



THE HOUR OF LAND

*A Personal Topography
of America's National Parks*



TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

Sarah Crichton Books Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York

Sarah Crichton Books
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

Copyright © 2016 by Terry Tempest Williams
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2016

The chapters "Gates of the Arctic National Park, Alaska" and "Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida and Mississippi" originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *Orion Magazine*, September/October 2014 and November/December 2010, respectively.

Owing to limitations of space, all acknowledgments for permissions to reprint previously published material can be found on page 397.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Williams, Terry Tempest.

Title: The hour of land : a personal topography of America's national parks / Terry Tempest Williams.

Description: New York : Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015042477 | ISBN 9780374280093 (hardback) | ISBN 9780374712266 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: National parks and reserves—United States. | National parks and reserves—United States—Pictorial works. | National parks and reserves—Social aspects—United States. | Landscapes—Social aspects—United States. | Williams, Terry Tempest—Travel—United States. | Natural history—United States. | Human ecology—United States—Philosophy. | United States—Environmental conditions. | BISAC: NATURE / Essays. | TRAVEL / Parks & Campgrounds. | TRAVEL / United States / General.

Classification: LCC E160 .W54 2016 | DDC 333.780973—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015042477>

Designed by Abby Kagan

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

www.fsgbooks.com
www.twitter.com/fsgbooks • www.facebook.com/fsgbooks

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Frontispiece: *Clearing Storm and Cathedral Group*, photograph © 2001 Edward A. Riddell

For
Steven Barclay

GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE, FLORIDA AND

MISSISSIPPI:

what more shall we do to others. To otherness 221

CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK, UTAH:

We are in some strange wind says the wind 253

ALCATRAZ ISLAND, GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATION

AREA, CALIFORNIA:

the bodies are all gone from it, the purchases have been made 301

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA:

it is so extreme this taking-the-place-of, this standing-in-for,

this disappearing of all the witnesses— 331

CÉSAR E. CHÁVEZ NATIONAL MONUMENT, CALIFORNIA, AND

THE FUTURE:

I say to myself keep on—it will not be the end—not yet— 349

THE GALLERY 369

SOURCES 375

AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS 385

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 391

AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS



By definition



IN BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK, the Rio Grande is so low because of drought, locals are calling it the Rio Sand. The river that separates the United States and Mexico is shallow enough in some places that a person can walk across the river in ten steps, maybe less. American children skip stones across its surface—one, two . . . the third skip lands abruptly on the other side. The same stones are picked up by Mexican children who skip them back across to the other bank in Boquillas Canyon. The game continues back and forth until parents intervene. On one side of the Rio Grande, tourists stand. On the other side, men and boys are herding goats. Breach the border and you will be arrested, American or Mexican, it doesn't matter. Border police could be anywhere. Black phoebes fly across the river, occasionally touching water like the stones skipped across international lines. In the twenty-first century, borders are fluid, not fixed, especially in our national parks.

Earlier in the day, I met a veteran from Desert Storm, the first Gulf War. His name was Bill Summers. Bill was a tall man with hair cut short; lean and muscular, rugged-looking in his camouflage fatigues—the kind of handsome that can't be brought down by a few missing teeth. I had noticed him picking

up trash along the Ross-Maxwell Scenic Drive; his backpack, with his sleeping bag and bedroll, was propped against the hillside by the side of the road.

We ran into each other at the Panther Junction Visitor Center on the interpretive trail. "Purple-tinged prickly pear—now there's a mouthful," he said.

"Yes, it is," I said, "especially, if you try to say it fast."

We began talking about cactus, how well adapted they are to drought conditions and arid country.

"I've been a volunteer in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park," he said. "The plants around the craters are also skilled at surviving harsh conditions." A brown shirt with the Hawaiian park's insignia was neatly tucked into his fatigues.

"How long did you volunteer there?"

"Three years."

"And you're here now?"

"Hoping to be. Just turned in my application today, ma'am."

"Does it look like they'll hire you?"

"It's lookin' that way."

"Why Big Bend?"

"The desert suits me, ma'am. Not a lot of people around here."

We moved to the next plant—cholla.

"The Devil's Stick," I said.

"That could do some serious harm to a man's leg," Bill replied.

"How long have you been volunteering in the national parks?"

