GRETTEL EHRlich
by Gregory L. Morris

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by Gregory L. Morris
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Gretel Ehrlich
As a Western writer, Gretel Ehrlich is something of a curious case. By birth a Californian, Ehrlich has nevertheless shaped her identity as a Western writer by experience gathered elsewhere in the West. At the same time, while Ehrlich has lived and written extensively about her life in north-central Wyoming—and built her considerable reputation upon that work—the arc of her experience has carried her for the moment back to her native California. This movement from place to place (Ehrlich has been a writer of many places in her career) suggests a dominant tension in her life and work: that of locating oneself in time and place, of determining the nature of home.

Ehrlich was born to Grant and Gretchen Ehrlich in Santa Barbara, California, on 21 January 1946, and grew up in nearby Montecito, "in a house [. . . ] with a view of the sea" (Islands, the Universe, Home 130). This early proximity to water would nourish a later, constant fascination in Ehrlich's work with water and its power to shape all things human and non-human, just as living through earthquakes and brushfires would teach her "how to see" and how to parse the grammar of the natural world:

The first earthquake I experienced shook my sister, who was paralyzed with polio, out of bed. I grabbed my parakeet, Willy, ran outside, and lay down. To feel the ground move in this way was to learn what "ground" means in all senses of the word: ground as primary place, as movement, as the foundation of what is knowable [. . .]. ("Landscape" 21)
Memories of this California childhood—lemon groves set afire, the barking of seals in the channel islands—resonate strongly for Ehrlich.

Similarly, growing up in California in the 1940s and 1950s provided Ehrlich with experience that would shape both her spiritual world and her aesthetic interests. Ehrlich recalls being part of a rich ethnic mix in this time and place: “I always had Japanese and Japanese-American friends growing up; there were Buddhist churches and Japanese grocery stores everywhere. So it wasn’t anything particularly exotic to me” (Morris, Talking 83). At the same time, Ehrlich remembers hearing the stories of internment camps, stories of those same Japanese grocery stores being closed down and their owners and their families being shipped off to places near and not-so-near: “I knew kids who had been born” in the camps (Morris, Talking 86), says Ehrlich. When she was fourteen, Ehrlich was sent to an Episcopalian boarding school for girls where, amidst her unhappiness, she began hungrily reading the books of D.T. Suzuki and immersing herself in Zen Buddhist philosophy. From these beginnings would eventually come Ehrlich’s own practice as an “American Buddhist.”

One other memory deserves mention here. In an essay entitled “This Autumn Morning,” Ehrlich recalls sitting for a portrait in 1958:

“You have to mix death into everything,” a painter once told me. “Then you have to mix life into that,” he said as his cigarette ashes dropped onto the palette. “If they are not there, I try to mix them in. Otherwise the painting won’t be human.” I was a child, and his words made me wince because it was my portrait he was painting. I wanted to be a painter at the time—I was twelve, and as far as I knew, death was something in a paint tube, to be squeezed out at
It was a dark lesson for a twelve-year-old, but one which stayed with Ehrlich. The evidence of its persistence—of the mix of death into everything living—emerges time after time in Ehrlich's writing (just as that early painterly impulse reveals itself in her landscape prose). So much of Ehrlich's work is informed by that tragic weave of desire and death, by the painful consciousness of mortality even amidst the regenerative bursts of bugling elk and of red-tailed hawks mating in mid-flight.

A self-described "three-time college dropout" (Trimble 14), Ehrlich would begin her college career at Bennington College, return to California for a stint at the UCLA Film School, and then travel cross-country once again to New York City, where she attended the New School for Social Research. What would come from this itinerant and inconstant education was a serious interest in documentary film-making; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ehrlich would work as writer, editor, and producer for various PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) film projects. More significantly, however, this interest would lead Ehrlich eventually to Wyoming.

In June 1976, Ehrlich arrived in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming to shoot a documentary film about sheepherders. While Ehrlich worked through the summer on her film, her lover, David, was in New York City, dying from cancer; he would die in September. Later in that same year, Ehrlich's film, Herders, would be completed, but Ehrlich's personal life would be marked by the incompleteness left by David's death. For the next two years, Ehrlich wandered in a welter of grief, until in 1978 she returned to Wyoming at the invitation of the rancher who was the subject of Ehrlich's film, John Lewis Hopkin. There, Ehrlich threw herself into the work of sheepranching and began working through her lover's loss.
There, too, Ehrlich met, courted, and eventually married Press Stephens, a young packtrip outfitter and guide from back East. The couple settled on an old homestead cattle ranch—the Hudson Falls Ranch—on the West Slope of the Big Horn Basin, where they bred and sold “naturally raised” cattle. During the next five years (from 1979 to 1984), Ehrlich also initiated her career as a full-time writer, completing her first work of nonfiction and her most widely known book, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985).

From this home-base in the Big Horns, and using that landscape as the source material for much of her work, Ehrlich launched what has developed into a fairly peripatetic writing life. Between 1984 and 1988, Ehrlich sandwiched in a trip to Japan and the completion of her first novel, *Heart Mountain* (1988), which explored the historical existence and the varied implications of the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp (in northern Wyoming), one of several camps set up throughout the United States to hold Japanese-Americans during World War II.

On the strength of these two books, Ehrlich was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1989, which allowed her subsequently to travel to Hawaii, to Japan, to Greenland, and to the Arctic, where she gathered material for what would become the text of *Arctic Heart*, a ballet later produced in the autumn of 1991 in London. But before that last event would happen, Ehrlich would be struck down and nearly killed by lightning on her Wyoming ranch, an event which necessitated her return to California for medical attention and a slow, problematic recovery. During this two-year recuperation, Ehrlich’s marriage would fall further into trouble; she would come under the care of, and become romantically involved with, the cardiologist supervising her recovery, Dr. Blaine Braniff; and eventually Ehrlich and Press Stephens would divorce. Still, Ehrlich journeyed: she attended the London premiere of *Arctic Heart*; she made trips back to Wyoming; she traveled far into the
Alaskan North to teach on a schooner and to count seals; she spent several months in China, climbing sacred Buddhist mountains, exploring the roots of her own Buddhist belief, and forming that experience into her book *Questions of Heaven: The Chinese Journeys of an American Buddhist* (1997).

But the therapeutic homecoming proved to be a settling-in, with Ehrlich reestablishing herself around 1997 in her native California, near her birthplace of Santa Barbara. Since that time, she has continued to travel, to write a variety of journalistic pieces, to publish a children’s novel, to contribute to collections, to teach (at Bennington), and to complete a photobiography of one of her eco-heroes, John Muir. Yet through it all—amid all the wandering and the relocation—Ehrlich has remained undeniably a genuine writer of the Western heart.

**THE POETRY**

Gretel Ehrlich effectively began her writing life as a poet. Her first two books, published eleven years apart, were collections of poetry, and she would eventually go on to bring out a third volume in yet another eleven years. In each book, Ehrlich makes plain a consistent concern of her poetic imagination: the sensuous intertwinnings of body, spirit, and landscape. Ehrlich’s first collection, a chapbook published in 1970 entitled *Geode/Rock Body*, maps the delicate cartography of flesh upon the rock-hard geology of landscapes that are frequently and identifiably Western (and western American). Moreover, Ehrlich infuses these twinned geographies of body and stone with a Zen Buddhist spirituality whose roots are obviously Eastern. In the opening poem of the collection, the body penetrates the specific geologic form of the geode—“a room / lined with crystals”—and becomes one with that form: “rock-bodies, / all of us” (“Zen Rock: Four Phases”).
Ehrlich goes on to explore this fusion, this entry into identities that are simultaneously physical and spiritual, employing a sensibility that partakes of both the scientist and the visionary. In what is actually Ehrlich's very first poem, "Poem for a Geologist," she attempts to reconcile these two ways of seeing and knowing, explaining that "there is nothing but granite and light" within the apprehensible universe. At times, Ehrlich argues, the body operates as language, inscribing its vocabulary upon the rockforms that surround it; at times, the body eroticizes the landscape as it eroticizes the body of the lover, transforming the natural world into a kind of compliant partner. For example, in "The Wise Body," Ehrlich imagines a confluence of air and earth, rock and bird, flight and stasis, all within the context of erotic (and spiritual) play:

Being still now. The wise body.
Travelling. Going nowhere.

