

The Clan of One-Breasted Women

■ Terry Tempest Williams

American author, naturalist, conservationist, and activist Terry Tempest Williams was born in Corona, California, in 1955 and grew up in Utah, where she is descended from six generations of Mormon pioneers. Williams received a degree in English and biology in 1978 and an MS in environmental education in 1984 from the University of Utah. After graduation, she taught on a Navajo reservation in Montezuma Creek, Utah; she has also been naturalist-in-residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History. A prolific writer, her essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, *Orion*, the *New York Times*, and *The Best American Essays* (2000). Williams is best known for her award-winning *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991), a book that interweaves memoir with a chronicle of the flooding of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in 1983. Williams's other books include *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland* (1984), *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994), *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape* (1995), *Red: Patience and Passion in the Desert* (2001), *The Open Space of Democracy* (2004), *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (2008), and *When Women Were Birds* (2012). She has also written two books for children, *The Secret Language of Snow* (1984) and *Cattails* (1985). In 2009, Williams was featured in Ken Burns's PBS series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. Currently, she is the Annie Clark Tanner Scholar in Environmental Humanities at the University of Utah.

"The Clan of One-Breasted Women" first appeared as the epilogue to her acclaimed *Refuge*. This essay has since been published worldwide. In it, Williams explores the connection between radioactive fallout from aboveground nuclear testing on the Nevada desert during the 1950s and early 1960s and the high incidence of cancer occurring not only in her own family but in other Utah families as well.



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Reflecting on What You Know

Today people are much more aware of the health risks caused by radiation and chemicals lurking in our environment than they were, say, fifty or sixty years ago. What do you know about the potential dangers of nuclear energy facilities, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, exhaust from the cars we drive, and preservatives and other additives in the foods we eat? Are you aware of any environmental contamination issues in the area where you grew up? Explain.

I belong to a Clan of One-Breasted Women. My mother, my grandmothers, and six aunts have all had mastectomies. Seven are dead. The two who survive have just completed rounds of chemotherapy and radiation.

I've had my own problems: two biopsies for breast cancer and a small tumor between my ribs diagnosed as "a border-line malignancy." This is my family history.

Most statistics tell us breast cancer is genetic, hereditary, with rising percentages attached to fatty diets, childlessness, or becoming pregnant after thirty. What they don't say is living in Utah may be the greatest hazard of all.

We are a Mormon family with roots in Utah since 1847. The word-of-wisdom, a religious doctrine of health, kept the women in my family aligned with good foods: no coffee, no tea, tobacco, or alcohol. For the most part, these women were finished having their babies by the time they were thirty. And only one faced breast cancer prior to 1960. Traditionally, as a group of people, Mormons have a low rate of cancer.

Is our family a cultural anomaly? The truth is we didn't think about it. Those who did, usually the men, simply said, "bad genes." The women's attitude was stoic. Cancer was part of life. On February 16, 1971, the eve before my mother's surgery, I accidentally picked up the telephone and overheard her ask my grandmother what she could expect.

"Diane, it is one of the most spiritual experiences you will ever encounter."

I quietly put down the receiver.

Two days later, my father took my three brothers and me to the hospital to visit her. She met us in the lobby in a wheelchair. No

bandages were visible. I'll never forget her radiance, the way she held herself in a purple velour robe and how she gathered us around her.

"Children, I am fine. I want you to know I felt the arms of God around me."

We believed her. My father cried. Our mother, his wife, was thirty-eight years old.

Two years ago, after my mother's death from cancer, my father and I were having dinner together. He had just returned from St. George where his construction company was putting in natural gas lines for towns in southern Utah. He spoke of his love for the country: the sandstoned landscape, bare-boned and beautiful. He had just finished hiking the Kolob trail in Zion National Park. We got caught up in reminiscing, recalling with fondness our walk up Angel's Landing on his fiftieth birthday and the years our family had vacationed there. This was a remembered landscape where we had been raised.

Over dessert, I shared a recurring dream of mine. I told my father that for years, as long as I could remember, I saw this flash of light in the night in the desert. That this image had so permeated my being, I could not venture south without seeing it again, on the horizon, illuminating buttes and mesas.

