

# TO TOUCH THE WATER

by  
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*for  
John Lewis Hopkin  
and  
all my Wyoming friends  
whose Western hospitality  
has been extravagant*



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# Introduction

Gretel Ehrlich, film-maker, essayist, editor, cow-and-shepherd, sophisticate of both coasts, when need be, and now, triumphantly, reborn poet—in the sense that poets of whatever age and reputation are reborn with better books, stronger poems than any done in the past—is a rarity: she writes poems not tailored to the needs of periodicals, East or West, or as steamy memos to an analyst, but out of the need to communicate, from time to time, with like spirits the fullness of her reality. It is a harsh one, even for one as giving as she, and only a very tough person—particularly if not born to it—could bear up to it, let alone, as is demonstrably clear in poem after poem in this collection, need it and love it to desperation. Harsh landscape, harsh weather, harsh work and, at times, harsh loving—that's her world, and she gives us good measure of it in these brave, sharply-imagined poems.

I like the poets who bear up to their worlds, and at their best ennoble it. I love the poets who do more than that, signal with every gesture, toward every humble thing making it up, their need for all of it. Gretel Ehrlich is of the latter group, as is seen in the remarkable *Other Seasons*, one stanza of which goes:

You should hear the way snow  
sizzles and shrinks, hisses and rots away  
Overnight someone new steps into  
those white thighs and drags herself downhill towards  
the next season.

Often she feels and observes fully, as throughout *Other Seasons*, sometimes very delicately, as in the lovely (save for the last unnecessary line of Part 5), very lovely *Six Songs to Tumbleweed*, the second part of which goes:

Because of  
Tumbleweed . . . .

Its small tangled woods  
Gone wild . . . .

A storm  
Moves.

The poet's love poems are as full of storms, and they are among the strongest in the collection, particularly *A Way of Speaking*, which has densities of this kind:

Once you showed me  
what time was by leaving me:  
when I forgot, you showed me again  
by coming back.

And there's the tender scroll-like ending of *A Shepherd Named John*.

One could go on and on—as they say—, quoting powers and felicities, but more than most books I've seen, this needs little recommendation. The commitment to a full life in the toughest of worlds is here, everywhere, and so is the honesty and grace. I very much admire the spirit of this book, and feel, for what I know will be more than the moment, much enlarged by it. I hope so very much Gretel Ehrlich will make more important documentary films, write sensitive essays on Wyoming friends, tend all those sheep, lovingly, in one of the wildest, most thrilling landscapes anywhere: even when need be, leave it, so as to return with greater need. But more than any of that, I hope she will make more poems as strong and fine as those in *To Touch the Water*.

Lucien Stryk  
DeKalb, Illinois  
February, 1981



*Probably She Is a River*

# Probably She Is a River

Probably she is a river where  
seasonal mixtures run  
rich: watercress, hot springs, ice floes stacked  
in clerical collars on robes of  
dark water folding and  
unfolding around her.

Probably she lost track  
of her reflection in the armed ambush  
of willow stands.  
She will not say her name.

Here is where  
all the collisions of storms  
fall out and swim home.

She rides those  
hard boxcars with other  
hoboes of winter: snowdrift, comet tail,  
wounded deer.

Here, at the rapids,  
she navigates her thin hips into surrenders.  
Those strangers hunt and  
touch and drink her longing to be invisible.

They do not fatten on it.

She loves them so she wants  
to be their one predator.  
They love her so they want her  
wildness to be hunted in them.

They tow her on  
thin train-floats of driftwood  
into warm spots and out again past  
bullet holes of rocks.

All her waters and liquors pulled this way.

Probably she cries out.

"I'm sinking."

Despite this vanity,

the river opens and accepts.

She is the water that carries her.

# The Orchard

We go into it at night.  
In Wyoming an orchard is the  
only city around--so many blossoms going up  
into trees like lights  
and windfall apples like lives  
coming down.

In the pickup, heads on the tailgate,  
we lie on last year's hay and wait  
for the orchard to bloom.  
A great horned owl sweeps between  
trees as if to cropdust the rising  
sap with white for the flowers.

