm interested in revolutionary texts. In many ways I find writers such as the South African poet, Breyten Breytenbach, the Chinese poet, Bei Dao, and Federico Garcia Lorca asking the questions of our time rooted in both culture and place. I just finished Auden's *The Prolific and the Devourer*. He also addresses the tension between a poetics of place and a politics of place. I just reread Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. What a riveting piece of “nature writing.” The oscillations of human conversation mirror the waves themselves. The power of physical metaphors illuminate and magnify the psychological landscape. Again, no separation. To read Lispector's *Apprenticeship* or *The Hour of the Star*, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, or the French poet, Bonnefoy, is to read the world whole and holy. Jeannette Winterson and Carole Maso also inspire me because they find their own forms that honor the integrity of their voice. These are some of the places where I find my inspiration. There are writers within the genre of natural history that I do think are creating revolutionary books in revolutionary times, writers like Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, Charles Bowden, Anne Carson and Rick Bass. But I would not call them exclusively “nature writers” either.

Mary: In a review of your collection, *An Unspoken Hunger*, John Mitchell said that one of your major themes was that environmental action is a creation of women. I wondered if you thought that was accurate—that women act as intermediaries between the earth and human conduct.

Terry: Again, I think that's too easy; I don't feel comfortable with these kinds of labels. They narrow our scope, confine our imagination to think beyond boundaries and borders. Although I'm very interested in feminist language, and the feminine critique and eco-feminism as an intellectual exercise, I find that in many ways that kind of writing, like

so much of the writing coming out of the academy, is removed from the body. When I hear, yes, women are the caretakers of the earth, I think yes, in many ways we are but no, we cannot solely be seen in that nurturing role. It is limiting and ultimately unfair to both men and women. It is all very complicated. What is our biology and what is our conditioning?

Jocelyn: “Caretakers of the earth. . . .” Isn’t that just foisting things off again on women?

Terry: Of course. Susan Griffin writes brilliantly about this subject in her books, *Woman and Nature* and *Eros and Everyday Life*. As women, we are tied to the earth through the cycles of our own bodies, whether it is through menarche or giving birth. I do believe we tend to see the world in more holistic terms, the patterns and connections that weave humanity together. But why—is another matter. Is this an “essentialist” point of view? I can only speak out of my bias, which is female, but I must tell you, I am primarily interested in the human response. We each have to speak out of our own authenticity whatever that is. And I believe we do it most powerfully through story. Story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart. We feel it. We don’t have to argue over the semantics. Women and nature: It is also about politics. It is true that when we look at grass roots activists and activism, where good work has been done on behalf of the land in urban and rural landscapes, and in preservation of the wild, we most certainly see women on the front lines. Wangari Maathai in Kenya who organized the Greenbelt Movement, Lois Gibbs who exposed the Love Canal in upstate New York, and Rachel Carson, who had an extraordinary effect on how we view pesticides with her book, *Silent Spring*, the list could go on and on. And when you look at leadership positions in grassroots organizations, they are largely held by women. But that is not mirrored on the national level. There, we see a more corporate model adopted by environmental organizations such as The Wilderness Society, Audubon, National Wildlife Federation. Hopefully we will see the predominance of male leadership change. It doesn’t matter whether we are talking about literary genres or the concerns of women, we would do well to paint a wide landscape that does not constrict our thinking. This is the work of the imagination and imagination is always about possibilities.

Mary: I often think genre is more a matter of marketing than anything else. Your work resists easy categorization but your books seem to be put into arbitrary slots—nature writing, women’s issues, new age, western literature, to name a few. Does that bother you?

Terry: I don’t think about it. Perhaps that’s for others to think about, like those in publishing or in the realm of the academy. I stand back and smile, or I simply shrug my shoulders. That’s not where I live as a writer and it’s not what possesses me. What concerns me most are the questions. What stories we tell that evoke a sense of place, or how one finds refuge in change, or what it means to make love to the land with ultimate reciprocity. That’s what I’m interested in. I don’t think a writer can really concern herself with what the critique or categorization is or she becomes paralyzed.

I remember being at a symposium where academics were discussing my work. It was terrifying. A writer works from the inside out and on that level how can one have a critical point of view? On another level, a writer has lived with the writing and worked with it from all different angles and perspectives. One knows the secrets woven into each sentence, the alchemy inherent in craft. A male professor at the symposium gave an exhaustive discussion/critique of *Desert Quartet* explaining everything I had done and why, and then he turned to me and said, “Your response?” After a bit of silence, I said hesitantly, “With all due respect, nothing you say is familiar to me and no, that was not my intention.” As I began to explain what my process was, what my intention was, he turned to the audience largely made up of graduate students and said, “It’s so much easier when they’re dead.”