We lie between a warm rock and a mountain stream.
Moving. And not moving.

We are alternately dark and light.
Accordingly the sky. (34)

In what is perhaps the collection's most West-centered poem, "Death Valley," Ehrlich describes a cluttered, noisy and noisome contemporary California suburbanscape, and the writer's attempt to escape from that chaos. The poet removes herself to Death Valley, "hoping to find / solitude or liberation." There, however, she finds instead the chaos of geology and geography; intent upon a revelatory examination of self, the poet discovers rather a landscape that consumes her imagination: "I spend my days stooped over / inspecting minerals and tumbleweeds, steaming crevices, / and closures, the exquisite desert vegetation." The desert, with its
stark geologic facticity, actually obliterates the (writerly) self: “I cannot think of writing at all. / The stillness, the endless variations of erosion and soil / (some is lateritic red) / isolates me from self-revelation.” The poem ends in irony, the poet retracing historical itineraries back toward what remains of home: “I decide to leave, get in the car and travel the route the / pioneers took: down the alluvial fans, / across the floor of Death Valley, then the Panamint.” Not all landscapes, Ehrlich suggests, encourage spiritual transformation, union, epiphany.

As much as earth and rock dominate the texture of Geode/Rock Body, even more does water—rain water, stream and river water, snowmelt and irrigation flow—organize Ehrlich’s second collection of poems, To Touch the Water (1981). Even more, as well, does the geography of the West function as the place of this poetry; it is in this collection, in fact, that Ehrlich first describes the Wyoming-world that would come to mark so much of her work as a writer and as a woman. The collection is distinctly structured, divided into five separate sections, and in each section Ehrlich emphasizes the relation between the human and all that surrounds the human upon a Wyoming ranchscape. The first section, “Probably She Is a River,” divides itself between poems of water and poems of love, all of which radiate from a womanly center of consciousness. Water, itself, is feminized and eroticized; in “Other Seasons,” a summer “Rain opens like a woman’s shirt and / showers milk on corn.”

In the second section, “Six Songs,” the landscape reverts at times to aridity, as in “Six Songs to Tumbleweed,” where the poet describes tumbleweed in movement, rolling through place and through individual lives. Here, Ehrlich deploys a Western icon as both natural artifact and as revelatory symbol. In the third section, “Two Songs,” Ehrlich juxtaposes the “blaze” of summer (in the poem “Summer”) and the “diction of flatland” with the frozen
muteness of winter (in “Winter”) and the ice-choked silence of a
Wyoming stream.

The collection’s fourth section, “Portraits,” is (as the title implies)
a series of character portraits of those who inhabit Ehrlich’s localized
landscape. Of particular interest here are those poems which
feature characters familiar in Ehrlich’s fiction and nonfiction. The
poem, “A Sheepherder’s Binge,” offers an early version of Pinkey,
the alcoholic sheepherder who will reappear in Heart Mountain
and the stories of Wyoming Stories and Drinking Dry Clouds; in-
deed, the story told in the poem is retold in the story “Pinkey”
from the latter collection. In “A Sheeprancher Named John,”
Ehrlich seems to write about John Lewis Hopkin, the sheeprancher
who was the center of Ehrlich’s documentary film and to
whom this particular collection of poetry is dedicated. Here,
Ehrlich creates a version of Western masculinity that is fitted both
to the harsh physicality of the landscape and to the softer erotic
geography of the body:

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. (32)

Ehrlich also includes a kind of elegy to her dead lover, David, in
“Self-Portrait Through Four Ages, Four Phases of the Moon,”
where she describes a sexual moment in a love affair shadowed by
darkness, moonfall, and the eventual, known death of the lover.
In the final title-section of the collection, “To Touch the Water,” Ehrlich clearly centers her poems—many of them love poems—in water. Bodies turn liquid; they are vessels, containments through which the female persona attempts to pierce and penetrate. Desire colors most of the narrative in this section, as the persona seeks with her lover (in an echo of the collection’s opening poem) “to touch the water in your body.” A similar sort of sexuality figures in “A Hawk’s Winter Landing,” where the poem’s persona—amidst a winter’s deep freeze—coaxes a reluctant sheeprancher (John Lewis Hopkin, again?) into bed and into love. In a clearly elegiac poem, “For David,” Ehrlich struggles with memory, loss, and relinquishment: “Sometimes I can’t unharness you. / Your death is a horse.” And in the book’s final poem, “Irrigating Hayfields,” Ehrlich fittingly closes her portrait of place with water, using it both as physical fact of ranchlife and as temporal symbol: “The one thing I’ve / been retelling is water.” Water is time, and here Ehrlich laments the loss of both.

If water moves through the poems of To Touch the Water, it is water transformed into snow and ice that shapes the poems of Ehrlich’s third collection of poetry, Arctic Heart (1992). And as with her second collection, the poems of Arctic Heart grow directly out of Ehrlich’s intense experience with place—in this case, with the Canadian High Arctic, that northernmost (if not westernmost) landscape. Invited to this place (as Ehrlich tells it in her Foreword to the collection) by her biologist-friend, Brendan Kelly, Ehrlich spent the late spring of 1991 living, working, and writing in the Arctic world. In the summer of that same year, Ehrlich flew from the Northwest Territories to London, and there composed the poem cycle which became Arctic Heart. More precisely, these poems were initially written, upon commission, as textual accompaniment to a ballet created by choreographer Siobhan Davies.
Divided into twelve parts, Arctic Heart is Ehrlich’s attempt to travel to the interior of the Arctic heart—and to the human heart as it operates and behaves in the Arctic icescape. Once again, then, we see Ehrlich focusing upon both the body (with its heart-quicken’d desires) and the meaningful topography of a central poetic landscape. And again the body and the world around it at times become one, with the body colored by that surrounding world: “Is there no end to / what is white inside us?” asks the poet in “Resolute Passage.” For Ehrlich, the body constantly must accommodate itself to place (“Space contorts me”), fitting its contours to the demands of the local geography, with its attending physical and emotional climates. As before, Ehrlich’s poems strike hard upon the elemental nature of the exterior world: light, wind, water, snow, ice all exercise their often bitter influences upon the body and the heart.

Yet within this frigid, forbidding territory, the heart does spark itself to life. Passion and physical desire work to create a saving heat. (One commentator has described Ehrlich as having had a “fling” with Brendan Kelly while here, suggesting the autobiographical nature of the poems.) In section nine, Ehrlich describes the confluence of bodies and elements and place:

Stream of light unfolds
in this tent stream
of thought too
narrow for hips too wide
for these windows

Circling sun letting itself
down on us where
words and legs lock
on caribou skins
Union and eventual dissolution mark this relationship in a cold place ("You halve me, have had me, have lost me"), and what remains is the substantial, permanent marking of that place upon the body, mind, and spirit of the survivor: "what is inside us is eaten, / even the calm in the / whirlwind's heart, / even the legs." The human heart, transformed by the alienness and uniqueness of this northern world, emerges radically transformed by the passage through this place, and finds itself having to readjust to the non-Arctic world upon departure. Salvation lies, Ehrlich suggests, in the persistent resilience of the heart. We live in and through place, irretrievably altered—and redeemed—by the experience.

THE FICTION

Ehrlich published her first volume of fiction in 1986, a collection of four interrelated tales entitled Wyoming Stories, published in a "Back-to-Back" edition which also featured a series of stories by Ehrlich's close friend Edward Hoagland. In her Foreword to this work, Ehrlich explains the evolution of her stories:

These linked stories were written during the winter and spring of 1985 in the order of their appearance. The writing of the stories started off straightforwardly enough, but very quickly, they ballooned into a larger, longer work. One thing led to another and before I knew it I had several hundred pages in front of me and a cast of characters who would not quiet down. As such, these pieces of writing should be considered as segments of a work-in-progress. (7)

Indeed, these stories would "balloon" to even greater dimensions, serving as the foundations for Ehrlich's eventual novel, Heart Mountain. Each of the four stories would make its way into the novel (specifically, into Part One of the novel), usually with only minor revisions and additions. Since Heart Mountain will receive
full treatment here shortly, only a brief discussion of *Wyoming Stories* is needed.

