



GRETEL EHRLICH

(b. 1946)

STEPHANIE KAZA

IN JUNE 1976, Gretel Ehrlich journeyed to Wyoming to film a documentary on sheepherding for the Public Broadcasting System. Her assignment was to capture the solitary lives of the herders as they traversed the open landscape with their sheep. She had left her dying lover, David, in New York City. Every two or three days she drove down the mountain to call David, whose condition was growing worse. By late September the filming was done, and Ehrlich made plans to fly east and rejoin David. But she was too late. He died that morning, on the heels of a powerful storm.

After David's death, Ehrlich traveled for two years, beset by grief and emptiness. Her New York life fell away as she tried to find comfort and relief. The tears came in waves, blurring earlier reference points, as she drifted across the continent. When John, the sheep foreman in Wyoming, invited her to come back, she accepted. She joined the crew herding sheep, finding her way through the loneliness by immersing herself in open space. By winter, she had settled in a small cabin for a season of solitude.

Winter in Wyoming is a palpable force. The winter of 1978 was the third worst on record. Ehrlich started writing letters; the stories were too dramatic to keep to herself. Under extreme temperatures of forty, fifty, and sixty degrees below zero, her attention was necessarily riveted on survival. The elements that shaped the land-

scape crept under her skin, penetrating to the bare bones of her life. In a matter of months, New York was a distant reality, displaced by the powerful presence of the Big Horn Mountains.

Ehrlich was no stranger to the West. Though she had gone east to Bennington College in Vermont, she was a native of California, born 21 January 1946 in Santa Barbara. At twelve, she wanted to be a painter, but by her early twenties her creative urge turned to filmmaking. She returned to California and enrolled in the film school at the University of California, Los Angeles. Later she moved to New York City, where she worked for PBS and attended the New School for Social Research.

Wyoming, the land she fell in love with, shaped much of Ehrlich's work. The Big Horn Mountains rise 10,000 feet above the valley floor. From her ranch in Shell where she lived with her husband, Press Stephens, the view to the east, west, and south is one unbroken landscape for one hundred miles in all directions. The steep mountains rise to the north—layers of rock holding the shallow seas that once covered the regions. Mudstones, sandstones, limestone—a collage of brown, red, orange, and white—press against gray granite upthrusts. The place is rich with fossils—marine sponges as well as saber-tooth tigers. The American Museum of Natural History found twenty-five

complete dinosaur skeletons in the ranch's lower meadow.

Feeder creeks to the Big Horn River flow out of the mountains behind the ranch. Waterfalls of meltwater tumble to the valley floor each spring. Ranchers depend on the snow runoff for irrigating the hay fields. Rainfall is sparse in Wyoming—an average of less than eight inches per year. Sometimes the creeks stay frozen until June. In most years water is available only through August; by September all but the major rivers have dried up.

Wyoming is big sky country, like Montana and Colorado. The endless cerulean sky of summer can be the source of wild and dangerous weather in winter: sudden blizzards bury the land under six feet of snow; stunning hailstorms flatten corn crops in a day. In winter, cold fronts can plunge temperatures to thirty below zero overnight. It is not uncommon for weeks to go by with temperatures never rising above zero. People adapt by taking it all in stride. In her essay "Landscape" (in *Legacy of Light*, 1987), Ehrlich comments, "What can seem like a hard shell veneer on the people here is really a necessary spirited resilience."

Like other writers of place, Ehrlich speaks from the irrefutable power of her experience on the land, the particular piece of land she calls home. Like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir before her, she is a walker and wanderer: In "Landscape," she says, "I like to think of landscape not as a fixed place but as a path that is unwinding before my eyes, under my feet." Ehrlich feels that "to see and to know a place is a contemplative act. It means emptying our minds and letting what is there, in all its multiplicity and endless variety, come in." For her, sense of place is a matter of sensory knowledge accumulated over time in the mind and body. "We rise with the landforms. We feel the upper altitudes of thin air, sharp stings of snow and ultraviolet on our flesh." To empty out is to let go of preconceived ideas of the landscape, to meet directly the "otherness" of a place. For Ehrlich this is an act of surrender. "Surrendering means stripping down, taking away every veil, every obstacle between ourselves and the

earth. . . . It is to allow ourselves to be touched from above and below and within, to let a place leave its watermark on us" ("Landscape").