Or there’s the professor, bless his heart, who did his dissertation on not *Refuge* per se, but the cover of *Refuge*. He said it was so obvious to him that I had created this erotic image on the cover of the paperback, so that when turned horizontally, one would clearly see the female sex organs—the vulva, labia and clitoris—and that this was the exterior of the body politic. I was speechless.

Jocelyn: It seems to me that your journey as a writer has been blessedly outside of the academy, more so than many writers’ journeys. I say blessedly because I have mixed feelings about working inside of that

community and that's why I'm very interested in your path as a writer. It seems so internal—you're asking questions that genuinely interest you and so often you're collaborating so that it's not just your own internal question, but something of a community question or a question you're asking with somebody else.

Terry: If we say we are an organism, we are an animal and if we are a good mammal, then somehow, we are perceiving on some level what other members of our species or family or community are thinking and feeling, so that our individual impulses in many ways become collective impulses. Recognizing that the most personal of feelings may in fact, be most general, enables us as writers to take greater risks. That's why I love collaboration because in a way one plus one equals three, that creative third. It's not a consensus, but a communal response, and therefore may be closer to the truth, whatever "truth" might be. I don't see collaboration as a compromise, rather a widening of the artistic circle.

Jocelyn: It's interesting how collaboration transforms your work in *Desert Quartet* which is the only work of yours that I've seen in print separately and then transformed as you were talking about earlier with Mary, and revised, yes, but also—what seems like it would be a simple matter—placed beside paintings. The writing seems to become another genre. It's as if the two of you are collaborating and also your work is collaborating.

Terry: Collaborating with Mary Frank on *Desert Quartet* was an exciting process and an exhaustive one. . . . There were exterior tensions because we were both artists and had our own visions and yet we both knew that we were committed to this "third thing." It's like a marriage or a relationship, it's the relationship that you're in the service of—in our case it was the exploration of the erotic landscape. We went through eighty-some journals of Mary's drawings. It was fascinating to see her visual mind. I have so much respect for the intensity of her work, her life. She is fearless. When she read the text, she had some very difficult questions for me that I didn't want to answer and she would not proceed as a collaborator until I had dealt with them.

Jocelyn: Can you give an example?

Terry: I could give several but I would like to keep them private. What I can tell you is that her wisdom, her honesty inspired me, pushed me, in ways I might not have chosen to go alone. She is sixty-two years old. I'm forty years old. She has lived a vastly different life than I have and yet both of us share so much of the world, similar sensibilities and aesthetics. She absolutely demanded that I go back into the text and either be more explicit or remove certain passages. She really made me look at my deepest fears. I think I stretched her in other ways, physically, pushing her to create a book where nothing is random. We worked very hard to try and make the book as seamless as possible. If we choose to use a turkey vulture on the page then those fingers near the fingers of flames matter even though someone might say what in the world does a turkey vulture have to do with fire and passion. But when the narrator is saying, "once again I allow myself to be ravished," here is that image. Or the notion of the bat hanging down or the woman who is literally touching herself—"a fast finger that does not tire," both what a woman experiences in loving her own body, and what the rhythm of the river provides that is beyond any human comprehension in terms of movement. Not only were we translating personal ideas to collaborative ideas, but we also had to translate them to a commercial realm where we were working with a publisher, an editor, and a designer, asking for a certain size, for a certain type of paper, for a certain fluidity on the pages, even color—making a book enlists a sense of trust and community and belief that what you are all creating is an object of beauty.

Mary: Perhaps in one sense all your work is collaborative. You have a relationship with landscape that seems collaborative, certainly reciprocal. As far back as your first book, *Pieces of White Shell*, you collaborated with the Navajo culture in some way, exploring those stories and myths, yet making them your own, making them speak in a larger context.

Terry: The children were my teachers. The great hubris of that book was that in the beginning, I thought I was going to create an environmental education curriculum for Navajo children. I was on the Reser-

vation all of thirty seconds before I said, No, I don't think so, and threw the curriculum out the window. Finally, in desperation as the children and I sat in the classroom, I took out a pouch I had attached to my belt and started passing around the various contents: rocks, sand, sage, a bouquet of feathers bound by yarn, deer skin. Each one of the objects became an ember, a story that ignited the children's imaginations and allowed them to speak. They were sharing their stories and in the process I was able to find my own. Somewhere in that cultural exchange we met on the shared grounds of our humanity, the trust once again, of our own relations.