"You did see it," he said.

"Saw what?" I asked, a bit tentative.

"The bomb. The cloud. We were driving home from Riverside, California. You were sitting on your mother's lap. She was pregnant. In fact, I remember the date, September 7, 1957. We had just gotten out of the Service. We were driving north, past Las Vegas. It was an hour or so before dawn, when this explosion went off. We not only heard it, but felt it. I thought the oil tanker in front of us had blown up. We pulled over and suddenly, rising from the desert floor, we saw it, clearly, this golden-stemmed cloud, the mushroom. The sky seemed to vibrate with an eerie pink glow. Within a few minutes, a light ash was raining on the car."

I stared at my father. This was new information to me.

"I thought you knew that," my father said. "It was a common occurrence in the fifties."

It was at this moment I realized the deceit I had been living under. Children growing up in the American Southwest, drinking contaminated milk from contaminated cows, even from the contaminated breasts of their mother, my mother—members, years later, of the Clan of One-Breasted Women.

It is a well-known story in the Desert West, "The Day We Bombed Utah," or perhaps, "The Years We Bombed Utah."¹ Above ground atomic testing in Nevada took place from January 27, 1951, through July 11, 1962. Not only were the winds blowing north, covering "low use segments of the population" with fallout and leaving sheep dead in their tracks, but the climate was right. The United States of the 1950s was red, white, and blue. The Korean War was raging. McCarthyism was rampant. Ike was it and the Cold War was hot. If you were against nuclear testing, you were for a Communist regime.

Much has been written about this "American nuclear tragedy." Public health was secondary to national security. The Atomic Energy Commissioner, Thomas Murray, said, "Gentlemen, we must not let anything interfere with this series of tests, nothing."²

Again and again, the American public was told by its government, in spite of burns, blisters, and nausea, "It has been found that the tests may be conducted with adequate assurance of safety under conditions prevailing at the bombing reservations."³ Assuaging public fears was simply a matter of public relations. "Your best action," an Atomic Energy Commission booklet read, "is not to be worried about fallout." A news release typical of the times stated, "We find no basis for concluding that harm to any individual has resulted from radioactive fallout."⁴

On August 30, 1979, during Jimmy Carter's presidency, a suit was filed entitled "Irene Allen vs. the United States of America." Mrs. Allen was the first to be alphabetically listed with twenty-four test cases, representative of nearly 1200 plaintiffs seeking compensation from the United States government for cancers caused from nuclear testing in Nevada.

Irene Allen lived in Hurricane, Utah. She was the mother of five children and had been widowed twice. Her first husband with their two oldest boys had watched the tests from the roof of the local high school. He died of leukemia in 1956. Her second husband died of pancreatic cancer in 1978.

¹John G. Fuller, *The Day We Bombed Utah* (New York: New American Library, 1984). [All notes are Williams's.]

²Ferenc M. Szasz, "Downwind from the Bomb," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Fall 1987 Vol. XXX, No. 3, p. 185.

³Philip L. Fradkin, *Fallout* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 98.

⁴*Ibid.*, 109.

In a town meeting conducted by Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, shortly before the suit was filed, Mrs. Allen said, “I am not blaming the government, I want you to know that, Senator Hatch. But I thought if my testimony could help in any way so this wouldn’t happen again to any of the generations coming up after us . . . I am really happy to be here this day to bear testimony of this.”⁵

God-fearing people. This is just one story in an anthology of thousands.

On May 10, 1984, Judge Bruce S. Jenkins handed down his opinion. Ten of the plaintiffs were awarded damages. It was the first time a federal court had determined that nuclear tests had been the cause of cancers. For the remaining fourteen test cases, the proof of causation was not sufficient. In spite of the split decision, it was considered a landmark ruling.⁶ It was not to remain so for long.