First Essays

Ehrlich's first major book, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985), is the story of her surrender to the landscape of Wyoming. She describes the book as "a celebration of everything here." The book was written from 1979 to 1984, when she was learning to herd cattle and sheep. She helped neighbors and filled in frequently as a ranch hand during calving season, pulling stuck babies out of mothers and doctoring weak calves in cold weather. The essays grew out of journal entries kept during this time and sent as letters to a friend in Hawaii. In 1986 the book won the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

In twelve essays, Ehrlich offers sketches of ranch life in Wyoming, shown through the lens of her own personal journey into the land. The title piece, "The Solace of Open Spaces," sets the stage for the human dramas to follow. She describes Wyoming as "the doing of a mad architect—tumbled and twisted, ribboned with faded, deathbed colors. Thrust up and pulled down as if the place had been startled out of a deep sleep and thrown into pure light" (p. 3). Great arid valleys stretch out across the center of the state, sheltered on the horizon by great mountain ranges: the Big Horns, the Absarokas, and the Tetons.

The wilderness of the landscape is matched by the unruliness of the seasons. "Winter lasts six months here. . . . At twenty, thirty, and forty degrees below zero, not only does your car not work, but neither do your mind and body" (p. 1). The end of winter does not necessarily mean an end of the harshness. "Spring weather is capricious and mean. It snows, then blisters with heat. . . . Melting snowbanks hiss and rot, viperous, then drip into calm pools" (p. 7). And through all the seasons of cold, heat, snow, and rain, there is always the wind. "If anything is

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endemic to Wyoming, it is wind. This big room of space is swept out daily, leaving a bone yard of fossils, agates, and carcasses in every stage of decay" (p. 8).

In this vastness, people conserve words. Solitude is a way of life for many of the ranchers and herders Ehrlich describes. Language is compressed, almost metaphorical. "Sentence structure is shortened to the skin and bones of a thought" (p. 6). Ehrlich comes to reflect this style of communicating in her own lean voice and carefully chosen words. A poet first, in her writing she reveals a keen ear for pacing, weight and understatement. In the introduction to *Words from the Land* (1988), Ehrlich is quoted as saying, "I'm very particular about language, as are most people who started out writing poetry. I think about every word. I care a lot about how it sounds" (p. 18).

Despite the laconic mode of speaking, Ehrlich feels warmed by the "coziness" of the state. Ranchers know each other from one valley to another, and people travel long distances to see each other. "Friendliness is a tradition" (p. 5). It mitigates loneliness and isolation, and provides essential help in emergencies. In this emptiness, people do not waste words; they value truth over etiquette, "believing honesty is stronger medicine than sympathy, which may console but often conceals" (p. 11). Though Ehrlich admits she originally returned to Wyoming to lose herself in the unpopulated vastness, instead "life on the sheep ranch woke me up. The vitality of the people . . . flushed out what had become a hallucinatory rawness inside me. . . . The arid country was a clean slate. Its absolute indifference steadied me" (p. 4).

In this waking up Ehrlich encounters the complexities of human history on this land, the wilderness stained by battles for territory. Crow, Shoshone, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Sioux once roamed the land without seeing a single barbed wire fence. White settlers carved the region into large ranch holdings dominated by cattle barons. Instead of emptiness, the land is full of stories that she tells in the rest of the book.

In "Obituary," the reader meets the odd characters who herd sheep for a living and have



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done so for most of their lives. There is Grady, the once-a-year binge drinker; Fred, the junk hoarder; and Albert, who tries to seduce her. She visits Bob Ayers, who is in jail for shooting six cows in a minor range war: "even if we are underpaid, I'd rather herd sheep than have some flat-footed prick telling me what I can and can't do" (p. 28). Each has a story born during long cold nights watching sheep, alone with the silent stars.

In "Other Lives" we meet Mary Francis "Mike," a third-generation rancher of "seamless loyalty" who taught Ehrlich to rope, and two other women "cowboys" who are frequent partners on the range. In "About Men," we meet the cowboys, who turn out not to be as tough as the men in the Marlboro ads. Ehrlich explodes

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the romanticized stereotypes, speaking in plain talk about how these men do their jobs. One old-timer told her, "Cowboys are just like a pile of rocks—everything happens to them. They get climbed on, kicked, rained and snowed on, scuffed up by the wind. Their job is 'just to take it'" (p. 50). Cowboy courage is based less on chasing outlaws and more on helping a stuck cow, a drowning horse, or someone in trouble. "Because these men work with animals... because they live outside in landscapes of torrential beauty... and awesome variables, because calves die in the arms that pulled others into life... their strength is also a softness, their toughness, a rare delicacy" (pp. 52–53).