As the book’s title suggests, Ehrlich set these stories in what would become, in her fiction, very familiar territory: within the long shadow of Heart Mountain, in northwest Wyoming. It is a landscape dotted with cattle ranches and sculpted into mountains and hills and intermountain plains. In 1942, when the stories take place, it is also a landscape marked—historically and emotionally—by the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp, an internment camp built to hold Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II.

In effect, each of the four stories is a kind of portrait, delineating the present lives and personal histories of those who inhabit the ranch- and camp-worlds of this landscape. The opening story, “Pinkey” (which Ehrlich would incorporate, in expanded and revised form, into Chapter Two of Part One of *Heart Mountain*), establishes the central ranch-world and the central characters in that world. Running the family ranch on his own is McKay, a twenty-seven-year-old man left behind by two brothers who are fighting in World War II, and by parents who were killed as a result of an automobile accident. McKay’s lone ranchhand is a broken-down cowboy named Pinkey, who spends most of his off-ranch time in the local, very-smalltown bar (the owner of the bar has abandoned ship, leaving behind a too modest pile of his belongings and a sign that reads: NO JAPS). In this story, Pinkey wanders drunken into a wintry countryside, where he is hit by a car and suffers a broken leg. In between the bar and the roadside, we are introduced to Pinkey’s son Vincent, a half-breed whom Pinkey longs to know much better than he does; the emotional landscape which stretches between father and son, however, is littered with a great deal of implied history. What Ehrlich describes here, in brief, is the story of a man whose life has become a series of suf-
ferings and redemptions, whose vision is occasionally darkened by
the bleakness of the physical and emotional territory that sur-
rounds him.

The second story in the collection, “Kai and Bobby” (revised and
reordered into Chapters Three and Four of Part One of the novel)
momentarily shifts the focus away from Wyoming and toward
California, where Ehrlich initiates the other narrative thread of
her stories. Here, Ehrlich introduces us to Kai Nagouchi and his
family, who are uprooted from their home in San Francisco and
transported by train to the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp. A
first-generation Japanese-American, Kai is forced to leave not only
his home but his Chinese-American lover, to whom he writes dur-
ing his relocation (and dislocation). (Kai also keeps a journal while
in the camp, which becomes a sort of alternate text within the
narrative.) Kai also works to ease the pain of his parents—espe-
cially of his father—who struggle to comprehend the events that
have engulfed them.

At the same time, Ehrlich explores here one of several significant
tensions within the stories, as she takes us more deeply into the
world of Bobby Koramatsu, the long-time cook at McKay’s ranch.
A Japanese-born expatriate, Koramatsu has worked for the family
for twenty years, and in that time he has accommodated himself
to this stark Western landscape and to its mentalities. Yet the
sudden appearance of the camp, filled with disturbingly familiar
faces, alters Bobby’s perception and disrupts his sense of assimila-
tion. Wandering into the camp and finding a people from whom he
has long been separated, Bobby finds his world radically altered:

He looked in the direction of the ranch but could see no
lights. The Big Dipper bent its elbow down where the ranch
should have been. He thought of the trains he had seen com-
ing in, full of Nisei and Issei, the “yellow peril,” and how
those trains travelled on track he had helped build, and how
they were bringing everything he had forgotten he was back to him. (40)

The camp and its internees jar Bobby's personal and racial memory; they force him to confront his past and his present, to come to some kind of terms with his own identity, to reshape his notions of home and family. Bobby must, as well, deal with one of those "dominant mentalities"—namely, the anti-Japanese sentiment that circulates above and beneath the surface of local life. And in this story, we gain a glimpse of how these tensions play themselves out in the relations among the inhabitants of the two worlds.

Ehrlich returns to McKay in the eponymous third story, "McKay" (revised for Chapter Six of Part One of the novel), and fills in there some of the biographical detail of her central character. McKay is haunted by the deaths of his parents, who died by drowning after their car overturned in a roadside borrow ditch. The power of that incident, and the power of the memory evoked by that incident, exerts a strong and lingering influence over McKay. Another sort of power is exerted upon him by his longtime friend and erstwhile lover, Madeleine, with whom McKay grew up (they were born on the same day in the same hospital); together they were first-lovers, and both have come to ranch alone in the wake of the war (Madeleine's husband having been taken prisoner in the Pacific). The proximity and presence of Madeleine serve both to placate McKay's loneness and to exacerbate it, providing him with a friendship while at the same time reminding McKay of the emotional and sexual absence (and abstinence) that marks his life.

The final story, "Thursdays at Snuff's" (worked later into Chapter Seven of Part One, with revisions), introduces another major character, Carol Lyman; she is a single mother, working her life out (along with her mentally disabled son, Willard) in the back-reaches of Wyoming, the lone woman in the West. On one of
her regular Thursday off-days—a day on which she makes purposeful escapes from her normal life—Carol finds herself holed-up in a small, stateline bar during a blackout. Gathered there are three other characters: Snuff, the bar’s owner; Wildman, a Harvard dropout who has ridden the rails out West and who now lives a hermetic life in a cabin behind the bar; and Mr. Nakamura, an internee of the relocation camp who has been accidentally left behind on an out-of-camp excursion and who wanders confusedly into the bar. During the blackout, and the thunderstorm which accompanies the blackout, each of the four characters tells his or her story, fashioning a minor autobiography or life-narrative. In the course of their storytelling, we gain a sense of the harsh “arbitrariness” that has brought these characters to this pass; as Carol herself notes, “they looked as if a river had run through them and swept all the small comforts away” (72).

Hinted at here, and highlighted elsewhere in the story, is another of Ehrlich’s constant concerns: the active and persistent presence of the natural world in the progress of our lives. Carol, in fact, comes to see a connection between the stories that have just been told and the external world that has helped shape those stories. Emerging into the recovered light of day, Carol shakes off the darkness and gazes at a transformed landscape:

The pink came out of the sky all at once. Now the cherry blossoms looked like drifted snow. The air took on a transparency like the hottest part of a flame. She thought she could see the stories she had heard that night skittering above the horizon, the troublesome human parts—the pain and blame—burning into the blandness of day. (76)

Landscape and the natural world, suggests Ehrlich, are inherent—and eternally ambiguous—elements in the stories we live and tell.

Ehrlich pursued these same stories in her only novel to date, *Heart Mountain*, published in 1988. The novel became, in fact, a
way of improving upon her initial efforts in short fiction; as Ehrlich has explained:

I wrote the stories pretty cold, off the top of my head, and realized that (a) they weren’t very successful short stories, and that (b) I had many more to write: 650 pages later, I finally put my pen down. It was probably not a good idea to have them published, but it was done innocently in that I didn’t know where they were leading. My editor, after completing work on Heart Mountain, said jokingly, Please, make your next book short. It took us a long time to get through that material; we would both forget what was going on—he had to hire an outside reader to keep track of things. Actually, I wrote five drafts of the novel [. . .]. (Morris, Talking 85)

In its final form, Heart Mountain emerged as a work of Western fiction rooted profoundly in the historical, cultural, and emotional contexts of the American World War II experience.

Historically, the novel is driven by a specific act: Executive Order 9066. Issued by President Franklin Roosevelt on 19 February 1942, this edict called for the creation of ten relocation camps throughout the United States (though most were situated in the western U.S.) and for the removal of over 120,000 Japanese-Americans (most of them coming from the West coast) to these camps for the duration of the war. One of these camps—the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp—was erected in the shadow of the mountain whose name the camp bore, northwest of Cody, Wyoming, on the west bank of the Shoshone River. Eventually, the camp would receive over 10,000 internees, transforming itself into a micro-community within the stark and expansive landscape of north-central Wyoming. For approximately three years, until Japan’s surrender in 1945, the camp functioned as a bizarre varia-
tion on "home" for these internees—these suddenly uprooted and disenfranchised *Americans*—who found themselves exiled among strangers in what had become a very strange land.