"The first blossom to come," you say,  
"I'll give the apple that grows there to you."

Another owl lands  
on a bare branch and drops  
a plug of micebones to the roots.  
Under him, the tree does not think of  
the sap's struggle.  
I listen to your heart. Divided by  
beats and rests, it says yes, then no, then yes.

Above us the Milky Way seams the sky and is  
stirred by a hand too big to see.  
We watch the stars.

Tonight so many of them fall.

## If You Wanted to Write a Poem

Think of yourself on  
a great desert—like the Sahara—  
with a good fast horse and  
very little water.  
You've been thirsty a long time.  
Each time you talk  
the thirst gets worse. You ride  
quickly from  
mirage to mirage  
and each one has  
real water.

# Born in the Afternoon

*for Victress Hitchcock*

Against barbed wire an antelope  
gives birth by the road. It's all sage here.  
I drive through rings and rings of mountains.  
The radio says: rain mixed with snow in the  
southeast tonight: a traveler's advisory:  
the mountain passes are slick.  
In front of me a raincloud crowns the sky in  
your direction. Vickie, where you're  
breathing and birthing. Remember to stay in the moment  
with the pain. Let this cloud draw rain  
through your body to soothe and clean.  
to nourish the child who's been growing there.  
Right now earth gives two messages:  
a female duck flies over the car:  
the stub of a rainbow shoots up from  
a ridge and disappears in clouds.  
Child. Child, still unnamed, unsexed,  
let go of your sleek garden of water,  
lower yourself through the locks of your mother's body,  
climb down this wet ladder of weather—  
rain to earth—and wake up  
on a pillow of sage where  
antelope, too, are born in the afternoon.

# In This Green Room

New York:  
Your ferns stand against  
mullioned windows. I water them  
twice a week in slashed light  
while you travel.

For five years  
you have been in the  
back of my throat like  
laryngitis: nothing  
about love said.

In this green room of  
alphabets, venetian blinds carve  
new words into shadow-bars and  
jail your tongue.  
Dismembered city light  
moves over your jaw.  
Inside, your white teeth have  
a shark's honesty: too fierce,  
they tear the frail tissue of  
closeness apart.

We go out at night.  
Unused to this vertiginous place  
I sidestep from cliff-dwelling to  
dry wash, my downhill feet  
slipping into erosions.  
We walk the length of Manhattan,  
bleeding from the leech of lost love  
and another time: love thought to be recovered,  
turns leprous, eating into  
the roughage of joined skin.

Now, halfway through  
my thirties, the people I've loved  
would fill this room.  
And when tears come, they are  
smaller eyes falling out of  
my own, towards what they  
can't see and what they can.



## Other Seasons

Long flanks of snow straddled and  
drifted my cabin all winter.  
Held me the way a man would  
if there had been one here.

If only I could drift into a place and  
hold a time of year so elegantly.  
Then break my legs leaving  
to embrace the awkward spring decay.

You should hear the way snow  
sizzles and shrinks, hisses and rots away.  
Overnight someone new steps into  
those white thighs and drags herself downhill towards

the next season. A thunderstorm  
unties the sky. It composes and decomposes darkness,  
and forgives what it has gathered there  
by letting it rain.

Rain opens like a woman's shirt and  
showers milk on corn.  
A flood starts inside those ears,  
a stranger's teeth drown in silk.

The rest of summer is  
dust and under that, a thousand miles of  
surface straight down.  
Autumn comes

on bruised light, its knives and forks of  
electricity carving sheets of rain.  
Fall is breeding time. The bucks  
are put in with the ewes

and under them dry grass  
couples with snow.  
Are we really  
genetic or seasonal-- dust to dust to dust--

everything skin-deep only?  
This morning the last glass sill  
of ice windowing the river  
held what I am when I'm alone

but feel someone else  
moving in me.

## Six Songs

# Six Songs to Tumbleweed

1.