Herding cows and sheep means working with animals at all times of day and night and in all seasons. In "From a Sheepherder's Notebook," Ehrlich describes riding for three days on horseback, tracking sheep through summer pastures. She deals with sun, wind, dust, and sheep ticks in the company of a trusty Kelpie sheepdog. "To herd sheep is to discover a new human gear somewhere between second and reverse—a slow steady trot of keenness" (p. 59). In "Friends, Foes, and Working Animals," Ehrlich experiences the "stripped-down compassion" of dealing with birth and death, and the "sacrament of nurturing" ailing animals. In contrast to "outsiders"—townspeople and city slickers with their patronizing attitudes—she sees in an animal's wordlessness "the cleansing qualities of space." She writes of horses as mischievous, intelligent, "chummy," telling stories of horse outlaws with ominous names—Bonecrusher and Widowmaker. Animals become meditation teachers, holding Ehrlich "to what is present; to who we are at the time, not who we've been." Wild animals make up for a lack of human contact out on the cattle range. In her terse style, she describes encounters with Big Horn rams, coyotes, and rattlesnakes. "I tried nude sunbathing once: I fell asleep and woke just in time to see the grim, flat head of a snake angling toward me" (p. 69).

In "On Water," Ehrlich traces the peculiarly Western preoccupation with water—when it will come, how much there will be, and whether it

will be enough for crops and cattle. "Dryness is a common denominator in Wyoming. We're drenched more often in dust than in water" (p. 78). One hopes for spring rains in April, but in drought years there may be only thin runoff from the high peaks. As Ehrlich puts it, "Waiting for water is just one of the ways Wyoming ranchers find themselves at the mercy of weather" (p. 76). Wars over water rights have plagued the West since the first white settlers grabbed up the territories along the watercourses. Ehrlich is also drawn to water for "what is unconscious, instinctive, and sexual in us." She compares people to rivers, fearing the "dry spells," feeling the potency of water for healing, for creativity.

Ehrlich's long-standing heartache is finally resolved when she meets a local rancher at a film festival in nearby Cody. He serenades her with sandhill crane calls and they are married ten months later, in the middle of winter. They move soon after to what used to be the town of Cloverly. Their plan is to rescue an old ranch from neglect, though the price is surrender of their bachelor lives on "the bunkhouse-bedroll-barroom circuit." After a honeymoon in Oklahoma City at the National Finals Rodeo, they return to the ranch to follow "the narrative thread of birth, death, chores, and seasons," marked by everyday rituals and easy familiarities.

The Solace of Open Spaces was received with praise by reviewers. In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Kristiana Gregory called the book "a tender, poetic salute to the West." Janet Cannon, in *Western American Literature Review*, described Ehrlich's writing as "hard, lean, yet feminine prose." In the *Sewanee Review*, Pat C. Hoy II recognized Ehrlich's "fine ear for the western voice, local sayings, and local color" and her ability to become the earth itself—"at once full, barren, contradictory; acted upon, changed, and charged." In this first volume of essays, Ehrlich defines her voice: pithy, strong, terse, and vivid. She establishes her relationship as a writer to the land of Wyoming, to "landscape as sacramental... perfect, irrational, semiotic." She learns the hard lessons of imper-

manence: "loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life" (p. lxxxvi). She tells her life story as a story of place and context, inseparable from the changing weather and raw landscape she comes to know as home.

Stories of Heart Mountain

Before *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Ehrlich had written two volumes of poetry; afterward, she began experimenting with short stories. *Wyoming Stories*, published in 1986, were sketches of characters who later appeared in her first novel, *Heart Mountain* (1988). The collage of stories takes place during World War II, following President Roosevelt's executive order authorizing the establishment of Japanese internment camps. Heart Mountain, across the valley to the west of the Big Horns, was one of ten camps in which more than 110,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans were detained for over three years. The novel combines fact and fiction to present a view of camp life, the imposition of military rule on the Japanese, and the problematic juxtaposition with ranchers and rural values. Ehrlich was moved to expose this untold history as an example of the complex tangle of people and cultures on this land she called home. She drew material from library archives at University of California at Berkeley and at Los Angeles, the Smithsonian, local libraries, personal interviews, and a trip to Japan to investigate Noh theater and maskmaking, Shinto, and Zen.

Heart Mountain is not nature writing, yet it reflects Ehrlich's sense of the land and the people who live there. Her curiosity and quest for understanding are personally motivated. As a resident of the Big Horn River valley, she has made Heart Mountain part of her landscape. Its history is her history, acquired in the act of taking up tenancy. The stories from wartime are still alive in the families of her wider neighborhood. She feels their weight and poignant lack of resolution. In telling the story of Heart Mountain, she honors those who were profoundly

affected by the landscape by no choice of their own. By the end of the book, we see, as reviewer Marian Blue noted in *Twentieth Century Western Writers* (1991), that "there are no winners of a war, but only survivors left in various stages of healing" (p. 206). Thus *Heart Mountain* becomes a sequence to Ehrlich's own healing in *Solace*, opening her experience of compassion to those who suffered before her on the same land.