"Since I returned home from Iraq in 1991. Served some time in the Grand Canyon; I've been all over. Our national parks are the most important thing we've got going in this country," Bill said. "As the human population increases, the wild places not only become more valuable but more threatened. It's another way for me to protect our homeland, ma'am."

Bill Summers reminded me of my friend Doug Peacock, a vet from the Vietnam War. Doug and I met on a trail in Glacier National Park in 1982 and

shared a similar conversation. Doug served two tours as a medic in the Army Special Forces, a Green Beret. A decade later, he would describe in his memoir, *Grizzly Years: In Search of the American Wilderness*, how a topographical map of Yellowstone National Park kept him half-sane in an insane war. Every night, he'd pull out the map and run his fingers over familiar country, transporting himself out of the jungle and into the mountains. He left Vietnam on the first day of the Tet Offensive, January 30, 1968.

Peacock returned home with wounds no one could see, and he disappeared into Yellowstone. Then he took a job as a volunteer on a fire lookout in Glacier National Park, where he not only watched for smoke, he watched for grizzly bears, and when he found them, he passed whole days in their presence. He didn't fear them, he was in awe of them. As he came to know individual bears, his heart slowly began to open to the beauty of the world. The grizzlies returned him to a life he could believe in. As payback, Doug Peacock would become one of the grizzly bears' fiercest advocates.

"Where are you from?" Bill asked.

"Utah."

"Now, there's a place to live."

"We live near Arches and Canyonlands."

Bill nodded. "Gorgeous parks. Been there."

"So, Bill, when you're a volunteer in a park, what do you do exactly?"

"Anything that's needed, ma'am, everything from backcountry rangering to trail maintenance to assisting people in trouble. You name it, I've done it, and believe me, with the Park Service hurting for funds, there's a lot to be done."

The conversation shifted to Big Bend.

"Have you been to the border of Boquillas near Rio Grande Village?" I asked.

"Not yet."

I told him about the kids skipping stones across the border.

"I read today that Congress is trying to introduce legislation to build a wall along the entire U.S.-Mexican border," he said.

"Can you imagine a wall in Big Bend?"

"Personally, I don't think much of fences, ma'am, and that goes for walls, too."

He bent down and rubbed his fingers across the small waxy leaves of the next plant. "Have you smelled creosote?" he asked. "Mighty fine scent."

"Last night, after the rain, the air was fresh with it."

"People don't come to places like these to see a damn wall." Bill shifted his weight and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I think there needs to be more emphasis on taking care of what's here, not what's over there."

Our conversation grew more personal. He asked whether I had ever worked for the Park Service. I told him that I, too, had been a volunteer in the parks—Grand Teton National Park, in 1974. I was a year out of high school. I took early-morning bird walks down by Blacktail Ponds along the Snake River, but I kept seeing birds that had never before been reported in Grand Teton, so the park officials grew suspicious of me.

"I only lasted a season," I said.

Summers laughed.

"In fact, one of the birds in question was an acorn woodpecker. I saw one today in the Chisos Basin and it was like seeing an old friend."

Bill told me he grew up on a farm in central Florida. "Course any farm boy's itchin' to leave, so I joined the military, enlisted in the army and took advantage of what they could give me. Then Iraq blew up and I went over. Came home pretty messed up. Paddled around the swamps in South Carolina to clear my head. There was a lot going on with me, wild places can unwind a mind. You calm down a bit. I found my way to the national parks. It was a free place to live without being bothered. And then, I learned about

volunteering. The Park Service gives you a place to live and enough money for food and incidentals. That was more than enough for me."

"I have a friend who served in Vietnam and worked in Glacier National Park—grizzly bears saved his life . . ."

"That wouldn't be Doug Peacock, would it, ma'am?"

"You know him?" I asked.

"Doug Peacock's my hero. George Washington Hayduke." Peacock served as the model for the character of Hayduke in Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Bill turned around. "I love that book. Love Ed Abbey. They've been a real source of inspiration for me."

Bill Summers's eyes steadied for the first time. "You see, ma'am, I guess it's a small world out here in the big open for us veterans. Tell Mr. Peacock hello for me next time you see him." He paused. "And tell him, thank you."

America's national parks were a vision seen through the horrors of war.