Mary: There seems to be a kinship between Navajo storytelling and the Mormonism you describe—that kind of willingness to believe in the unbelievable. It was as if you had to travel to the Four Corners in the American Southwest in order to look at your own culture.

Terry: Yes, it is true, the Navajo culture sent me back home to my own. There are similarities, a strong family structure reinforced through generational storytelling, a keen belief in the power of healing, but there are also marked differences. I had to come to terms with the fact that in Mormon culture, or any Christian religion for that matter, we are taught that human beings have dominion over the land. This is one of the things that has led to my own estrangement from orthodoxy. Most Indigenous People do not view their relationship toward the earth this way. They see themselves as a part of nature with a sense of kinship extended to all forms of life. These differences in philosophy loom large in our actions toward nature and how we view ourselves as human beings.

As we approach the twenty-first century, I think another hubris we carry is that we think we are beyond landscape. For example, when nature writing is discussed, it's often viewed as soft or sentimental. We continue to see landscape or our relationship to nature as optional. The criticism of environmental writing—that it's not mindful of class, that it's an extravagance—is a critique of our own minds in terms of how we view our relationship to landscape. To speak about nature is to ultimately address issues of health, justice, and sovereignty. Nature writing in the pure sense is not cynical. It can be a literature of hope and

faith and how we might move within our communities to heal our severed relations. When we look at postmodern fiction, so much of it is deeply cynical. Here are two trends in American literature on absolutely divergent paths.

Jocelyn: Maybe that's why students are sometimes resentful at first when we talk about going out into the land to write what they see.

Terry: I know I encountered this type of reaction in the beginning from the students here in the nonfiction program at The University of Iowa. But as they ventured out into the wetlands and walked along the river, I watched their minds open. Before too long, they were pouring over field guides and developing their own sense of biological literacy. The students found that by heightening their awareness to the natural world, something was sparked in their writing, as well. This is not to say that writing about landscape is an epiphany around every corner. That kind of writing drives me crazy. But to see landscape as a complex set of principles, metaphors, and social considerations that are germane to this point in time. I think about Octavio Paz when he says that if we're interested in a revolution, an evolution of the spirit, it requires both love and criticism, that it is a writer's obligation to critique his or her own society or community. By the same token, how do we continue to keep our sense of compassion whole so that we don't become solipsistic, so that we don't become nihilistic and contribute not only to the passing of all other species, but even our own soul?

Jocelyn: In *Desert Quartet*, did you and Mary Frank both go out into the same landscape?

Terry: No, Mary had been out west during the course of our collaboration. She and her husband traveled to Arizona and the Four Corners region. She knew the country I was writing about from her own point of view. Curiously enough, right after I had finished writing *Desert Quartet*, I became involved with fellow citizens in a massive campaign to stop a dreadful wilderness bill, HR 1475 and S 884, the Utah Public Land Management Act of 1995. This was a curious juxtaposition in my own life. On one hand, I was completely immersed in the idea of Eros and nature, writing out of the body, wanting in some way to respond to

the beauty of these sacred lands of the Colorado Plateau through language. And then on the other hand, I was asking, What can we do to stop this legislation? As a writer how can I be of use? So much of my writing of the last two years has been of a political nature whether it was writing a letter to Congress or an essay for *Audubon* magazine simply outlining the issues. I think each of us takes our turn within community and my number came up on this one. So, on one hand I was revising the essay of “Water” and on the other hand, literally, I was writing an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* regarding Utah wilderness. These are the kinds of confluences we experience as writers and yet they were both the same thing—a love of land. A response to home.

Jocelyn: Do you speak in different voices? One would seem very politically focused, the op-ed voice. I heard you on National Public Radio on that same issue where you were speaking to the reporter as you walked on the land. And then the writing in *Desert Quartet* is so poetic, it’s like a series of prose poems. Does that feel like the same voice to you when you move from community to community and setting to setting?