Sea-fan.  
Sweeper. Sieve of life.  
Held breath.  
Delicate one-foot  
Head that rolls.  
Blow-up in my face . . . .

This sudden grass

Grace

Tumbleweed.

## 2.

Because of  
Tumbleweed . . . .

Its small tangled woods  
Gone wild . . . .

A storm  
Moves.

### 3.

Tumbleweed travels  
In wind  
Gathering speed like a horse

Entering its last gait . . .  
The mane rips out of  
The neck. Fire fills

The arms  
Of the rider.

## 4.

Clouds separate  
Into waves of heat.  
Eagle lifts off his steak dinner  
Of hit-and-run rabbit, banks left  
Over unclaimed land of  
Pure calcium--White Mountains--

Tumbleweed flies beneath in  
New snow.

## 5.

Tumbleweed stows away  
On the undersides of trucks . . .

Tumbleweed sees the world.



## 6.

Tumbleweed lives on air.  
Clouds point south in migratory patterns.  
The wife of a cowboy burns  
Last night's gathering of tumbleweeds to  
Keep warm. Alone, she sings.  
"This is my love, this is my love."  
As it becomes winter, clouds  
Heal together.  
Tumbleweed is the last hair of earth.  
Clouds fall through in the west as rain.  
Tumbleweed sweeps up the light.



## *Two Songs*

# 1. Summer

The blaze of tiny insects rubbing  
their flash into luminous firefly wings  
The blaze of insect sex, the noise of it.  
Serial bodies created whimsically,  
the blaze of monotony.  
The glare of snake serum  
spreading inside your veins.  
The blaze of black ash relighting itself from  
past fires, the blaze of stacked irrigation pipes—  
beginnings of bodies carrying water back and forth  
across fields. The blaze of repetition.  
Silvery fish-glint of silos and barntops,  
matriarchs of these plains, the blaze  
of yellow grasshearts, sudden boulders bumping up  
under combines. The blaze of the blade.  
The glare of an empty room as  
you are leaving it, the afterlight of wheat,  
the blaze of saliva emptied onto  
small town pavement—strict markings. The blaze  
of the branch-graft, point of incision blurred by  
glint of sap.  
The separate blazes of overlapping grass,  
the glare of waxy fruit bubbling between leaves,  
the glint of dry-hulled speedboats dragged  
toward distant reservoirs, hundreds of miles away,  
mirages of water softly shouldered in nearby hills.  
The blaze of groundwinds slashing crops into  
separate rows, cornsilk ablaze, blackening kernels.  
Everything lonely to  
the left of me and to the right—  
this pastel of space growing  
broader and higher in  
thick suspensions of grass—the diction of flatland—  
heat curving fields of it into whole mountains,  
into the straw beds of  
bottomless lakes.

## 2. Winter

Winter came  
shaved by a river into  
ground-clouds that lift  
snow into the sky, into  
steam that warms into  
fog.

In the willow blur  
her skin faded  
the fade congealed as  
ice afloat.

Under her  
feet the broken  
stones of the streambed  
were new storms.



## *Portraits*

## Camilla

She was beautiful and she was broken down.  
The wild sticks of her face were weights  
that had begun to collapse and her skin was the last  
dusty remnant of it. Her eyes were skylights on the scene.  
The forms she made as sculptures were put there by architects.  
Her father was one and her husband: she pulled them apart  
and dilapidated them into anything but buildings—  
wild places with no men.  
Her hands shook. They shook into rainstorms, into  
volcanoes that detonated her skin. It rained lava. Mountains  
popped up made of clear unclimbable water. She was a painter  
and painted all this beautifully.  
In the rooms where she lived there were layers of glass,  
weeds, cobwebs she would not break down, of dust, plastic  
sheets, blue paint that swelled into more storms inside  
her bed. There were leaks in the roof. Unruly hedges grew  
inside the house. They were labyrinths that hid her.  
She lived near the ocean. She unreeled swags of seaweed  
into imaginary beings who made love to her while she grew  
faint, went to seed, went soft by the passing of time with  
no will.  
On a friend's recommendation she ate liver. She drank. She lied.  
She bit her husband's arm. She wept into the skylights of  
her eyes until they were slits I could not see into.  
The twigs of her face fell into her neck and were aqueducts  
for her fears.  
My own flights had unregistered blossoms, gestures recoiled  
into bent-back hands. I could not touch down. She put hinges  
on my heels and used me as a door to go into and out of  
the braided branches she wore to keep warm.  
She stayed in one place. I did all the moving until movement  
no longer equated meaning for either of us.  
I gave her all the turns and angles of my body and suggested  
she build.  
She drilled holes in the blood cliffs for adobe.  
She planed the scrub forests smooth  
She took her husband back and her son and her father,



