

Also by Terry Tempest Williams

Pieces of White Shell

Earthly Messengers

Coyote's Canyon

Refuge

An Unspoken Hunger

Desert Quartet

Leap

RED

PASSION AND PATIENCE IN THE DESERT

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PANTHEON BOOKS • NEW YORK

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LABOR

*Life comes, life goes, we make life . . .
But we who live in the body see with
the body's imagination things in
outline.*

—Virginia Woolf,
The Waves

I forget the first time I saw this boulder, maybe thirty years ago as an adolescent traveling through Utah's red-rock desert with my family. Or maybe it was twenty-five years ago, as a young bride making a pilgrimage to this part of the world with my new husband, not only in love with him but also with this arid landscape that ignites the imagination.

Today, I return once again to the Birthing Rock.

I return because it is a stone slate of reflection, a place where stories are told and remembered. Call it my private oracle where I hear the truth of my own heart.

Yes, the actions of life are recorded, here, now, through the hands of the Anasazi, the "ancient ones," who inhabited the Colorado Plateau from A.D. 500 to 1200. Their

spirits have never left. One feels their intelligence held in the rocks, etched into the rocks. This rock stands in Kane Creek Canyon, the size of a small dwelling, exposed and vulnerable, only a few miles from the town of Moab, Utah.

There she is, as she has been for hundreds of years, the One Who Gives Birth, a woman standing with her arms outstretched, her legs wide open, with a globelike form emerging. Four sets of tiny feet march up the boulder alongside her. There are other figures nearby: a large ceremonial being wearing what appears to be an elaborate headdress and necklace. It feels male but it could be female. Who knows what these Anasazi petroglyphs might mean? What is translated through stone is the power of presence, even centuries old.

Deer. Mountain sheep. Centipedes. A horned figure with a shield. More footprints. And around the corner of the boulder, two triangular figures, broad shoulders with the points down, made stable by feet. From their heads, a spine runs down the center. They are joined together through a shared shoulder line that resembles the arms of a cross. A slight tension is felt between them as each pulls the other, creating the strength of scales balanced. Next to them is another figure, unattached. A long snake with nine bends in its river body is close to making contact. All this on the slate of blue sandstone that has been varnished through time; when carved it bleeds red.

Piñon. Juniper. Saltbush. Rabbitbrush. The plant world

bears witness to the human one as they surround the Birthing Rock. They are rooted in pink sands when dry, russet when wet. It is a theater-in-the-round choreographed on Navajo sandstone, reminding us of dunes that once swirled and swayed with the wind in another geologic time.

There is much to absorb and be absorbed by in this sky-biting country. At times, it is disorienting, the Earth split open, rocks standing on their heads, entire valleys appearing as gaping wounds. This is the power and pull of erosion, the detachment and movement of particles of land by wind, water, and ice. A windstorm in the desert is as vicious as any force on Earth, creating sand smoke so thick when swirling it is easy to believe in vanishing worlds. The wind and fury subside. A calm is returned but not without a complete rearrangement of form. Sand travels. Rocks shift. The sculpting of sandstone reveals the character of windgate cliffs, sheered redrock walls polished to a sheen over time.

My husband is climbing the talus slope above me. I hear a rock fall and call to him. His voice returns as an echo.

In repetition, there is comfort and reassurance.

I return my attention to the Birthing Rock, this panel of petroglyphs that binds us to a deep history of habitation in place, this portal of possibilities, a woman giving birth, a

symbol of continuity, past generations now viewed by future ones.

As a woman of forty-four years, I will not bear children. My husband and I will not be parents. We have chosen to define family in another way.

I look across the sweep of slickrock stretching in all directions, the rise and fall of such arid terrain. A jackrabbit bolts down the wash. Piñon jays flock and bank behind a cluster of junipers. The tracks of coyote are everywhere.

Would you believe me when I tell you this is family, kinship with the desert, the breadth of my relations coursing through a wider community, the shock of recognition with each scarlet gilia, the smell of rain.

And this is enough for me, more than enough. I trace my genealogy back to the land. Human and wild, I can see myself whole, not isolated but integrated in time and place. Our genetic makeup is not so different from the collared lizard, the canyon wren now calling, or the great horned owl who watches from the cottonwood near the creek. Mountain lion is as mysterious a creature as any soul I know. Is not the tissue of family always a movement between harmony and distance?

Perhaps this is what dwells in the heart of our nation—choice—to choose creation of a different sort, the freedom to choose what we want our lives to be, the freedom to choose what heart line to follow.

My husband and I live in this redrock desert, this “land

of little rain" that Mary Austin described at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is still a dry pocket on the planet one hundred years later. Not much has changed regarding the aridity and austerity of the region.

What has changed is the number of needs and desires that we ask the earth to support. There are places where the desert feels trampled, native vegetation scraped and cut at their roots by the blades of bulldozers, aquifers of water receding before the tide of luxury resorts and homes.

And the weight of our species will only continue to tip the scales.

The wide-open vistas that sustain our souls, the depth of silence that pushes us toward sanity, return us to a kind of equilibrium. We stand steady on Earth. The external space I see is the internal space I feel.