On June 30, 1864, not long after the Civil War's most deadly battle, at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Land Grant into law, protecting for the first time—for all time—land secured for the future. Yosemite Valley and the ancient, giant sequoias of the Mariposa Grove located there were written into law as America's inaugural nature preserve ceded to the state of California, later to be expanded and established as a national park in 1890. Though this war-weary president would never see the glory of El Capitan or the beauty of its reflection in the Merced River, he had experienced them through the images of photographers—Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan, and Eadweard Muybridge. These magnificent lands were alive in Lincoln's imagination and he believed they might offer a unifying peace for a divided nation.

The irony was this: Fourteen years prior to the signing of the Yosemite

Land Grant, another war had been fought here—the Mariposa Indian War, from 1850 to 1851.

It is a chapter buried in America's history. In the midst of the California Gold Rush, the Mariposa Battalion, a volunteer militia company under the banner of California, had gone to battle against the Ahwahneechee Indians who lived in the Yosemite Valley. The Ahwahneechees resisted the invasion but were eventually defeated. In an act the military leadership deemed respectful, they named the lake where the war was fought after Chief Tenaya, leader of the Ahwahnee, but to the chief, this well-intentioned gesture served as a final humiliation. In the name of Manifest Destiny, Tenaya and his people were removed from their home ground and assigned to a reservation near Fresno, California. This reservation was short-lived as Congress did not ratify any of the eighteen treaties made with California Indians between 1851 and 1852. As a result, Miwoks, Monos, and Yokuts remained living in their traditional homelands with no claim to the land, always on guard against white settlers.

This is a book about relationships inside America's national parks, and as is always the case with relations, the bonds formed, severed, and renewed within these federal lands are complicated. They are also fundamental to who we are as a country. Whether historical or ecological, political or personal, the connective tissue that holds together or tears apart our public lands begins with "We, the People."

Our national parks receive more than 300 million visitations a year. What are we searching for and what do we find? As we Americans and visitors from abroad explore the 400-plus sites within the national park system that includes national parks, monuments, battlefields, historic sites, seashores, and recreation areas located in all fifty states, perhaps it is not so much what we learn that matters in these moments of awe and wonder, but what we feel in relationship to a world beyond ourselves, even beyond our own species.

I was raised in the state of Utah, where five national parks and seven

national monuments are commonplace. We took them for granted: Zion, Bryce, Arches, Canyonlands, and Capitol Reef were in our backyard, the land where our families gathered and we roamed free. We hiked the Zion Narrows and escaped a flash flood.

On that same trip, my brother and I camped against a red rock wall and in the morning when we awoke, a boulder had fallen between us. We cross-country skied in Bryce Canyon, convinced the pink and yellow pinnacles of stone were lit from the inside out, especially at night. In Capitol Reef, we picked peaches from orchards planted by Mormon pioneers. We knew that Arches and Canyonlands were an acquired taste, a bare-boned landscape more akin to Mars than to Earth. Natural Bridges had the darkest, star-struck skies, the place where I almost died falling off a cliff, with 136 stitches running down my forehead like a red river and a lifelong scar to prove it. We learned early on we live by wild mercy.

But it was standing inside Timpanogos Cave (a national monument) as an eight-year-old child that marked me. We hiked up the steep mountain trail that rises a thousand feet from the valley floor in a short mile and a half. We were hiking with our church group from Salt Lake City, just an hour north. We reached the entrance of the cave and were ushered in by a park ranger. Immediately, the cool air locked inside the mountain enveloped us and we wore it as loose clothing. Immense stalactites and stalagmites hung down from the ceiling and rose up from the floor, declaring themselves teeth. We were inside the gaping mouth of an animal and we were careful not to disturb the beast. We passed through Father Time's Jewel Box and the Valley of Sleep, traversing the cave on a narrow constructed walkway above the floor so as not to disturb its fragility. But it was the Great Heart of Timpanogos Cave that captured my attention. When everyone else left the charismatic form, I stayed. I needed more time to be closer to it, to watch its red-orange aura pulsating in the cavernous space of shadows. I wanted to touch the heart, run the palms of my hands on its side, believing that if I did, I could

better understand my own heart, which was invisible to me. I was only inches away, wondering whether it would be cold or hot to the touch. It looked like ice, but it registered as fire.