The drama of *Heart Mountain* turns around rancher McKay Allison and internee and painter Mariko Okubo. Though he has "more brains and common sense, good looks, and more natural ability than anyone in the valley" (p. 4), McKay is melancholy. McKay's brothers have gone off to war; he is left to manage the cattle ranch because he has a gimp leg. In an odd hunting accident, McKay injures Abe-san, Mariko's grandfather; he goes to the camp to make amends. At a time when most Americans viewed the Japanese as archenemies, McKay acts more like a neighbor than a patriot. After several visits, he finds himself drawn to Mariko. They fall in love, but it is a compromised love, torn by differences in culture and situation. Mariko is married, McKay is lonely. Yet he is close to Madeleine Heaney, a woman he has known since childhood. Madeleine is lonely, too, for her husband is missing in action. Ehrlich tells the story of life inside the camp through the journal voice of Kai, a Berkeley student who helps organize a draft resistance campaign.

The emotional tone throughout most of the story is one of longing—longing for the war to be over, longing to be with the one you love, longing for a window of openness in the midst of tension, strain, and uncertainty. Madeleine "came to think waiting was one of the things that go with being a woman, and she hated it. But during a war everyone is waiting, everyone is powerless, everyone is offering himself up to become dead in some way" (p. 142). She passes the months herding and calving, working long nights in the cold. McKay's response to longing is to seek solace in the landscape, paralleling Ehrlich's own journey into the open spaces for healing. "Under the clipped top of Heart Mountain... he imagined there was an eye that saw

him, sometimes the only eye, and a beacon light which led his grasping, solitary thoughts home" (pp. 5-6). Like her, he cannot forget the powerful presence of the one he loves but can never really have. Kai, who also yearns for Mariko, finds stability in the practice of Zen Buddhism, which he learns from Abe-san. Abe addresses the point directly. "If you are enlightened, does not mean there is no pain, no confusion in your life. To Ikkyū [a Japanese poet], desire and letting go of desire—same thing" (p. 181).

When the war is over, Mariko leaves Heart Mountain. On one of their last walks together, she and McKay climb the ridge and look down into a small canyon. "How different we are, Mariko thought. I look at all this but he is made of it. He is not separate from it as I am" (p. 345). Here Ehrlich shows the fruits of her own embrace of the land. In the character of McKay, she portrays the power of the land to possess those who live there. It is the land, after all, that remains constant through the war. Kai and Abe-san take a day of their new freedom to climb Heart Mountain. This pilgrimage represents the high point of the Zen teachings for Kai; Abe becomes one with the mountain that has cast its shadow on the camp throughout the internment. As if his task is complete, Abe dies soon after, while sitting in McKay's car.

Critics recognized the effort Ehrlich made to reveal the dark side of the American war years. Marian Blue writes, "Rarely has World War II literature successfully reached into the rural West and created a microcosm; Ehrlich has done so" (p. 206). Garrett Hongo in the *New York Times Book Review* complemented her for her "immense poetic feeling for the internal lives of [the book's] varied characters and the sublime high plains landscape that is its backdrop." Her portrayal of Japanese culture tends toward the "exotic Other," but at the same time it reveals her own growing fascination with Buddhism, a theme that surfaces repeatedly in her next volume.

Before Ehrlich returned to nature writing, she retrieved four of the earlier pieces from *Wyoming Stories* and added ten postscript stories. The new collection was published in 1991 as *Drinking*

Dry Clouds. In each postscript she writes in first person, allowing herself to walk into the experience of the characters from *Heart Mountain* she knows so well. She speaks as Kai's mother, as Madeleine, as McKay. It is as if she is still haunted by these voices and cannot let them go until they have become part of her. All the people bear the scars of loneliness and loss. And all the stories take place in the empty benchlands that can drive people mad. "God, there's nothing here," says one of the relocation camp residents. But he is stating the view of a stranger; for Ehrlich, the fullness of the landscape shapes everything. Christopher Tilghman wrote for the *New York Times Book Review*, "The people in Ms. Ehrlich's stories seem compelled to bear witness to their times, to their land and the lives they have lived upon it" (p. 6). These themes are consistent in all of Ehrlich's work: she uses personal testimony to investigate, struggle, and ultimately accept the relative scales of life and death, love and loss, and the impermanent nature of it all.