The novel itself is structured in four parts—one part for each year of the camp's existence—with Ehrlich providing markers of time's passage even as time itself passes often unmarked within the world of the camp. Moreover, the camp almost immediately achieves a kind of presence in this landscape of the Big Horn Basin; as alien (in several senses of the word) as it is at first, the camp gradually attains a kind of familiarity to the world around it, accommodating itself to the physical and spiritual topography of the place. The progress of that accommodation, however, is naturally problematic and incomplete; the camp, after all, is an alien and alienating place, impermanent and unnatural and radically out of place.

This sense of dislocation and displacement is emphasized by Ehrlich through her foregrounding of the natural world within the novel. The camp takes its name from the mountain which casts its shadow over this particular landscape and which exerts a powerful imaginative influence over all who live within that shadow. As such, the mountain—a "geological freak" (5)—enjoys both a physical and symbolic presence in this world and serves as the novel's center of meaning. Most of the novel's characters construct some sort of relationship with the mountain, though the natures of those relationships vary, depending upon the imaginative vision informing the relationship. Moreover, Heart Mountain exists within the greater relational dynamic of the natural world surrounding and enveloping it. Sky, cloud, stars, elk, crane, plant, landform: all come to signify in some way in this novel, and the reader learns to read the topography as one of several texts within the narrative as a whole.
Opposed to or complementing the dynamic of place is an equally powerful dynamic of emotional relation among the human inhabitants of this place. Indeed, *Heart Mountain* is, at heart, a complex and multifaceted love story, with characters connecting and disconnecting throughout the course of the narrative, weaving an intricate, often troubled web of relation among themselves. Foremost among these relations is that between McKay Allison (whom we have seen before in *Wyoming Stories*) and Mariko, an expatriated Japanese-American woman and artist who has returned from Paris with her husband to care for her grandfather and who finds herself transported to the camp by the force of historical circumstance. Brought together (and kept apart) by that same historical circumstance, McKay and Mariko work to close the significant cultural and political distance between them; both exert a kind of imaginative force over that circumstance, investing and overlaying their physical worlds with a spiritual and an erotic vision that permits at least a temporary emotional proximity.

At the same time, lesser emotional relationships play themselves out in the shadow of this central drama of the heart. McKay himself struggles with his ancient attachment to Madeleine, who is separated from her husband by the war and whom she fears may be dead. Each works his or her ranch alone, in a kind of emotional isolation; yet each acknowledges the persistent presence of the other in his or her life, and they eventually connect physically, driven by their aloneness into a single sexual moment; when that moment produces a pregnancy and a subsequent miscarriage—a miscarriage suffered through by Madeleine alone—the distance between McKay and Madeleine reestablishes itself for the better.

Mariko also must negotiate an emotional topography of her own. Locked in a bad marriage to a man (Will) who values the political act above the emotional, Mariko is aided by her husband’s political temperament in freeing herself from that marriage; labeled as a
troublemaker within the Heart Mountain camp, Will is shipped off to another internment site where dissidents like himself are collected, kept apart, and more or less silenced. Mariko also finds herself the object of desire from another, closer quarter. One of the novel’s central characters is Stephen Kai Nakamura, a young graduate student in history who is relocated from San Francisco with his parents, separated from his Chinese-American lover, and who finds himself awash simultaneously in history, culture, and sexual want. Within the created world of the camp, Kai is re-educated—by Mariko, and by her grandfather, Abe—in the ways of the culture from which he has become estranged, and learns to perceive the world he professes to study from a new angle of vision.

It is Kai who also creates one of the several significant texts within the novel and who speaks as one of the dominant voices. A student of history, Kai transcribes the history through which he is living into a journal wherein he captures both the inward and outward events that mark his life and the life of the world around him. Mariko, too, records both her personal and her historical experience of place and event through the medium of her paintings, which render the immediate landscape of the camp and of the Wyoming world around the camp in delicate, evocative brushstrokes of meaning. Ehrlich informs her narrative, as well, with the poems of Ikkyu and Tu Mu, with letters from McKay’s brothers and Kai’s heretofore unknown brother, with newspaper articles, with camp bulletins, and with government declarations. All of these forms compete for historical and narrative authority within the world of the novel; all of these forms also contribute to the polyglossal world of Heart Mountain and constitute the very history which the novel records. Language, Ehrlich suggests, not only captures the historical moment—it is the historical moment.
Clearly, this novel is concerned with the clash of cultures provoked by the historical energies unleashed by the war, and we see the ways in which Ehrlich’s characters absorb these energies into their everyday lives and into their imaginations. Again, at the center of this storm are McKay and Mariko, each of whom comes to envision the world through the optics of the other’s culture. As McKay guides Mariko through the Wyoming landscape that is his home and his natal territory, he introduces her to the work-culture of that landscape; certainly McKay’s identity is shaped as much by the ranchwork he performs in this place as by the place itself (and Ehrlich steeps her novel in the details of this work); work and place are inextricably linked for McKay, and to understand McKay, Mariko must come to understand these forces which shape him. Conversely, Mariko educates McKay in the spiritual value resident in the landscape, although McKay is already somewhat aware of that inherent spiritual presence. These separate traditions, these separate ways of seeing, eventually shape themselves into one coherent vision as Mariko and McKay meld—if only for the immediate historical moment—their bodies and imaginations into one indivisible being.

_Heart Mountain_ , we must remember, is a story of the heart and of the heart’s power, and Ehrlich consciously informs her novel with an erotic charge which sweeps unchecked through bodyscape and landscape. When McKay first confronts Mariko with his desire for her, he declares that desire dramatically with the fresh physical emblem of his love: “McKay reached into his pocket, badly stained with blood now. He felt the firm, slippery muscle—not his own, but the antelope heart—and, holding it in the palm of his hand, presented it to her” (112). Ehrlich eroticizes the world as a way of confirming our own essential animality; McKay is “crazy” with desire, and that craziness is reflected in the natural world around him. Later, when the force of circumstance begins to sug-
gest its way into the relationship, Mariko too feels the intimate correspondence between the personal and the natural:

She felt her heart cramp, then jerk into motion. There would be no end to wanting or loving him, yet she knew that nothing could ever meet the expectations of desire.

They stood in the V where two creeks met. A kingfisher, perched on a branch, dove into the water and came out again as if untouched, unscathed. She looked at McKay. In his eyes, slabs of gray were cut into the blue. It's the kind of imperfections Japanese love, a sign of beauty, she thought, smiling, and grabbed him around the waist.

"Your bones are so light. I always forget that," he said, touching her wrist. "Like a bird's."

They heard flapping and laughed. Upstream and around a bend, a blue heron lifted into sight and flew behind a screen of willows. (343)

Here, as in so many other places in the novel, Ehrlich conjoins the intensely, inwardly personal and the outwardly visible in a dramatized emblem of the sympathetic connection between the human and the natural; the hearts of both worlds, hints Ehrlich, beat crazily and often sadly with desire. Sometimes, the best we can do is ride the craziness, admitting it into our private ways of being, knowing all the time that the heart's story too often is replete with pain and separation.

Such is the story told in Heart Mountain, though Ehrlich does allow for a kind of Zen-inflected balance to enspirit her novel. While deaths occur in the worlds within and without the camp, those worlds are also blessed with the returns of the believed-dead, with the emergence of new loves and new lives. Hearts continue to beat; history remains present and effusive; individuals travel away from and back toward themselves; home reshapes and redefines itself.
So, too, did Ehrlich’s Heart Mountain cycle continue to reshape and redefine itself, as she returned to this place and to these characters in yet a third book, Drinking Dry Clouds: Stories from Wyoming (1991). The stories in this collection, according to Ehrlich, well nigh compelled themselves to be told, as Ehrlich explains in her Foreword to the book:

These linked stories were written in the winter of 1989-1990. They are preceded by a novel, Heart Mountain, which was the outgrowth of the first set of stories in this volume. When I returned to my characters, five years after their initial appearance in my life, they seemed to want to report to me, so I let them speak in the first person. These stories are brief, like the palm-in-the-hand stories Yasunari Kawabata compiled, small enough to hold in the palm of your hand [. . .].