Suddenly, I heard the heavy door slam and darkness clamp down. The group left without me. I was forgotten—alone—locked inside the cave. I waved my hand in front of my face. Nothing. I was held in a darkness so deep that my eyes seemed shut even though they were open. All I could hear was the sound of water dripping and the beating heart of the mountain.

I don't know how long I stood inside Timpanogos Cave before our church leader realized I was missing, but it was long enough to have experienced how fear moves out of panic toward wonder. Inside the cave, I knew I would be found. What I didn't know was what would find me—the spirit of Timpanogos.

To this day, my spiritual life is found inside the heart of the wild. I do not fear it, I court it. When I am away, I anticipate my return, needing to touch stone, rock, water, the trunks of trees, the sway of grasses, the barbs of a feather, the fur left behind by a shedding bison.

Wallace Stegner, a mentor of mine, curated a collection of essays and photographs called *This Is Dinosaur*, published in 1955 by Alfred A. Knopf. The book made an impassioned plea for why Dinosaur National Monument in Utah should not be the site of the Echo Park hydroelectric dam that would flood the lands rich with archaeological history adjacent to the Green and Yampa Rivers.

In the first chapter, called "The Marks of Human Passage," Stegner wrote:

It is a better world with some buffalo left in it, a richer world with some gorgeous canyons unmarred by sign boards, hot-dog stands, super highways, or high-tension lines, undrowned by power or irrigation reservoirs. If we preserved as parks only those places that have no economic possibilities, we would

have no parks. And in the decades to come, it will not be only the buffalo and the trumpeter swan who need sanctuaries. Our own species is going to need them too. It needs them now.

The dam was never built. Today, six decades later, Dinosaur National Monument remains an oasis of calm, home to the Fremont people, who once inhabited these desert lands, and the Ute people, who still live here in lands adjacent to the oil and gas boom currently under way in the Uintah Basin, now the site of America's first tar sands mine.

As we mark the centennial of the National Park Service, my question is this: What is the relevance of our national parks in the twenty-first century—and how might these public commons bring us back home to a united state of humility?

The creation of America's national parks has been the creation of myths. I grew up with the myth that when Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872 it was void of people. No one told me that our first national park was the seasonal and cyclic home of Blackfeet, Bannock, Shoshone, and Crow Nations. I was told instead that the steaming basins with geysers and fumaroles, hot springs and boiling waters were avoided by Indians—it was superstitious ground; Indians kept their distance. Like any good story with the muscle of privilege behind it, it seemed believable. And I never asked the question, "Who benefits from the telling of this particular story?"

The truth is, the federal government did not want visitors to Yellowstone to encounter Indians. Full stop. And so they either banned tribes from the new preserve or relegated them to the margins, where they could continue to hunt game—unseen. This was the era of "Indian removal" and westward expansion. Reservations were being established at the same time as national parks.

But it wasn't just our national parks that were displacing tribes: American progress was on the move in every state and every territory, rolling over

whoever and whatever got in the way. Nor was it just Indians who complicated a mythical landscape. Elk and deer were lovely to look at, an enhancement of a pastoral vision. But wolves and grizzly bears were another matter—there was no place in this pretty picture for predators—and in Yellowstone they were hunted, trapped, and killed.

A fuller and more honest narrative has emerged over time, mostly from tribal historians who want to right a historical wrong. Knowledge matters. Justice matters. Hindsight shows us our blind spots and biases; we can recognize ourselves as human beings caught in the cultural mores of a specific time. This is not to excuse the brutal and tenebrific acts of the past, but to consider them in the light of what we know now.

By definition, our national parks in all their particularity and peculiarity show us as much about ourselves as the landscapes they honor and protect. They can be seen as holograms of an America born of shadow and light; dimensional; full of contradictions and complexities. Our dreams, our generosities, our cruelties and crimes are absorbed into these parks like water.

The poet Rumi says, “Water, stories, the body / all the things we do are mediums / that hide and show what’s hidden.” So much has been lost.