Terry: It’s complicated, and as always, nothing is as it appears. It would be easy to say that the political voice is found in *The New York Times* op-ed piece, and that the poetic voice lives inside *Desert Quartet*, but I actually think that *Desert Quartet* is a far more political piece of writing. I remember talking to a librarian friend of mine about texts, and I started to read to her *The New York Times* op-ed piece because I wanted her opinion about something and I couldn’t even get through it, the language bored me so. Because I was trying to explain to her what we were engaged in regarding Utah’s wildlands, I ended up sharing with her the story from *Desert Quartet* about the frogs. That was where the motion was, the emotion. The irony lies in the fact that more people would have read *The New York Times* piece than will ever read *Desert Quartet*. So, again, I think it’s about shape shifting, about assessing what the occasion demands. How can we as writers serve the culture in a long term sense and in a short term sense? I had felt that my family was under siege; I responded. It’s immediate. One is held accountable. It was the only weapon I had against my senators Orrin Hatch, Bob

Bennett and my representatives Jim Hanson and Enid Greene Waldholz, among them. Would they understand *Desert Quartet*?

Mary: In your collection, *An Unspoken Hunger*, there's an essay in which you take newspaper clippings about the Gulf War and insert them into the narrative about going to a nuclear testing protest with your uncle, the ex-state senator with the guns in his car. What made that essay so effective was that by putting those disparate statements from our culture together, you made another sort of collaboration, a whole new piece in which the sum is greater than the parts.

Terry: We live in an era with so many variables. Maybe everyone thinks that the time they live in is heightened, but I do believe we face unique circumstances, if nothing else, the dwindling of the earth's resources and an increasing population should bring us to our knees. There are huge disparities all around us. Take today for example; we're in a car, with jets overhead and an Amish carriage on our right. We visit an antique store delicately looking at quilts that are hand stitched and find ourselves practically in tears as we see our childhood before us, whether it's fiesta glass or tinker toys. On the other hand, there's fast food down the street, we are pressed for time, there will be a dozen e-mail messages to respond to when we get back to the university. Talk about a crazy quilt—who can make sense of this? All we can do as writers, as human beings, is pull the pieces together and see what pattern emerges.

Mary: I was reading that at the turn of the century, as society became more urban and industrial, there was simultaneously a great nostalgia for a sort of romanticized English countryside version of landscape. It struck me that the more things change, the more things stay the same. There must be something missing in our relationship with landscape that makes us keep repeating these patterns of environmental destruction and nostalgia for what we're destroying.

Terry: I think we are in a transitional time and perhaps this is heightened by the approaching millennium, which is largely symbolic if nothing else. I've been thinking about that, about this business of millennialism—what happened in the 16th to 17th century, from the Middle Ages to

the Renaissance. What's happening now. It's interesting that John Cobb, a theological historian at Carleton College, says that at the turn of the century the world was being focused through the lens of Nationalism. And that Nationalism played itself out in the most horrific way with World War II, with Nazi Germany and Hiroshima. We saw that Nationalism was no longer useful, and that the only thing that could take us out of Nationalism into the next era was Economism, the big build up. Now we are seeing the same pattern again; Economism is no longer useful. Cobb says that often one moves from one era to the next through great pain. He mentions the Holocaust as an example and wonders what type of holocaust will move us out of Economism. I know that's a very sensitive word, but I feel we're already seeing it in the form of environmental degradation. Our own forests, our deserts, our waters, whole species disappearing at a tremendous rate—where will that take us? Cobb thinks it will deliver us to Earthism—a sense of an extended community that includes all life forms—plants, animals, rocks, rivers and human beings, and that we will be forced, if we are to survive, to live more cooperatively, on a much smaller scale in terms of sustainability. I think that's a very idyllic point of view, but an evocative one. I would like to believe him. As we discussed earlier, we are living in an unprecedented time because of diminished resources and the terrifying pressures of population that we have never seen before.

Mary: Well some of us are, but some of us just don't seem to get it.

Terry: I think that comes back to our obsession with our own species. That we aren't willing to extend our compassion outwardly, whether it's a Judeo-Christian ethic or whether it's an American ethic who can say, but we are deeply, deeply solipsistic.

Jocelyn: There's such a resistance to the idea that we're animals, and I love that in *Desert Quartet* you write the animal body. You're in your animal body.

Terry: Mary Oliver writes, "There's really only one question: How to love this world?" I love that. Perhaps the second question is the one asked by Breyten Breytenbach, "The real revolutionary question is: What about the other?" I think in this next century we are going to be

forced to think about the Other in much more compassionate and meaningful ways, practical ways. And not out of altruistic impulses, but for our own survival. Could we even say “for the love of God?” Perhaps it is no longer in our evolutionary interest to think in terms of the survival of the fittest, but rather, the survival of compassion.

Jocelyn: And you see that happening more through writing, through being in the land and breaking down that boundary of separateness.