(7)

As Ehrlich suggests, the stories in Drinking Dry Clouds are part of the extended narrative which stretches back to Wyoming Stories, carries through the novel, and seeks (perhaps) some degree of closure in this collection. The first four stories here, in fact—“Pinkey,” “Kai and Bobby,” “McKay,” “Thursdays at Snuff’s”—initially appeared in Wyoming Stories; they serve as backstories, as a kind of remindful prelude to the new stories that follow, and provide historical coherence to the collection.

The ten stories which follow these first four stories (the collection is divided into two parts, the first four stories collected as “During the War,” and the second as “After the War”) explain the aftermath of the relocation camp experience. Told all in the first person, these stories give direct voice to characters who were effectively silenced or made marginal within the world of the novel, and they give extended expression to others who spoke more centrally in the novel. Each story tracks a bit of the path taken by
its narrator in the wake of the war, though for no narrator do we ever arrive at the end of that path.

The first story of this second part is entitled “Madeleine’s Day,” and it details the problematic return of Henry into the life of his wife and into the life of their “disrupted marriage” (88). For Madeleine, it is a story of failure: her failure to anticipate the difficulties entailed by her husband’s return, her failure to close the distance that has grown up around and in Henry’s absence, her failure to mitigate the strangeness of this stranger who is her husband. Indelibly marked by his prison-camp experience, Henry re-enters—“parachutes” into, says Madeleine—his former world a hungry man who cannot abide the abatement of that hunger; neither his body nor his mind is yet ready to take in all that is needed or that is offered. Both Madeleine and Henry come to understand the redefined nature of their relationship—or to understand the need to redefine that relationship—and to reaccommodate each to the other. In a way, it is a matter of exploring and remapping the new “natural geography” of their marriage.

Though it does not follow this first story in order, the very brief monologue “Henry” serves as a kind of companion piece to “Madeleine’s Day” and allows Henry to speak for himself, in a stream of consciousness narrative. Here Henry recovers remnants of his prison camp experience, picking up fragments of recollection as though they were scraps of food hoarded in the starving-days of the camp. Here, Henry also responds to the world into which he has descended, a man estranged by the dark weight of his war-life: “Shit, there’s no privacy here. I’m tired of being the freak show. In prison no one looked. We were all the same. I wish I could blow these mountains down so I could see” (117). Tired of being defined as object, Henry desires a subjective vision that permits erasure of
the very heart of his local landscape, the mountains. Accommodation seems still temporally and physically distant.

Returning to the story sequence, the third story, “Pinkey” (the title echoing, of course, an earlier, similarly titled story), adopts certainly the most unusual narrative attitude of these fourteen stories. Here, Pinkey speaks to us in the voice of the dead; he is a ghost, moving still through the world of the living. It is Pinkey who announces, in fact, his own death: “I died last week. Does that surprise you?” (105). Pinkey’s question, and his direct addressing of that question to an imagined auditor/reader, suggests a familiarity enjoyed by no other character in Ehrlich’s Heart Mountain world. Ehrlich even permits Pinkey to narrate his own death and the passage from body into spirit:

After the room went dark it was like drinking dry clouds, the mist was going through my chest and there were leaves in my eyes, plastered inside like they were stuck to something wet. I didn’t have any feet or legs but I was moving, first up at an angle then down fast at a slant toward sand, but when I hit there was no impact. (107)

Pinkey dies in his cattle-camp cabin, attended only by his dogs and by the ghost of his son Vincent, who has preceded him in death and who, like Pinkey, dies solitary. In death, Pinkey remains a presence in the lives of those who remain embodied and alert; but he remains fatefuly distant from the flesh and blood corporeality of that world, missing—perhaps most of all—his dogs, whom he can hear talking among themselves about the weather and whose bodies remind him of what has been lost: “Sometimes I dive down and try to catch one or two of them. If I could just run my hand along their backs, under their chests, and smell their tangy breath and feel their smooth tongues on my face . . . but they keep slipping away” (110). Pinkey reiterates an affection and
an affinity for the animal—and, in particular, for the dog—felt strongly herself by Ehrlich. Desire, it seems, transcends mortality; the heart never stops wanting what it cannot have or what it once had but has now lost.

In the story that follows, “Kai’s Mother,” Ehrlich allows her once-silenced character to speak, and what she tells us of is three varieties of dispersal. For one, she explains her husband’s mental collapse and her own attempt to come to terms with his emotional and psychological departure from her life. She also traces the post-camp unwinding of her son Kai; inducted into the Army, Kai is assigned to language school and trained (with no small trace of irony) in Japanese. Finally, this woman once held captive by force of marriage and of politics describes her own return to California and to a new independence—what she calls “going back to America.” Her old life, with all of its relics and icons and possessions, has been erased; what lies ahead waits to be shaped by the force of her own hands. She re-enters the world enlivened by courage and by a quickened sense of self:

When the train doors opened, all I could smell was eucalyptus. To the west a bank of fog rolled over the ocean like an arm dividing Japan from me, poured in under bridges, eating the pink edge of the continent, then exploded against the train, taking with it my fear. (115)

With the next story in this series, “Champ’s Roan Colt,” Ehrlich again gives voice to a character who figured silently in the world of Heart Mountain. Champ Allison, the wounded, battle-scarred brother of McKay, here accounts for his painful, disruptive presence on the home-ranch following his return from the war. Like Henry, Champ feels irretrievably altered by his experience. Gut-shot, limping, and supported by a cane like some ancient, half-cracked veteran, “warped beyond recognition” into fury-filled
identity, Champ is no longer at home: "In fact I think I cause quite a bit of unhappiness around here" (120).

Champ's disconnection with all that is expressed by the ranch as being home is figured most clearly in his temporary, infuriating failure with the gift-colt, a present given Champ by McKay as a kind of welcoming home gesture. The gesture—and the colt itself—serve only as sources of resentment; both Champ and the colt refuse capture and "breaking," and in his anger Champ does damage to the horse: "what I saw [...] broke my heart: the colt's front legs were wirecut and swollen" (123). The shock of what he has wrought upon the horse regathers Champ, at least for the moment, into a resigned wholeness:

The game was over, but I had lost. I knelt, running my hand down one mangled leg. "Jesus, Blue, what the hell did you get so scared for?" But it was me who had been scared, not of the horse, but of my own incompetence, scared of this everlasting limp. (123)

Reflected back to Champ in the blood and worried flesh of his wounded colt is the undeniable fact of his own wounding and his own fear; here, at least, Champ takes some measure of his circumstance and locates himself again within the world that will always take him back into its embrace.

The familiar voice of McKay Allison narrates the succeeding story, "McKay," and the tone of that voice is markedly lamentative and full of loss. Beset by the havoc wrought by the presence of Pinkey's ghost within his house, McKay also must deal with the removal of both Madeleine and Mariko from his life. Identifying the familiar symptoms, McKay successfully diagnoses his own condition: "How many years has my heart been split like this—split in two like a dowser's rod—hunting—bending down over hidden water?" (127). So central in the narrative weave of Heart Mountain
and its worlds, the heart seeks always its own imperative: completeness, wholeness, profound health. Yet McKay's heart remains fractured, divided, subject to the push-and-pull pressures of Madeleine and Mariko (who writes to McKay from Paris) and to the sad recollection of the unborn baby once carried by Madeleine.

McKay's predicament is given clearer focus at the New Year's Eve party celebrated a year following the camp's closing. Riddled by bone-deep loneliness, McKay half-playfully, half-purposefully takes a run with a jeep at Madeleine and Henry. The event turns more-than-half-comical, but the next morning—in the new, but no happier, year—McKay wakes to the bleak reality of his world: "I collapsed my weight into the unused part of the bed. How cold it felt against my groin. Holding a hand over my eyes I imagined a body under me—Mariko's, Madeleine's—and beside us, a child" (131). That world, it seems, is populated with ghosts: with the ghosts of his parents, of Pinkey, of Mariko and Madeleine, of the unborn child that might have offered some permanence to his being. Ehrlich stands firm with McKay, offering no easy answers to his solitariness and his despair. The heart, Ehrlich suggests, can only heal itself over time. Nor does the healing always "take."