built a house inside herself for all of them and came home to it.  
The house was a hinge connected to earth through which she would continually swing.

## A Shepherd's Binge

He rattles on ballbearings and spikes and mostly spikes  
across the room.  
He does the St. Vitus dance.  
After a binge he can't walk the world flat.  
His sleepwalker arms shake air in front of him with  
staccato, off-center tilting.  
He fights demons to get to the bathroom.  
None of these tricks gives him bouyancy.  
There are cuts on his face and feet.  
In the rust of the pickup he hides his brain-scratches,  
the suicidal loops, the terrible rusting liver.  
He hides rust inside rust.  
Brown whiskey, loose from the bottle, breaks into flames.  
I swear, I saw him swallowing swords . . . .  
His upper set of teeth spin out of his mouth as  
he gags on the redundancy of family.  
He goes back to the bars: the Cactus, the Medicine Wheel,  
the Shoshone.  
Now the gum-and-tongue gate passes only liquid. For two  
weeks this goes on: whiskey in—vomit out.  
Small town confidences dry heave him into a panic.  
Passing cars lay a long slicker of slush against  
his bowed legs as he weaves the streetloom,  
braiding footsteps into tangled wants,  
reversible conclusions.  
Then he's through with it.  
The baffaced woman who tends bar returns his teeth by mail.

## Self-Portrait Through Four Ages, Four Phases of the Moon

The first time they cut her nails there was  
a blackout in town. Then the sky filled with new moons.

As a child no one could explain to her how  
that half-light on the breaks and draws of the earth  
could come from so far away, and what was time if it was light,  
and would she be old when the moon went down?

Later in her life she knew the moon. It rounded itself off  
to a zero. A blackened nail on her hand rose over  
the white sheets where she and a man who would die  
were making love, and it eclipsed that perfection.

Long long after that knock-out  
the moon came-to again.

# Mansion

*for Michael Mathers*

## I.

On the third floor above forty-nine  
other other rooms, yours—the smallest of them all  
Wallpapered salmon, a monastic peach peeling at  
every corner like a monk's robes unravelling—  
He, like you, finally rebelling.  
Skulls, spears from Africa, parts of animals' bodies,  
books on existentialism, rows of masks, the diaries  
of Thoreau and Emerson next to the double bed  
where you sleep alone with a girl's name pencilled in  
by the other pillow.  
The long-faced windows search impeccable grounds  
for a squirrel's cache, or for light, or for eyes  
as lonely as yours to look into.  
Summer squalls face off the heat, fall into  
the green cups and slides of ivy and ride those steady vines  
into your derelict room.

Up from her ovens of fresh-baked bread  
your mother hangs horseshoe crabs over your dreaming head  
and says, "Good luck, Mike. Become who you're afraid you're not."  
For the rest of the morning you teeter over  
the family fortunes: faultless collections of art,  
ornithological displays, carved Buddhas who fold their legs  
of space around the crowded opulence of rooms.

After lunch (you'd never skip a free meal), you hit  
the road with a dime.  
Explore then the people you might become: hoboes, shepherders,  
circus men, drag queens.  
Examine the bodies of men and women—their fingerprint-proof  
of uniqueness, every topographical curve you are not,  
until at last you come to the part of this book of wonders  
with the photographs.  
Become what you are: an image-maker, a soul-snatcher.  
Go play in those wide fields of light.