In April 1987, the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals overturned Judge Jenkins’ ruling on the basis that the United States was protected from suit by the legal doctrine of sovereign immunity, the centuries-old idea from England in the days of absolute monarchs.⁷

In January 1988, the Supreme Court refused to review the Appeals Court decision. To our court system, it does not matter whether the United States government was irresponsible, whether it lied to its citizens or even that citizens died from the fallout of nuclear testing. What matters is that our government is immune. “The King can do no wrong.”

In Mormon culture, authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent thinking is not. I was taught as a young girl not to “make waves” or “rock the boat.”

“Just let it go—” my mother would say. “You know how you feel, that’s what counts.”

For many years, I did just that—listened, observed, and quietly formed my own opinions within a culture that rarely asked questions because they had all the answers. But one by one, I watched the women in my family die common, heroic deaths. We sat in waiting rooms hoping for good news, always receiving the bad. I cared for them, bathed their scarred bodies and kept their secrets. I watched

⁵Town meeting held by Senator Orrin Hatch in St. George, Utah, April 17, 1979, transcript, 26–28.

⁶Fradkin, *op. cit.*, 228.

⁷*U.S. v. Allen*, 816 Federal Reporter, 2d/1417 (10th Circuit Court 1987), cert. denied, 108 S. Ct. 694 (1988).

beautiful women become bald as cytoxan, cisplatin, and adriamycin were injected into their veins. I held their foreheads as they vomited green-black bile and I shot them with morphine when the pain became inhuman. In the end, I witnessed their last peaceful breaths, becoming a midwife to the rebirth of their souls. But the price of obedience became too high.

The fear and inability to question authority that ultimately killed rural communities in Utah during atmospheric testing of atomic weapons was the same fear I saw being held in my mother's body. Sheep. Dead sheep. The evidence is buried. 33

I cannot prove that my mother, Diane Dixon Tempest, or my grandmothers, Lettie Romney Dixon and Kathryn Blackett Tempest, along with my aunts contracted cancer from nuclear fallout in Utah. But I can't prove they didn't. 34

My father's memory was correct, the September blast we drove through in 1957 was part of Operation Plumbbob, one of the most intensive series of bomb tests to be initiated. The flash of light in the night in the desert I had always thought was a dream developed into a family nightmare. It took fourteen years, from 1957 to 1971, for cancer to show up in my mother—the same time Howard L. Andrews, an authority on radioactive fallout at the National Institutes of Health, says radiation cancer requires to become evident.⁸ The more I learn about what it means to be a "downwinder," the more questions I drown in. 35

What I do know, however, is that as a Mormon woman of the fifth generation of "Latter-Day-Saints," I must question everything, even if it means losing my faith, even if it means becoming a member of a border tribe among my own people. Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives. 36

When the Atomic Energy Commission described the country north of the Nevada Test Site as "virtually uninhabited desert terrain," my family members were some of the "virtual uninhabitants." 37

One night, I dreamed women from all over the world circled a blazing fire in the desert. They spoke of change, of how they hold the moon in their bellies and wax and wane with its phases. They mocked at the presumption of even-tempered beings and made promises that they would never fear the witch inside themselves. The women danced 38

⁸Fradkin, *op. cit.*, 116.

wildly as sparks broke away from the flames and entered the night sky as stars.

And they sang a song given to them by Shoshone grandmothers:

Ah ne nah, nah

nin nah nah—

Ah ne nah, nah

nin nah nah—

Nyaga mutzi

oh ne nay—

Nyaga mutzi

oh ne nay—⁹

The women danced and drummed and sang for weeks, preparing themselves for what was to come. They would reclaim the desert for the sake of their children, for the sake of the land.

A few miles downwind from the fire circle, bombs were being tested. Rabbits felt the tremors. Their soft leather pads on paws and feet recognized the shaking sands while the roots of mesquite and sage were smoldering. Rocks were hot from the inside out and dust devils hummed unnaturally. And each time there was another nuclear test, ravens watched the desert heave. Stretch marks appeared. The land was losing its muscle.

The women couldn't bear it any longer. They were mothers. They had suffered labor pains but always under the promise of birth. The red hot pains beneath the desert promised death only as each bomb became a stillborn. A contract had been broken between human beings and the land. A new contract was being drawn by the women who understood the fate of the earth as their own.