"Home Is How Many Places"

In *Islands, the Universe, Home* (1991), Ehrlich returns to nature essays, based both at home in Wyoming and farther afield. This work was supported by a Guggenheim fellowship awarded in 1989. For wider perspectives on her own sense of place, she travels to Hawaii, Japan, and the Channel Islands off the Santa Barbara coast, collecting insights from physicists and astronomers as well as her Japanese hosts. True to the tradition of Thoreau, the book uses walking as a way to follow the landscape and the mind simultaneously. Ehrlich sets the frame for her journeys in the first essay, "Looking for a Lost Dog." She struggles with perspective, with distance and intimacy, with "impulse and reason, passion and logic." Walking over trails and washes, she is filled with longing. "Some days... this one place isn't enough... Those days, like today, I walk with a purpose but no destination. Only then do I see, at least momentarily, that most everything is here" (p. 7).

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Stories of Wyoming alternate with accounts of her journeys. "Spring," "Summer," and "This Autumn Morning" take the reader into the extremes of Wyoming weather. Winter is about not only cold but also about ice, "movement betrayed, water seized in the moment of falling" (p. 13). Spring is about restlessness, the return of movement. "Sap rises in trees and in me, and the hard knot of perseverance I cultivated to meet winter dissipates; I walk away from the obsidian of bitter nights" (p. 13). The mountain moves below her feet, a continent adrift. The wind blusters. "Its fat underbelly scrapes uneven ground, twisting toward me like taffy" (p. 17). The season brings on waves of doubt, deliberation, resistance. Questions of time and space blur over the face of the landscape, consuming the mind with questions. Meanwhile, Ehrlich "sit[s] cross-legged on old blankets" (p. 24).

Summer is not just any summer; it is the driest summer since the Dust Bowl, and Yellowstone is on fire. Ehrlich chronicles the storms of heat, the rainless thunderclouds, temperatures over 100 degrees, and the combination of dust and smoke darkening the sky. "A big hand is dropping matches all over the West. Like winged seeds, sparks are propelled into the sky, scratching and scarring its skin" (p. 47). On Black Saturday, 20 August, over 160,000 acres burn in a single day. Despite massive deployment of troops and helicopters, the West keeps burning. On 6 September, Ehrlich meditates on higher ground in the mountains, and ash lands on her tongue. "What have I eaten? A piece of tree, of fire; a piece of this island universe..." (p. 55). The endless, weighty smoke becomes metaphor for obstacle, delusion, barrier to inner clarity. Almost the entire summer is obscured.

In autumn the nights turn cold. It is a year later, and Ehrlich flashes back to the previous spring when she and her husband visited Yellowstone to survey the damage: dead bison, dead elk, the charred ruins of the forest. At home death comes to a heifer and then to a good friend. She writes, "I knew how death is made—not why, but where in the body it begins, its lurking presence before the fact, its strangled music as if the neck of a violin were being

choked. . . . I know how easily existence is squandered, how noiselessly love is dropped to the ground" (p. 75). She sits, holding the Zen posture of stillness, seeking relief from the mind's chatter. A small island in her ranch pond is her refuge, her point of reference as time passes and the seasons shift. By November the lake is frozen and covered with snow.

This winter she escapes to Japan, following her desire to know more about the culture and spirituality she encountered when writing *Heart Mountain*. Ehrlich's attraction to Japan and Zen go back to an early love for Japanese poetry, especially that of Basho. Ehrlich identifies the tenth-century *The Kokinshu* as a favorite collection of poems. She came in her words,

to sniff out *shizen* . . . spontaneous, self-renewing, inherently sacred natural world of which humans are an inextricable part. I wanted to see how and where holiness revealed itself, to search for those "thin spots" on the ground where divinity rises as if religion were a function of geology itself: the molten mantle of sacredness cutting through earth like an acetylene torch, erupting as temple sites, sacred mountains, plains, and seas, places where inward power is spawned. (*Islands, The Universe, Home*, p. 90)

Where does one find *shizen*? Ehrlich travels back before Buddhism to the animist traditions of Shinto, established through oral tradition before there was a written language in Japan. She watches the wild *kagura* play at midnight on New Year's Eve, where beating drums call down the *kami* (spirit-gods). *Kami* live everywhere: in pines, birds, rain clouds, fish, and waterfalls. Some have special temples built for them, especially on the sacred mountains like Fujiyama. Her pilgrimage leads her to the trail taken by Matsuo Basho, a Zen poet famous for his witty haikus. In June 1689 he climbed Mount Haguro in straw sandals; three hundred years and six months later, Ehrlich takes a car to the top, which now holds five or six temples, a huge parking lot, and many souvenir and noodle shops. She is in northern Honshu, the coldest part of Japan, where Basho wrote his well-known

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Narrow Road to the Deep North. The spirits of the dead are said to live in the far northeastern corner. This is also the home of the *itako*, the women who speak with the dead.