The baby lost to McKay is, figuratively, found and loved by Carol and Snuff—and then, in the story "The Baby," is subsequently lost as well. The very real foundling is, in fact, the son of the Wildman and an unnamed woman, and when the woman shows up at Snuff's with her parents to reclaim her child, both Carol and Snuff are sent careening from the measure of their loss. Snuff disappears; shattered by their inability to hold on to that which they love ("'We don't belong and nothing belongs to us'"), Snuff seemingly abandons Carol to her despair. Mirroring, in a way, Snuff's absence, Carol withdraws with her son from the flow of local life. Willard, still wielding his willow branch, rages at the loss of the baby's presence in their lives. And Carol seeks the familiar
therapy of escape: “I want to get out of here, I want to drive, I want to go somewhere, I don’t want to be me!” (140). Before she can turn toward the road, however, Snuff returns bearing a healing gift: a baby fawn, spotted and motherless and hungry. Again, the spirit and heart of the animal—the non-human animal—provides the human with a kind of solace that we will witness again in Ehrlich’s work.

The eponymous narrator of “Velma Vermeer” deploys her voice in a recollection of her earliest days with her husband, Harry, who would eventually lose his life to suicide. We see Velma now six years after that suicide, reflecting on their whirlwind, cruise-shipboard romance and their subsequent marriage at sea. What Velma also recalls is a fellow passenger, a woman—Mrs. Whitfield—who befriends Velma and fits her appropriately for the occasion; she provides Velma with a dress, with jewelry, and with the memory of one fine insight: “If you can have just this one time of great happiness in your life,” I remember Mrs. Whitfield saying sometime during the evening, “Then whatever happens doesn’t matter” (146). The words are made permanent for Velma by Mrs. Whitfield’s own death soon after the wedding—a suicide, a woman self-cast overboard. That “one great thing”—the wedding, the brief friendship, the memory of what Velma has momentarily known—whatever it may be, persists and survives in Velma’s memory and sustains her through the more particular memories of loss.

In the penultimate story of the collection, “Bobby’s Cabin,” Bobby Nakamura recounts the return of the other Allison brother, Ted, from the war. Ted, too, is severely and multiply scarred; his body bears a jagged, metallic remnant of the war within its flesh and bone, and his spirit, as Bobby notes, is thin: “I could see the wafer of his spirit was like the moon behind the shadow—there and not there” (149). Conscious of his own agedness and mortality, Bobby spins his autobiography to Ted as a sort of healing or bibliother-
apy: making passage from Japan to the United States, Bobby alights in Chinatown in San Francisco, where he feels hated, cast out, separated from the localized culture of that place. He then takes a job with the Union Pacific Railroad, cooking for the crew constructing the railroad—the only Japanese in a Chinese crew—and ends up in Wyoming. The passage from home to home has been, for Bobby, a circuitous one. And the telling of that passage works its medicine on Ted, who, desiring a story and getting a story, enjoys a moment of stillness in the rage of his body:

I could see he was quiet inside. Maybe his spirit had begun to heal. Stories do that to people, they make us forget ourselves. That night I felt a little lost. I had not thought of these things for a long time, these tales, all bound up—a closed book—until Ted started coming to my cabin, and now, night after night, page after page, they fly from me. (153)

Telling his own “palm-in-the-hand stories,” Bobby effects a double healing; there is medicine in both the giving and receiving of such stories, as Bobby’s words, carried upon the spirit of his voice, travel toward the hearts of both storyteller and story-listener.

Ehrlich completes her Heart Mountain cycle with “Ted’s Night,” an appropriate offering of voice to a character who has been partially healed through the voice of another. Ted tells his own story—the story of his wounding (by kamikaze attack, not by random shrapnel as he has told Bobby, sparing Bobby the pain of that truth), of his passage back to America and to home, of his recovery-by-narrative—and describes his own sense of death’s proximity. Ted veers toward a kind of death-in-life; he, like Pinkey, is a kind of ghost, sick and weak of spirit. Ted knows what life is—“that’s what life is about—locking eyes with the world” (160)—but he does not know whether his love for that world is strong enough to sustain him. In an image that replicates his brother McKay’s
waking on New Year’s morning, Ted awakens screaming from another nightmare, his body soothed by Bobby’s ministrations and his eyes full of the new day’s sunrise. At least, Ehrlich suggests, that much is real. No heart lacks its wound. No heart does not need healing. That is the fact from which all healing—and all storytelling—begins.

Mention must be made here of Ehrlich’s most recent work of fiction, a novel for children entitled: A Blizzard Year: Timmy’s Almanac of the Seasons (1999). Conceived in the form of a “diary of the year,” this novel describes a year on a Wyoming cattle ranch as imagined, experienced, and recorded by a thirteen-year-old girl named Timmy. Her diary transcribes the realities—sometimes magical, sometimes cruel—of contemporary ranch life in the West, giving us a child’s-eye anatomy of that life, embedded as it is within seasonal and economic cycles.

Timmy is precociously conscious of the ranching tradition her family has inherited and continues to maintain. Both the ranch and the hardbitten ways of ranchlife are part of Timmy’s historical sense:

When my great-grandparents bought the ranch they changed very little. It passed to my grandparents, who lived the same way. Grandad always said that all he had was two pairs of cowboy boots—one for dancing and one for working, and that he didn’t need anything else. My mom and dad are the same. We don’t buy much. In this business, Dad says, you have to be conservative in everything, because it might not rain or snow for seven years or the cattle prices might drop, or sickness might spread through the herd. You have to live like a coyote, he always says. Make your own way with what you have. (10)
And Timmy and her family do make their way, practicing a time-worn ranch-ethnic that encourages Timmy to develop and appreciate a kind of symbiotic relationship with the natural world around her.

That ethic is tested, however, when the natural world turns violent and dumps killing February blizzards on the ranch. Cattle are lost. The temper of Timmy's ranchworld begins to change:

Something was different this year. As we pushed the cattle through the gate, the banker was there counting animals. At dinner I asked Dad why. I guess I hadn't been thinking very clearly, because it wasn't until then that I understood the financial effect of the blizzards. It was simple: if we had no calves to sell, we had no income, and no money to pay the bank the annual operating costs we borrowed from them every year. (39)

Amidst the rituals and the affirmations offered by the life Timmy knows comes a more difficult lesson about the essential economic nature of her world. The rhythms of the ranch are profoundly shaken and disrupted by this intersection of natural calamity and financial overextension. As Timmy discovers, banks and loan payments are an integral, traditional part of the (un)natural cycle of ranchlife.

With the ranch facing dissolution, Timmy and a friend turn to modern strategies and technologies to retrieve the family homestead. This late-twentieth-century ranch child connects with the broader, regional ranching community—and with the persistent, communal, supportive ethic that still informs that regional community—through the electronic web of the Internet and of e-mail, and manages to rescue one more ranch from the abyss of financial failure. In the process, Timmy sees her vision of her world and of her identity subtly transformed; she reimagines the way of life—of
Ehrlich’s best-known book was also her first book of nonfiction. Published in 1985, *The Solace of Open Spaces* established Ehrlich as a significant and early voice in what would develop into a powerful chorus of contemporary Western nonfiction prose place-writing. To put part of Ehrlich’s achievement into some perspective, it might be helpful to recall that before the appearance of *Solace*, the only major piece of contemporary prose-of-place was Ivan Doig’s *This House of Sky* (1978). Still to come in the ten years after *The Solace of Open Spaces* were: Cyra McFadden’s *Rain or Shine* (1986), William Kittredge’s *Owning It All* (1987) and *Hole in the Sky* (1992), Rick Bass’s *Winter: Notes from Montana* (1990), Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge* (1991), Mary Clearman Blew’s *All but the Waltz* (1991) and *Balsamroot: A Memoir* (1994), Teresa Jordan’s *Riding the White Horse Home* (1993), and Janet Campbell Hale’s *Bloodlines* (1993). With these writers, Ehrlich helped open up the American West to rediscovery as a “place,” as a natural world to be studied and instructed by. She also helped turn that landscape from an object of fear into a source of “solace”; space becomes significant, agoraphilia supplants agoraphobia.