## II.

Light.

Light scraped off the sunporch, the greenhouse, the servants'  
quarters, off traintracks that led you west, off muted  
steambath seductions, off pipes and posts and industrial parks,  
off hobo jungles, off a bum's pint bottle tipped into the sun.  
It all enters your solemn view camera.

Light scraped off the world's waters, the dead diamonds of  
tides, off boat people, and the great polluted rivers—  
all restored to the uncut light of your eye:  
even the lesser lights wiped from your shoes,  
until you are synonymous with light.

### III.

Black is your appetite, your critical eye.  
Your mother might as well have said, "Abandon hope.  
Middle gray is enough."  
Turn on your miner's light and descend. Shine it on  
your own negativity.  
Your mother might as well have said, "Be as bold in love  
as you are in life."  
Shine it into the passing trains you love. The open boxcar's  
proscenium arch holds its scenes uncritically.  
Be as bold as that.  
Darkness is just another kind of light playing on things.  
The train is a crossing path.  
You cannot enter its rooms of love alone.

## Tom Hudson, Pilot

In brown grass  
seed covered with snow.  
Hair travels through combs  
as harvest: a life.

*His boyishness was a spur  
floating from the heels of earth  
making curve-cuts  
in the bloat of air, marks of speed—  
and scars where speed was too great: a death.*

Autumn burns the body bright as leaf.

## A Sheeprancher Named John

A swarming.  
Orange as bees into hair, a face.  
In a long overcoat of them he moves swiftly  
by stings and grace across Big Horn Mountains,  
against an upstream current of sheep.  
When he speaks it is brutally to the point.  
His fingers taper. A diamond ring orbits one of them  
and is glazed by the silkdust of oats.  
Orange, not direct light but  
slanted, helplessly elegant, a color of  
minor disrepute—faded chiffon draped  
on the high, startled bones of his face.  
Skin crisscrossed, uncertain tracks of aging,  
irregular hems sewn, the threads pulled out.  
His whole body, orange and burnt orange.  
The abalone shell of his back with rich meat  
under it, perfectly plumbed and moving sideways in  
the sign of Cancer.  
On his arms, sunspots like birdseed melted and  
scraped smooth—burns on powdery skin.  
How could it be so soft in a climate that weathers?  
Mouth, a loose tear across the face, rarely  
moved by shapes of words, but a listening apparatus—  
lips slide apart, mark feelings awash and received.  
Eyes are steady-state. Burnt all the way brown.  
Shy penis, mostly  
swirled white.



*To Touch the Water*

## To Touch the Water

January: a simple operation on the heart of the earth.  
Diagnose it: drought.  
In a disguise of mothering  
clouds cap off dry hills with male shadows:  
no teats or womb.  
A tractor moves on air, the whirl of its seedless drills  
floats above furrows, never touching earth.  
The rancher who drives it is a generational skeleton,  
dried back into his father and his father's father.  
and all the way forward into his grandchildren's unborn bodies.

February: *to touch the water in your body.*  
We've gotten the seasons mixed up.  
I can't remember if I'm a man or a woman.  
In the pine forest above us  
branches are amputated from tree trunks.  
splinter and condense into birdnests with no eggs.  
Split cattails dry into swampbones.  
Nightingales, meadowlarks, and red-tailed hawks dehydrate  
in flight, grow thousands of brittle wings in their  
flight over jack-knifed corn to find water.

March: the terror of fatigue.  
Dust lunges up from plowed, unplanted fields  
into gray panels of light  
that search for the water in your body.

April: near  
a dry waterhole two ducks  
mate greedily. The gander locks his neck  
down on hers and works himself in from the rear.

May: *to touch the water in your body.*  
A dairy farm goes bankrupt.  
The cows give out their last fevered milk.  
What had once overflowed from buckets  
is now the sky's white cataract  
that cannot see we are dying of thirst.

June: *to touch the water in your body.*  
Trees break off and dredge  
dry earth like handplows.