Ehrlich meets several *itako*, all of whom are blind; blind women are thought to be especially receptive to the spirits. The third woman catches her by surprise, recognizing her need to speak with a dead one. Ehrlich is still haunted by the loss of her lover David. She makes a pilgrimage up Osorezon, the mountain of spirits—a twenty-six-mile round-trip in falling snow. This physical challenge in “seeking the Way” brings her to the heart of Buddhism—compassion. With insight born on the dark winter night, she finds compassion for her own suffering as well as for the suffering of others. In the end, this is the only true relief for the depth of her loss.

Her journey continues off the coast of southern California, in a boat trip to San Miguel, the northernmost of the Channel Islands. In “Home Is How Many Places,” Ehrlich links islands to family, to history, to the native people who have gone before her, the Chumash. A friend of Chumash ancestry tells her, “If you want to know who you are and where you are, you have to know who lived here first” (*Islands*, p. 143). Ehrlich speaks of islands as places of “birth and arousal of consciousness,” as “reminders of arrival and departures,” as “refuge and sanctuary.” As a child living in Santa Barbara, she had often dreamed of swimming to San Miguel. Now she was going to San Miguel, finding a fresh view on her childhood reference point. As she lies on the wet boat deck, the ocean spray blots out the stars. “I lick darkness from my mouth. It’s said that at the bottom of the gravest doubt there is satori [Zen enlightenment]” (p. 131). Stories of geologic and cultural origins establish her place in the much longer history of her life. The ocean, too, is home. In *Legacy of Light* (1987), she writes, “No matter where we live as adults, the landscape... in which we grew up stains us with its indelible ink” (p. 20).

All the themes of *Islands, the Universe, Home* come together in “The Fasting Heart,” the last essay of the book: walking, landscape, season,

water, quest, spirit, journey. The fasting heart is the one that is empty and open to receive the “knowledge that cannot know anything.” Ehrlich engages fully with “the way material reality is unobservable and implicit order can be found in paradox.” She draws on quantum physics, astronomy, and Taoism to grasp the illusion of separateness. Her lake island refuge is flooded by spring runoff; once again she sees that “the origin of life is always found in death; death is life’s constant companion.” She is haunted by questions, “What is this wild embrace?... Who is holding me?” (p. 192). “Pale clouds unfold... the mountain moves like a river” (p. 196). The embrace is infinite, delicious, aching. She asks, “Where do I break off and where does water begin?” (p. 196). Now the words of the thirteenth-century Zen master Dogen define her walking: “Walking beyond and walking within are both done on water” (p. 196). Thus her journeys take her from island to island, and across all the expanses between.

Lightning Strike

On 6 August 1991, Ehrlich was struck by lightning. Her walk under blue skies ended abruptly when she was thrown to the ground unconscious. *A Match to the Heart: One Woman’s Story of Being Struck by Lightning* (1994) is the astonishing story of her near death, her quest for help and understanding, and her eventual recovery. That she lived to tell the story is a miracle. Throughout her various hospital stays and blackout episodes, she chronicles her states of mind near the dark fog of death. Into this personal account Ehrlich weaves information on the nature of the heart and nervous system, the nature of thunder and lightning, and the complex long-term effects of lightning strikes on the human mind and body.

The book begins with Ehrlich’s agonizing return to consciousness: “A single heartbeat stirs gray waters. Blue trickles in, just a tiny stream. Then a long silence” (p. 3). Awakening in a pool of blood and flung far off the path, Ehrlich considers Buddhist instructions for the dying.

Her chest numb and her heart beating wildly, she manages to walk the quarter mile back to her ranch house in Wyoming. "The earth felt like a peach that had split open in the middle; . . . the sky was tattered book pages waving in different directions" (p. 8-9). The emergency medical team brought her to the nearest hospital, thirty-five miles away, where the only doctor in town recorded her ailments: cardiac arrest, broken ribs, concussion, lacerations, and kerauno-paralysis from waist to throat. Alone in the hospital that night she felt "like an ancient, mummified child . . . bound tightly, unable to move, my dead face tipped backwards toward the moon" (p. 18).