Most importantly, though, Ehrlich discovered in this landscape a personal identity, some reflection of a self that had been erased by intimate tragedy, loss. In Ehrlich’s case, that identity emerged through an actual *working* of the landscape, through the forging of
a vital connection between the geography of place and the way of life indigenous to that place. The natural world that Ehrlich writes of is a *peopled* landscape: men and women live in nature, they work ranches that are integral portions of nature. Ehrlich’s nature is not an isolated, discrete entity, but one that is immediate, proximate, webbed with influence. Work, sexuality, death, time—all are bound up in this immensity of space.

Unlike most of the writers mentioned above, however, who possessed—and wrote of—deep familial roots in their native Western geographies, Ehrlich came to her subject—the Big Horn Basin landscape of northern Wyoming—as an outsider, assuming a very different angle of vision in her study of place and of people-in-place. Rather than casting a backward, recollecting glance at a familiar geography, Ehrlich approaches her chosen place from and in the present, her perspective and perception unobscured by the potential infidelities of memory or nostalgia. Ehrlich is an observer, both of Place and of Self; and in *The Solace of Open Spaces* she attempts to map both of those elements onto a stark linguistic grid. As she writes in the book’s Preface: “The truest art I would strive for in any work would be to give the page the same qualities as earth: weather would land on it harshly; light would elucidate the most difficult truths; wind would sweep away obtuse padding” (x).

For Ehrlich, language and landscape are intertwined, with expression arising from an organic vocabulary rooted in the place; language transforms itself into the elemental, physical nature of the place. Land, sky, animal, labor—these are sources of metaphor and image. Ehrlich’s naturalist eye captures both the miniature and the grand, attentive to the sorts of detail often lost in the breadth of landscape and overwhelming space (a reflection, perhaps, of Ehrlich’s work both in film and in fiction).

At the same time, Ehrlich works to locate her dislocated Self within and through that language and the world it inscribes. The
story of her arrival in Wyoming, of her filmmaking project there, and of the tragedy, grief, and recovery she experienced in Wyoming has already been related in the pages above. That story is, too, the central, originating story of Solace; bits of the story scatter themselves throughout the twelve essays, but it is in the opening, title essay that Ehrlich connects her personal crisis to the healing process she finds inherent in working and living in this particular place—or in this particular space. Indeed, space is what most clearly defines this specific physical and cultural landscape of Ehrlich's adopted Wyoming, and inherent in space is a curative quality: "Space has a spiritual equivalent and can heal what is divided and burdensome in us" (14). Tumbled and chaotic as she is, Ehrlich discovers in the character of Wyoming and its people a source of order and value, a locus around which she can reorganize her disheveled soul. Such space also encourages a kind of moral geology in which "rock-bottom truths" exist like landforms: "In all this open space, values crystalize quickly" (11), Ehrlich writes, suggesting a sort of causal relationship between the spatial and the ethical, between topography and culture.

In the essay "The Smooth Skull of Winter," Ehrlich examines the nature of these connections more closely and incisively. Looking at the Wyoming landscape through the specific lens of winter, Ehrlich articulates the links between landscape and human consciousness, and (following Seamus Heaney's lead) reads this passage of season as a significant and signifying text. Winter "is a scroll—the white growing wider and wider like the sweep of an arm—and from it we gain a peripheral vision" (71). The meaning derived from reading that text is twofold: on the one hand, the winter landscape quickens a "softness" and a physicality buried at the heart's center; the cold "ache" of the wintering body is an acknowledgment of that body's underlying need and desire: "Twenty or thirty below makes the breath we exchange visible: all of mine
for all of yours. It is the tacit way we express the intimacy no one talks about" (72-73). At the same time, the iced-over, snow-laden landscape is a mirror of the mind and of its frenetic, scattered, winter-driven workings:

Winter is smooth-skulled, and all our skids on black ice are cerebral. [...] All winter we skate the small ponds—places that in summer are water holes for cattle and sheep—and here a reflection of mind appears, sharp, vigilant, precise. Thoughts, bright as frostfall, skate through our brains. In winter, consciousness looks like an etching. (74)

For Ehrlich, the human and the physical geographies enjoy an intimate correspondence; the Wyoming geography is, in many ways, the individual thought, impression, and response writ overlarge.

In the essay, “On Water,” Ehrlich reiterates this idea in her contemplation of the intertwined and ambiguous meanings of water in a drought-stricken Wyoming: “There is nothing in nature that can’t be taken as a sign of both mortality and invigoration. Cascading water equates loss followed by loss, a momentum of things falling in the direction of death, then life. [...] Water can stand for what is unconscious, instinctive, and sexual in us [...] It carries, weightlessly, the imponderable things in our lives: death and creation” (83). We accommodate ourselves to our immediate worlds, says Ehrlich; we situate ourselves in the places to which we have invited ourselves and which, in turn, shape the spaces (of the body and of the land) which we inhabit: “Everything in nature invites us constantly to be what we are” (84). Water is replete with meaning—political, emotional, spiritual, economic—in Ehrlich’s Wyoming, and she affirms the frank and utter resonance of that meaning within the logic of that place: “Even in this dry country, where internal and external droughts always threaten, water is self-registering no matter how ancient, recent, or brief” (85).
Conversely, Ehrlich testifies that “the women I met—descendants of outlaws, homesteaders, ranchers, and Mormon pioneers—were as rough and capable as the men were softhearted” (39). From a cultural landscape so historically masculinized as the West, Ehrlich posits an unlikely and provocative “androgy­nized” world where the codes of gender, of sex, and even of sexuality are not quite as transparent as one might believe.

The bulk of this knowledge is brought home to Ehrlich firsthand, for *The Solace of Open Spaces* is, of course, also an autobiographical study of Ehrlich’s self-in-place. More precisely, the book is a study of a woman-in-place, and therein may lie the true significance of Ehrlich’s work. By involving herself in the Western world of which she writes, Ehrlich gives us what is probably the first im­portant self-study of the contemporary woman-in-the-West.
As we know already, Ehrlich settles in (and into) Wyoming burdened with grief and lugging a “hallucinatory rawness” (4) inside her. The death of her lover, David, disorients Ehrlich; in Wyoming, she seeks relocation, grounding, solace. In the essay “Other Lives,” Ehrlich recalls David’s visit to Wyoming during the making of her film. She remembers, too, how the fact of his dying reduces even the vastness of Wyoming to its essentials: “dying prunes so much away—everything extraneous, everything that has not been squeezed into paradox” (37). When David dies, Ehrlich elects to stay in Wyoming for the funeral of a ranch-friend rather than attend David’s funeral back East; but David’s “ghost” accompanies Ehrlich, “mischievous and glinting” (38), and the shock of David’s death sends Ehrlich into a two-year drift away from Wyoming.

When she returns, she returns to work and to a community in place—a community of welcoming women and men who are defined by their ability to do the work of the place. Here, Ehrlich relearned the art of accommodation and survival, and discovers the healing effects of camaraderie and loyalty. Here, too, Ehrlich takes another lover—a young rancher—and finds the solace of physical connection, of the “chemical razzle-dazzle” of desire:

In September we rode the mountain to check cows, fishing with a flyrod from horseback the creeks we crossed. All summer there had been the silent, whimsical archery of seeds: timothy and fescue, cottonwood puffs, the dilapidated, shingled houses of pine cones letting go of their seeds. Now his full weight on me was ursine, brooding, tender. Sexual passion became the thread between having been born and dying. For the first time the concussive pain I had been living with began to ebb. One never gets over a death, but the pain was mixed now with tonic undulations. (48)
As she does so often in her writing, Ehrlich eroticizes her landscape here and fills it with potential; all is “let go,” the rhythms of the season corresponding and in synch with the rhythms of the body.