July: thirst.  
Twin Ponds is dry. Windy Point. Pond Twenty.  
As we look for water  
I know it's better that you can't read or  
write well, that we are a compound of  
bad tempers and silk flesh and  
thoughts, unspoken, shuttled across our lips,  
hieroglyphic.

August: *to touch the water in your body*  
In the pickup you let yourself down across  
my chest. Eyes closed off by shyness  
Baled hay rises in  
soft architectures around us.  
Sheep bunch up and move out on  
imaginary watercourses  
creating eloquent and ambiguous geographies.  
I lean against you.  
I'm afraid of the deep learning  
in your body which is bookless and  
has no names for feelings.  
Way back in May, all of Wyoming's water  
channelled into your chest.  
It's a vibrant stream ricocheting inside you.  
Give up your thirst,  
the dry, unspoken affection.  
Let me touch the water in your body.  
The sky is filling with birds--  
crows, magpies, eagles,  
vultures--and they are  
circling.

# A Way of Speaking

Tonight is the one  
that neither bosoms nor  
spits us out. that cannot hatch  
its eggs of desire or even  
the ones that come after.  
of nothingness.  
Your hand does not go  
around my breast to find  
the milk there.  
It was on this range we met,  
moving your father's cattle.  
We rode in dust. We laced our  
strangers' lives behind the herd.  
We did not know what kind of knot  
we would make.  
Standing in the stirrups at a dead run,  
you showed me how to throw a loop and dally up  
without losing fingers.  
During the day our legs  
touched, moved apart, touched again.  
To live with cattle like we did  
was to enter the inward blousing of grass  
and drift there.  
Once you showed me  
what time was by leaving me;  
when I forgot, you showed me again  
by coming back.  
That fall, on the Greybull River,  
I saw how cowboys fish:  
mounting a moss-slick rock  
with high-heeled leaps, you hulked  
over water.  
You faced the current  
You dared trout to collide  
with your too-big hook tied to bailing string  
and when nothing bit you said,  
"See, even fish think it's boring."

Once we entered that river.  
It slit its neck so we  
might use its voice.  
Even so. I do not know if there is  
a way of speaking that ever  
takes one person to another.  
or forward to what they might become.

## A Hawk's Winter Landing

You call me one night and say,  
"Better come on up here and keep me warm."  
So I drive to the ranch.  
Everywhere the white refrains of winter  
carol out and out ahead of me.  
Snowdrifts roll up and fall back from  
the pickup until your house appears,  
one planet of light  
in this  
Arctic sea.

At the door, you hold me.  
It's like being gathered into  
a nest of wishbones  
all breaking in my favor.  
"I love those mountains," you say,  
the brim-sweat on your hat standing  
in a halo of peaks around your head.  
As I look at your face, your eyes  
sew with tropical stitches  
everything stark in me.

"It's a hard camp here," you warn me.  
"Pipes froze, no heat,  
nothing fancy in the way of food."  
We go to a room.  
As we undress, I dowse you  
with haydust from morning,  
those bright clippings scribbled fast  
across your back as if to spell out  
the emergency of being together,  
the restraint we feel.

You get into bed  
with your boots on.  
I ask why. "Gai," you say,  
"If I take them off,

I'll fall in love with you."  
A draft in the room  
roams us as if we belonged  
to its spell, drifting and  
banking over our two lives,  
awkward on the swayback bed.

"Sweetheart," you say, "All these years . . ."  
Outside snow begins to fall.  
". . . I've wanted you . . ."  
It falls and is gathered in a willow's hairnet of frailty.  
". . . And now I'm afraid once I start . . ."  
It spills on itself and sifts double.  
". . . I won't be able to stop . . ."  
Against the house, trees rattling.  
". . . I'd like nothing better  
than to die in your arms this way . . ."

All night the drifts pull fans of white marriage rice  
across us as if snow were beads of desire hurrying  
to close the road. I say,  
"If we are people on whom nothing is lost,  
it only matters that we do not lose the night and who we are."  
You turn to me. Even at forty, you're scared.  
My hands go to your boots. I pull at the heels.  
Your feet fly free. Your whole body floats up  
like a hawk who might be lifting  
out of a tree but is really landing.