When her condition worsened to the point where she could barely remain conscious, Ehrlich's father flew to Wyoming to bring her home to Santa Barbara. There she received proper medical care under the hands of compassionate cardiologist Blaine Braniff. Excruciating tests showed her sympathetic nervous system had been "fried," leaving the vagus nerve constantly telling everything to slow down, including her heart and blood pressure. "Clamminess turned to a drenching sweat; my breathing came fast and the terrible, elephantine heaviness invaded my body again" (p. 47). Between doctor visits Ehrlich tries to understand the landscape of human neuroanatomy. She compares the brain to a globe on a spindle, she sees the body as "a separate continent, a whole ecosystem, a secret spinning planet" (p. 51). Earlier she muses, "If I held a match to my heart, would I be able to see its workings, would I know my body the way I know a city, . . . would I know where this passion to live and love comes from" (p. 27)? In the course of her painstaking recovery she concludes "the mind-body split is a meaningless, laughable idea" (p. 88), and further, that neglect of the natural world outside the body reflects an equally serious neglect of the world within. Thus Ehrlich extends her curiosity and passion for the land to the inner wilderness of the human body—an equally complex system worthy of marvel.

The setting for much of *A Match to the Heart* is the Santa Barbara coast, where Ehrlich lets the healing power of water restore her strength. Here she "would surrender to whatever swam

through me" (p. 65). She encounters grebes, kelp, pelicans, and fog, windswept beaches, and winter storms. Aching for a friend, she flies her beloved sheepherding dog Sam to town a week before Christmas. "Now one of my saviors was here at my side, we had both been struck, we had both survived, and I knew that if during the night I fell unconscious, he would bring me back alive" (p. 82).

In Sam's company and with the help of loving neighbors and Dr. Braniff, Ehrlich regains enough strength to visit Wyoming to ease her homesickness for the land she has known for seventeen years. But in the year away her marriage had failed and the ranch had changed noticeably. She could see this was no longer home, that she had to leave. "I felt like a river moving inside a river . . . the rivers were layers of grief sliding, the love of open spaces being nudged under fallen logs, pressed flat against cut banks and point bars" (p. 140). To soothe her soul from the loss of so much intimacy, she travels to Alaska where "thundering amputations" of calving glaciers made it seem like "the universe was falling apart" (p. 146). Here finally she could see the illuminating face of death: "Night came . . . and the face of the glacier turned bright as if a huge slab of moon had been cut off and laid against the mountains" (p. 150).

In this unusual natural history of body, place, and mind, Ehrlich again draws on scientific expertise to enrich her narrative. Two cardiologists show her the world of the beating heart by allowing her to observe open heart surgery. A neuropsychologist describes the "postelectrocution syndrome," confessing most doctors do not know to look for tiny damaged nerves. A lightning expert explains that winter is the most dangerous time of year because of the increased moisture in the atmosphere. Ehrlich attends the Third Annual Lightning Strike and Electric Shock conference and encounters strange and terrible stories of seizures, amnesia, night terrors, numbness, impotence, chronic pain. With startling richness, she communicates the alien inner landscape of those who have been irreversibly transformed by their experience with electricity.

Back in California after the conference, Ehrlich finally breaks through her long *bardo*, the Tibetan word for the "wandering state between life and death, confession and enlightenment, neurosis and sanity" (p. 40). Joining friends for a diving expedition off Santa Cruz Island, she jumps into the ocean for the first time in thirty years and "the shell of my body lifted off and was destroyed as cool water flowed in over new skin" (p. 189). This primordial plunge takes Ehrlich back to her home waters, revealing the dimension of healing in her experience of sense of place.

Yellowstone Country

Having survived this dramatic encounter with lightning, Ehrlich went on to write a vivid narrative for *Yellowstone: Land of Fire and Ice* (1995), a photo-essay of the wider Yellowstone bioregion. Beautifully produced, with exquisite full-page color photographs and double-page diagrammatic foldouts, the book is one in a series celebrating the epic geologic processes of America's national parks. Brilliant photos by Willard and Kathy Clay introduce the diverse landforms and habitats of Yellowstone—the grand mountains, valleys, canyons, the aspens, pines, and grasses.

Ehrlich is at her best returning to the land she knows so well. Though the book is a broad natural history of place, Ehrlich especially entices the reader to experience the grandeur of its geologic activity. "Standing in the midst of hot pots, wild gorges, and white capped mountains, it seemed that heaven, earth, and hell were all here in this one place, bound by the vertical stitchery of rain, snow, fire, and steam" (p. 17). She speaks of Yellowstone as an ecosystem, not as a single park with limited boundaries, but rather "an embarrassment of riches" (p. 11)—"six plateaus, a grand canyon, . . . ten thousand thermal features, . . . dozens of rivers and creeks, several mountain ranges and . . . huge glaciated valleys" (p. 17). She traces the development of a land ethic for the area, advocating agency management based on biological understanding.