But I know this is the exception, even an illusion, in the American West, as I stand in Kane Creek where my eyes can follow the flight of a raven until the horizon curves down. These remnants of the wild, biologically intact, are precious few. We are losing ground. No matter how much we choose to preserve the pristine through our passion, photography, or politics, we cannot forget the simple truth: There are too many of us.

Let me tease another word from the heart of a nation: sacrifice. Not to bear children may be its own form of sacrifice. How do I explain my love of children, yet our decision not to give birth to a child? Perhaps it is about

sharing. I recall watching my niece, Diane, nine years old, on her stomach, eye to eye with a lizard; neither moved while contemplating the other. In the sweetness of that moment, I felt the curvature of my heart become the curvature of Earth, the circle of family complete. Diane bears the name of my mother and wears my DNA as closely as my daughter would.

Must the act of birth be seen only as a replacement for ourselves? Can we not also conceive of birth as an act of the imagination, giving body to a new way of seeing? Do children need to be our own to be loved as our own?

Perhaps it is time to give birth to a new idea, many new ideas.

Perhaps it is time to give birth to new institutions, to overhaul our religious, political, legal, and educational systems that are no longer working for us.

Perhaps it is time to adopt a much needed code of ethics, one that will exchange the sacred rights of humans for the rights of all beings on the planet.

We can begin to live differently.

We have choices before us, conscious choices, choices of conscience and consequence, not in the name of political correctness, but ecological responsibility and opportunity.

We can give birth to creation.

To labor in the name of social change. To bear down

and push against the constraints of our own self-imposed structures. To sacrifice in the name of an ecological imperative. To be broken open to a new way of being.



It begins to rain softly in the desert; the sand is yielding, the road is shining, and I know downriver a flash flood is likely, creating another landscape through erosion, newly shaped, formed, and sculpted.

I wonder when this catastrophic force will reach me?

Erosion. Perhaps this is what we need, an erosion of all we have held secure. A rupture of all we believed sacred, sacrosanct. A psychic scouring of our extended ideals such as individual property rights in the name of economic gain at the expense of ecological health.

I wonder when . . .

The wall of water hits. Waves turn me upside down and sideways as I am carried downriver, tumbling in the current, dizzy in the current, dark underwater, holding my breath, holding my breath. I cannot see but believe I will surface, believe I will surface, holding my breath. The muscle of the river is pushing me down, deeper and deeper, darker and darker. I cannot breathe, I am dying under the pressure, the pressure creates change, a change of heart. The river changes its heart and pushes me upward with the force of a geyser. I surface, I breathe. I am

back in the current, moving with the current, floating in the current, face up, on my back. There are others around me, our silt-covered bodies navigating downriver, feet pointing downriver. We are part of the river, in boats of our own skin, finally, now our skin shining, our nerve returning, our will is burning. We are on fire, even in water, after tumbling and mumbling inside a society where wealth determines if we are heard, what options we have, what power we hold.

How can I get my bearings inside this river?

Erosion. I look up. Canyon walls crack and break from the mother rock, slide into the river, now red with the desert. I am red with the desert. My body churns in the current, and I pray the log jam ahead will not reduce me to another piece of driftwood caught in the dam of accumulation.

Who has the strength to see this wave of destruction as a wave of renewal?

I find myself swimming toward an eddy in the river, slower water, warmer water. We are whirling, twirling in a community of currents. I reach for a willow secure on the shore; it stops me from spinning. My eyes steady. The land is steady. In the pause of this moment, I pull myself out. Collapse. Rise.

Now on shore like a freshly born human, upright, I brush my body dry, and turn to see that I am once again

standing in front of the Birthing Rock, my Rock of Instruction, that I have sought through my life, defied in my life, even against the will of my own biology.

No, I have never created a child, but I have created a life. I see now, we can give birth to ourselves, not an indulgence but another form of survival.

We can navigate ourselves out of the current.

We can pull ourselves out of the river.

We can witness the power of erosion as a re-creation of the world we live in and stand upright in the truth of our own decisions.

We can begin to live differently.

We can give birth to deep change, creating a commitment of compassion toward all living things. Our human-centered point of view can evolve into an Earth-centered one.

Is this too much to dream? Who imposes restraint on our imagination?



I look at the rock again, walk around to its other side, the side that is hidden from the road I experienced as a river. The panel has been shot away, nicked by bullets, scraped and chipped to oblivion.

Six small figures have survived the shooting rampage. I bend down and look more closely at the deliberate nature of these petroglyphs.

Someone cared enough to create life on a rock face, to animate an inanimate object. Someone believed she had the power to communicate a larger vision to those who would read these marks on stone, a vision that would endure through time.

I see a spiral and what appears to be a figure dancing, her arms raised, her back arched, her head held high.

We can dance; even in this erosional landscape, we can dance.

I have come full circle around the boulder.

There she is, the One Who Gives Birth. Something can pass through stone. I place one hand on her belly and the other on mine. Desert Mothers, all of us, pregnant with possibilities, in the service of life, domestic and wild; it is our freedom to choose how we wish to live, labor, and sacrifice in the name of love.