Terry: That’s certainly the impulse that I write out of. What would it mean now to write sustainable prose?

Mary: What is sustainable prose?

Terry: I honestly don’t know, I am simply asking the question. If that’s where we’re moving as a species, if that’s what we need to start thinking about—how to live in sustainable communities, how to create sustainable economies that don’t exploit the land and the people but rather extend our compassion and imagination to foster new cooperative solutions, then wouldn’t that be an interesting structure to overlay narrative? We are really talking about the need for new stories in our culture, stories that allow us to reconsider our lives.

Mary: You often write about the importance of story—certainly for us as individuals, but also for communities. I find that really interesting to think about—how cultures are shaped by the stories that are told. For example, the American story of expansion and exploitation. Maybe it’s time to change the stories we’re telling.

Terry: Exactly. Maybe that is one of the impulses we are seeing in memoir—the old stories don’t work for us anymore and we’re desperately trying to find the stories within the truth of our own lives. Maybe that is also the impulse driving creative nonfiction right now, life today is so surreal, fiction no longer serves us or satisfies us in the same way. Or maybe it is as it has always been. We are simply hungry for good stories, fiction or nonfiction. Story is the umbilical cord between the past, present and future; it keeps things known. Story becomes the conscience of the community, it belongs to everyone. When we think about what it means to be human, it is always answered or explained

through story.

Mary: And you've said that the most personal stories are the most universal in the way they reach beyond themselves to illustrate larger truths.

Terry: There was an article in *The New York Times Magazine* about the growing trend of changing one's religion. Catholics become Muslims, Muslims become Buddhists and Buddhists become Christians. Religion has always been one of the most powerful stories within our own families, passed on from generation to generation. If we are letting go of that story then it makes sense we have to create another. What will it be? I don't think we know yet. So in that sense, maybe all of our texts are experimental right now because we've lost our universal symbolic language. I was interested in reading a Davenport-Hines biography on W. H. Auden. One of the reasons Auden returned to Christianity was because of the symbolic language. There was a common point of communion in which he could write to his perceived audience. I think it could be argued that today there is no overriding symbolic language that holds us together, but I do think the diversity of expression and ideas we are seeing right now is and will be ultimately positive.

Jocelyn: Is this the importance, do you think, of collaboration? Because, as you are talking about the importance of stories, I find myself thinking back to Milan Kundera, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, I think, who writes of ostriches crowding in and appearing to mouth words, and it's a moment when a character sees that all the people tell their own stories just to tell them—nobody listens to the others' stories. In collaboration, you're telling your story with another artist and listening. As you pointed out before, the two stories create a third story. So, it isn't just telling, it's hearing as well.

Terry: One of the things we continue to learn from Native Peoples is that stories are our medicine bundles. I feel that way about our poems, our essays, our fictions. That it is the artist who carries the burden of the storyteller. Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter to a friend, "Life is a spell so exquisite, everything conspires to break it." How can we not respond? Terrence Des Pres speaks of "a prose of witness" that relies on

the imagination to arrive at the heart of the matter. I believe this is our task as writers to respond to the world as we see it, feel it, and dare to ask the questions that will not allow us to sleep. Imagination. Attention to details. Making the connections. “Art—right words to station the mind and hold the heart ready.”

Jocelyn: What are you working on now?

Terry: At this particular moment, nothing and it feels delicious. It is time for me to go underground and listen.

Mary: But you wrote a new piece this very week!

Terry: I did, but that comes out of the dailiness of life. The students here inspired me. I saw them taking such risks and working so hard on their essays. I wanted to work alongside them. We carry stories with us. Don't you think? And there has been this particular story that has been possessing me. It's about my family's construction business that was shut down for eighteen months due to federal regulations regarding the desert tortoise. This was the same tortoise my husband and I were working to protect as an endangered species in St. George, Utah. I was thinking how we are all endangered species. My father, an endangered species. My father whom I will list as a threatened species, threatened by his emotional nature, threatened by my emotional nature. These are sentence fragments that have inhabited my mind. I think we're always holding on to sentences until they finally surface. To write an essay takes time, weeks, months, even years, as the various strands weave themselves together and then suddenly, you begin to see it as a full-bodied piece that demands to be brought to the page. To write an essay is to be in the service of an idea. But in terms of a project that will consume me as *Refuge* did, as *Desert Quartet* did, I don't know what that will be. I need to stay home, be still. I trust the silence and the questions that will move me into the next mysterious terrain. As I said, it's time to listen and go underground to hear what the roots are saying.