# For David

*What happens to people that love each other?"  
"I suppose they have whatever they have and they are more  
fortunate than others. Then one gets the emptiness forever."*

*Ernest Hemingway  
**Across the River and into the Trees***

## I.

Then we feed the cattle with  
a sorrel team and a sled.  
We break bales like bread  
and scatter them before the wind.  
Sometimes we cross the river  
on bad ice to check for calves because  
one cow backed up to a wash and  
dropped her calf into the water.  
And after, empty and light with no load,  
we bump home across snowy furrows.

I dream we pull you  
through all the seasons: through autumn's  
hot temper when trees are  
moods and the sky is  
charcoaled black then whitestruck  
until May. Then we are not  
breaking bales but lives and they  
are scattered bones in a crossing wind.

Sometimes I can't unharness you.  
Your death is a horse.  
I can't unwrap from my wrists these  
leather lines that tie us together.  
Then you lie in my lungs and  
break words across my breath like water.  
You tell me anything I can hear.



## II.

Once when a surgeon said  
your chances of making it were "pie in the sky,"  
a mask of weather lowered over us.  
I asked, "Ether or oxygen?" But the mask  
just came down. That day broke you.  
And when the clock unwound you said,  
"Let's not tell time anymore."

### III.

Now I have to learn words that say  
the complication of who you were.  
Memory breaks open its head and  
throws you too far, then slams you close:  
Eyes. Voice. Hands. Scar.  
And the wind blows death into your black hair.

## IV.

They buried your ashes and planted  
a tree in them. Sometimes a wind  
comes and shapes grass into  
little bayonets as if protecting your absence.  
And the tree, like the surgeon's needle,  
punctures me with its spinal, bending song  
until all the air is gone  
from words and the emptiness I feel  
is forever.

## Cutting Wood On Shell Creek

We cut into dead bodies for heat.  
Cottonwoods that stood up for  
the first cattlemen in this valley  
and pointed to water.  
now firewood.  
Dead too are your  
grandfathers who bathed  
and made children on this river,  
then closed their eyes to  
its surging brightness until  
it spread forward to you.

When we use water in  
Wyoming, we're using time  
Nine hours on a mountain  
are meted out by simple  
ablutions after love-  
spring water, holy,  
cupped over cockhead and face.

Even though I want to marry  
you, be your sister-father-brother,  
we can't adjust the river's  
heretic clock of births, break-  
ups and marriages to fit  
who we are or learn  
what water knows, that letting go  
is real time, actual  
passion whose  
natural velocity mends  
what is separate in the world.

Fourteen months gone by.  
A skull's slow-moving  
season of being "just friends"  
hammered open. Inside:  
your mind like a bee

stung by another bee--  
fast, brooding, fiesty.  
And in front of those  
accordioned workings,  
your eyes--trout-spotted,  
sagging at far corners as if  
pulled by some ancient  
understanding of gravity--  
that we are simply here.

Tonight Northern lights  
shimmy up black poles and  
shine. Kirilian, against  
the Big Horn's false  
scaffolding of permanence.  
I've been flung to the dark  
side of this planet and rise  
as those black moons in your eyes,  
swimming upstream in iris  
towards the private  
blue tenderness pulsing  
there.

## Irrigating Hayfields On the Shoshone River

The one thing I've  
been retelling is water.  
In sets of dreams water is turned,  
the images by which we live  
are tin dippered—water  
drawn by hand.

Who can remember  
what we are? As if  
there had been  
in any brackish pond  
intentional ears of algae listening  
not to what we've said,  
but been.

A river is so fast to  
leave the slush of snow in  
summer, so fast  
to be covered with ice,  
so fast to cup  
the spawn of trout and throw it  
mid-river.

Downstream is in sight  
but out of reach.  
Right now there are rapids.  
Right now there is a  
bend in the river where  
muledeer drink and beavers  
launch their wooden spans  
like time across  
what is always  
leaving.

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