Under the cover of darkness, ten women slipped under the barbed wire fence and entered the contaminated country. They were trespassing. They walked toward the town of Mercury in moonlight, taking their cues from coyote, kit fox, antelope squirrel, and quail. They moved quietly and deliberately through the maze of Joshua trees. When a hint of daylight appeared they rested, drinking tea and sharing their rations of food. The women closed their eyes. The time

⁹This song was sung by the Western Shoshone women as they crossed the line at the Nevada Test Site on March 18, 1988, as part of their "Reclaim the Land" action. The translation they gave was: "Consider the rabbits how gently they walk on the earth. Consider the rabbits how gently they walk on the earth. We remember them. We can walk gently also. We remember them. We can walk gently also."

had come to protest with the heart, that to deny one's genealogy with the earth was to commit treason against one's soul.

At dawn, the women draped themselves in mylar, wrapping long streamers of silver plastic around their arms to blow in the breeze. They wore clear masks that became the faces of humanity. And when they arrived on the edge of Mercury, they carried all the butterflies of a summer day in their wombs. They paused to allow their courage to settle. 44

The town which forbids pregnant women and children to enter because of radiation risks to their health was asleep. The women moved through the streets as winged messengers, twirling around each other in slow motion, peeking inside homes and watching the easy sleep of men and women. They were astonished by such stillness and periodically would utter a shrill note or low cry just to verify life. 45

The residents finally awoke to what appeared as strange apparitions. Some simply stared. Others called authorities, and in time, the women were apprehended by wary soldiers dressed in desert fatigues. They were taken to a white, square building on the other edge of Mercury. When asked who they were and why they were there, the women replied, "We are mothers and we have come to reclaim the desert for our children." 46

The soldiers arrested them. As the ten women were blindfolded and handcuffed, they began singing: 47

*You can't forbid us everything
You can't forbid us to think—
You can't forbid our tears to flow
And you can't stop the songs that we sing.*

The women continued to sing louder and louder, until they heard the voices of their sisters moving across the mesa. 48

*Ah ne nah, nah
nin nah nah—
Ah ne nah, nah
nin nah nah—
Nyaga mutzi
oh ne nay—
Nyaga mutzi
oh ne nay—*

“Call for re-enforcement,” one soldier said.

“We have,” interrupted one woman. “We have—and you have
no idea of our numbers.”

On March 18, 1988, I crossed the line at the Nevada Test Site and
was arrested with nine other Utahns for trespassing on military lands.
They are still conducting nuclear tests in the desert. Ours was an act
of civil disobedience. But as I walked toward the town of Mercury, it
was more than a gesture of peace. It was a gesture on behalf of the
Clan of One-Breasted Women.

As one officer cinched the handcuffs around my wrists, another
frisked my body. She found a pen and a pad of paper tucked inside
my left boot.

“And these?” she asked sternly.

“Weapons,” I replied.

Our eyes met. I smiled. She pulled the leg of my trousers back
over my boot.

“Step forward, please,” she said as she took my arm.

We were booked under an afternoon sun and bussed to Tonapah,
Nevada. It was a two-hour ride. This was familiar country to me. The
Joshua trees standing their ground had been named by my ancestors
who believed they looked like prophets pointing west to the promised
land. These were the same trees that bloomed each spring, flowers ap-
pearing like white flames in the Mojave. And I recalled a full moon in
May when my mother and I had walked among them, flushing out
mourning doves and owls.

The bus stopped short of town. We were released. The officials
thought it was a cruel joke to leave us stranded in the desert with
no way to get home. What they didn’t realize is that we were home,
soul-centered and strong, women who recognized the sweet smell of
sage as fuel for our spirits.

Thinking Critically about This Reading

In paragraph 20, Williams tells us that “the United States of the
1950s was red, white, and blue. The Korean War was raging.
McCarthyism was rampant. Ike was it and the Cold War was hot. If
you were against nuclear testing, you were for a Communist
regime.” Why do you think that Williams thought it was important
for readers to know what the United States was like during these
years? Explain.