Restoration is what is required today. Can we engage in the restoration of a different kind of storytelling, not the stuff of myths, self-serving and corrupted, but stories that foster integrity within a fragmented nation? Can we change America’s narrative of independence to one of interdependence—an interdependence beautifully rendered in the natural histories found in our public lands? These are the parables of change and transition that might offer us maps to help us navigate our future in the era of a warming planet. We have never been here before.

It has been said there are two stories in the world: an individual goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town. I am telling both of these stories and adding a third, a story of homecoming within my explorations of twelve national parks and monuments. Some I visited for the first time, like Big Bend

National Park in Texas. Others I had visited before—Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota, which I returned to with my father. And then there are those parks like Grand Teton National Park and Canyonlands, in Wyoming and Utah, that I consider home ground. In the case of the Gettysburg National Military Park in rural Pennsylvania, I returned repeatedly, in all seasons, trying to make sense of a war that in so many ways has never ended.

In my wanderings among these dozen national parks, my intention was to create portraits of unexpected beauty and complexity. I thought it would be a straightforward and exuberant project, focusing on the protection of public lands, as I have done through most of my life. But, in truth, it has been among the most rigorous assignments I have ever given myself because I was writing out of my limitations. I am not a historian or a scientist or an employee of a federal land agency privy to public land policy and law. My authority is simply that of a storyteller who lives in the American West in love with this country called home.

I have been inspired by the photographs and people included in this book. I have learned that there is no such thing as one portrait or one story, only the knowledge of our own experience shared. I no longer see America’s national parks as “our best idea,” but our evolving idea; I see our national parks as our ongoing struggle as a diverse people to create circles of reverence in a time of collective cynicism where we are wary of being moved by anything but our own clever perspective.

“The purpose of life is to see,” the writer Jack Turner said to me on a late summer walk at the base of the Tetons. I understand this to be a matter of paying attention. The nature of our national parks is bound to the nature of our own humility, our capacity to stay open and curious in a world that instead beckons closure through fear. For me, humility begins as a deep recognition of all I do not know. This understanding doesn’t stop me, it inspires me to ask more questions, to look more closely, feel more fully the character

of the place where I am. And so with this particular book, I have sought to listen to both the inner and the outer landscapes that spoke to me, to not hide behind metaphor or lyricism as I have in the past, but to simply share the stories that emerged in each park encountered.

At a time when it feels like we are a nation divided, I am interested in how a sense of place can evolve toward an ethic of place, especially within our national parks.

Oren Lyon, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Seneca Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, recently said, "It can no longer be about the color of our skin, but the color of our blood."

Our national parks are blood. They are more than scenery, they are portals and thresholds of wonder, an open door that swings back and forth from our past to our future. "This something we call America lives not so much in political institutions as in its rocks and skies and seas," wrote the photographer Paul Strand.

This is the Hour of Land, when our mistakes and shortcomings must be placed in the perspective of time. The Hour of Land is where we remember what we have forgotten: We are not the only species who lives and dreams on the planet. There is something enduring that circulates in the heart of nature that deserves our respect and attention.

Whenever I go to a national park, I meet the miraculous.

On June 2, 2015, my husband, Brooke, and I celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary. We chose to spend it in Yellowstone. We rose before dawn in the Lamar Valley not far from where wolves were reintroduced twenty years earlier. A silhouette of coyotes feasting on a bison carcass, surrounded by bald eagles and ravens, appeared in our binoculars. As the light grew stronger the coyotes became nervous and left. The eagles flew. The ravens vanished. A large gray wolf entered.

Morning light illuminated the bison body, now more bones than flesh. We watched the wolf disappear into a red cavern of ribs. He emerged stained.

In the several hours we watched, the wolf's stomach expanded with each mouthful of bison ripped from the scaffolding of bones until he stopped eating, looked over his shoulder, sniffed, and walked back into the woods.

At dusk, we returned to the Lamar Valley. We wondered whether the wolves might be back on the carcass. Instead, two coyotes were picking on bones covered by a buffalo robe. The coyotes disappeared into the shadows with the last light of day.

An indigo sky deepened. A mile away, a herd of a hundred bison or more grazed unconcerned. Seven left and walked single file toward the remains of the mother bison. They circled her twice, sniffed her, nudged her body, and tightened their circle as they lowered their heads. They stayed with her until twilight. Then the bison left as they came, walking single file back toward the herd—save one lone bull who stayed behind.