As in all her writing, Ehrlich illuminates the vastness of landscape through her own personal experience. She monitors the recovery from the 1988 fires that burned over one million acres, she walks the rim of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, she offers close-up views of grizzlies and coyotes, peregrine falcons, and deer mice. Returning from a weeklong pack trip in the high country, she comes to understand Yellowstone as "truly a living organism" (p. 129). The book's beautiful journey through this vital and remarkable place concludes with her concern for shrinking fragments of habitat. She urges, "we must do what we can to help restore the broken and defiled lands between these beautiful islands and understand that, when we travel through this fine wilderness, we are walking on the back of a living being" (p. 129).

Among Modern Writers

Like other nature writers, Ehrlich speaks from her experiences of landscape and pilgrimage, the quest of a mystic, rancher, naturalist, woman. Her work fits Peter Fritzell's description of nature writing (in *Nature Writing in America*, 1990) as part spiritual autobiography and part natural history. Fritzell suggests this is a literature of extreme positions, from celebrations of self to modest self-effacement and humility, from radical doubts to strong affirmations. In seeking to locate themselves, nature writers, Fritzell suggests, echo the elementary experience of early Americans. The New World, in effect, is an epistemological problem still being worked out on the Western frontier. Ehrlich's writing about Wyoming—its people, weather, seasons—is an explication of place, a way of "settling the country" by composing it into stories. She likewise explores her own story by going back to her California origins and learning about some of the original people there. In the journey to Japan, she gathers seeds of insight that will nourish her stories of the future.

Ehrlich typifies the type of nature writer John P. O'Grady describes (in *Pilgrims of the Wild*,

1993) as one "who documents the crossing of thresholds." These are the thresholds of perception and psychological transformation, where self and other blur in the experience of the larger whole. Walking is a way to prepare to receive the Other, to settle the mind and open the senses. O'Grady focuses on desire as the personal driving force behind powerful nature writing. He defines desire for the wild as an "objectless desire," a passion spread over the landscape, charging the space with erotic potency. Ehrlich expresses this desire again and again in her longing, her roaming, her questioning, her "obsession with origins." *What is this wild embrace?* She asks the question as a koan, seeking answers in dreams, rock formations, the physicality of life and death, in the pulsing, changing shape of the seasons and their consummation in her.

Ehrlich stands out among modern nature writers for her poetic voice, her intimacy with the Wyoming landscape, and her inclination to Buddhism. Her writing is marked by its attention to nuance expressed in haiku-like metaphor and simile. Speaking of an injured eagle, she writes, "How big she was, how each time she spread her wings it was like a thought stretching between two seasons" (*Islands*, p. 18). She intersperses poetic imagery of the landscape with terse philosophical insights. For example, in *The Solace of Open Spaces*, "There is nothing in nature that can't be taken as a sign of both mortality and invigoration" (p. 83). As a writer of place, she makes a particular effort to capture the people shaped by the place; in her time, these are ranchers, herders, outdoor people. She recognizes in them an evolutionary truth of character. A rancher's life "is not a series of dramatic events for which he or she is applauded or exiled but a slow accumulation of days, seasons, years, fleshed out by the generational weight of one's family and anchored by a land-bound sense of place" (p. 5). Her sketches of sheepherders and cowboys in *Solace* bring other voices than her own to comment on ranching life. For contrast she seeks out physicists, astronomers, and botanists to offer a scientific perspective on the larger scale of place.

Ehrlich places herself in the literary tradition of Emerson and Thoreau, quoting their works in her essays. She refers to Dante, Robinson Jeffers, and Walt Whitman—poets who inform her work. Basho is a special favorite, though she cites poetry by other Japanese writers as well. She is equally drawn by the spiritual writings of Lao-tzu, the Buddha, and the Zen teacher Dogen. These provide an Eastern counterpoint for her Western literary heritage. They offer guideposts of inspiration as she deals with the ephemeral nature of the universe.

To these East-West influences Ehrlich brings her sensibilities as a woman. She is one of a handful of women nature writers in the 1990s who are infusing their work with sensitivity and emotion that reveal the erotic. Her work is an effort to embody the power and attraction of the land. The wild is alive in her—in her body, in her feet, in her heart—and she cannot rest while this vitality stirs in her. Her work rings with the richness of lived experience, a depth that cannot be plumbed in a quick reading.

In Ehrlich's work we have the gifts of one who is willing to struggle with the questions of life and meaning. She invites readers to travel with her to the lands of paradox, beauty, intimacy, and spirit. She offers no final answers, but through her exploring, readers see a way to settle with the earth and find their way home. "To see means to stop, to breathe in and out," she writes in "Landscape." "If we go out in order to find, not to impose, the landscape touches us and we it. Only then is a sense of place born."

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