In part, Ehrlich has managed to fall in love with place, intuizing its needs and its nature. Over time, Ehrlich also falls in love again with a man. In the essay “Just Married,” Ehrlich recounts her meeting and eventual marrying of Press Stephens, a local rancher and fellow “culture straddler.” Their initial encounter comes at “a John Wayne film festival in Cody, Wyoming,” and Ehrlich is impressed by this man who “cried during sad scenes in the film” and “who could talk books as well as ranching, medieval history and the mountains, ideas and mules” (86). After a ten-month courtship, Ehrlich and Stephens marry and move to an “end-of-the-road ranch [. . .] bumped up against a nine-thousand-foot-high rock-pile”; they are surrounded by geology, impermanent flesh isolated amidst deep canyons of rock-time. And once again, Ehrlich accommodates herself to the cycles and habits of place:

The seasons are a Jacob’s ladder climbed by migrating elk and deer. Our ranch is one of their resting places. If I was leery about being an owner, a possessor of land, now I have to understand the ways in which the place possesses me. Mowing hayfields feels like mowing myself. I wake up mornings expecting to find my hair shorn. The pastures bend into me; the water I ushered over hard ground becomes one drink of grass. Later in the year, feeding the bales of hay we’ve put up is a regurgitative act: thrown down from a high stack on chill days they break open in front of the horses like loaves of hot bread. (90)

Living in place means being “possessed by place”; existence is a physical, sensual, sexual act of entry. The body becomes, in
Ehrlich’s vision, a medium of passage; time, the seasons, pain, grief, and unharnessed love all move through the flesh, leaving it scarred, "scoured," and gratified.

To celebrate their union, Ehrlich and Stephens spend their honeymoon in Oklahoma City, at the National Finals Rodeo, where Ehrlich uncovers the connections between the rodeo and marriage. As she writes at the end of “Rules of the Game,” “A good rodeo ride, like a good marriage [. . .] becomes more than what it started out to be. It is effort transformed into effortlessness; a balance becomes grace, the way love goes deep into friendship” (101). (Ehrlich uses essentially the same phrase, “love gone deep into a friendship,” to describe her marriage in “Just Married.”) Love transmutes a marriage into something akin to art and provides its participants with a temporary peace-in-time. The qualities of “acceptance, surrender, respect, and spiritedness,” Ehrlich argues, invest themselves equally in the “good rides” of rodeo and marriage.

Ultimately, Ehrlich concerns herself—and her Self—with the problem of love in the open spaces. Her central geographies are of land and of heart, and her strategy is to fuse the two in the searing heats of sexuality and spirit. Nowhere is this method made more clear than in the final essay of Solace, “A Storm, the Cornfield, and Elk.” Here, Ehrlich closes her meditation with the “double voice of autumn”: “one says everything is ripe; the other says everything is dying. The paradox is exquisite” (127). She cites Ikkyu (the same poet-priest featured in Heart Mountain) on the ever-remindful presence of death in our bones; she recalls the Japanese sense of being “aware,” of a “beauty tinged with sadness.” There is seed-burst and there is harvest.

Ehrlich captures this sense of tense momentum, of life-urge against death-urge, in her portrait of the elk as they enact the rituals of desire and regeneration on the rock-ridges above her ranch; the bull elk “charge with antlered heads, scraping the last of the
life-giving velvet off, until one bull wins and trots into the private timber to mount his prize, standing almost humanly erect on hind legs while holding a cow elk’s hips with his hooves” (130). Ehrlich admits her connection, both mystical and physical, to this ritual of time and place. Once again, the landscape and its elements turn erotic for Ehrlich: “In the fall, my life, too, is timbered, an unaccountably libidinous place: damp, overripe, and fading. [. . . ] Now I want to lie down in the muddy furrows, under the frictional sawing of stalks, under corncobs which look like erections, and out of whose loose husks sprays of bronze silk dangle down” (130). The orgiastic impulse runs through rock and earth and flesh, enlivening and quickening Ehrlich’s connection and taking her beyond mere solace.

Yet at the same time, in a nod to her own spiritual temperament, Ehrlich acknowledges the sacramental character of living in this place. Experience, finally, is holy:

Today the sky is a wafer. Placed on my tongue, it is a wholeness that has already disintegrated; placed under the tongue, it makes my heart beat strongly enough to stretch myself over the winter brilliances to come. Now I feel the tenderness to which this season rots. Its defenselessness can no longer be corrupted. Death is its purity, its sweet mud. The string of storms that came across Wyoming like elephants tied tail to trunk falters now and bleeds into a stillness. (130-31)

Ehrlich manages to reconcile herself finally to death—the death of a lover, the death of a world-in-season—through the acceptance of the nature of the place and of all places. She has worked her way into an understanding of what it must mean to lead a knowledgeable life. Where Wyoming and its long stretches of space once offered her solace, Ehrlich now offers something back. Love, at last, has become reciprocal.
In her second book of nonfiction, *Islands, the Universe, Home* (1991), Ehrlich works again some of her familiar Wyoming territory, but also travels outward and away from that territory to explore the connectedness and relatedness of places and things. While Wyoming remains Ehrlich’s commanding subject, *Islands* is influenced strongly by Ehrlich’s Orientalism and by her interest and belief in Buddhism. (In this collection, in fact, we can see Ehrlich laying some of the groundwork for her later book of essays, *Questions of Heaven*, in which she recounts her journey to China and her climbing of one of the four mountains sacred to Buddhist belief.) *Islands* is also a book about journeying, about the holy “walk” (97) that describes both the passage through life and the passage through belief, and Ehrlich becomes the self-described pilgrim at whose side we ascend the path to some form of knowing.

That path winds through a variety of space and spaces, taking the reader beyond the physical geography of mere earth and toward a more cosmic consideration of place. And while Ehrlich’s meditation on place and time is influenced by Eastern spirituality, it is informed as well by the rationality of physics and of physical science. Ehrlich is interested in the way in which the human—and the human body—is related to the vast spaces that surround us; she is intrigued by the fact of embodiment, of being in the body and of the body, and by the ways in which we make peace with the body-in-place. In this way, *Islands* becomes the history of a search, of a seeking after the “sources” and origins of that embodiment. As Ehrlich says in “Looking for a Lost Dog,” “To find what is lost is an art in some cultures” (4), and Ehrlich works here to promote that art in our own rootless culture.

As in *The Solace of Open Spaces*, the homescape of Wyoming serves Ehrlich as a kind of psychic geography over which she roams, looking for much that she has lost: her mind, her heart,
her dog, her lover, the seasons, her wildness. Time is marked in *Islands* again by the passage of seasons (the book cycles through an annual turn from one spring to the next), and Ehrlich grounds her meditations in the hard, hot facts of those seasons: the summer fires of Yellowstone in 1988, a late-autumn blizzard, the “surges of desire” in spring. As always, Ehrlich is intrigued by the connection of the outward to the inward, of the external world (in its most distant of reaches) to the inner self, and suggests that we might learn of our relation to that world from the fresh evidences of its presence: “Spring teaches me what space and time teach me: that I am a random multiple; that the many fit together; that my swell is a collision of particles” (24). We educate ourselves from the lessons of the world; we read the signs of spring, we contemplate the wonders of particle theory, and we place ourselves thereby in relation to the wide world around us. By understanding the physics of both worlds—of the physical and the spiritual—we organize the chaos of loss and desire, the same ghosts which haunt all of Ehrlich’s work.

For Ehrlich, our place in the world reduces itself to the metaphor of the island, so that she begins her meditation with what becomes a recurring elemental motif: the island in the lake on her Wyoming ranch, and the “bachelor duck” who swims there, solitary. Insularity marks our existence on this planet, says Ehrlich; in many ways, we are reduced to the intimate islands of our bodies, the small planets of flesh and blood and unyielding desire. But the body is only one in a chain of related islands in “this island universe” (55), as body inhabits planet and as planet arcs through universe:

To think of an island as a singular speck or a monument to human isolation is missing the point. Islands beget islands: a terrestrial island is surrounded by an island of water, which is surrounded by an island of air, all of which makes up our
island universe. That's how the mind works too: one idea unspools into a million concentric thoughts. To sit on an island, then, is not a way of disconnecting ourselves but, rather, a way we can understand relatedness. (64)

Even consciousness is necessarily and strategically insular, a distinct route to understanding: “To separate our thoughts into islands is the peculiar way we humans have of knowing something, of locating ourselves on the planet and in society” (65-66). This is the paradox of location: if we wish to know of our relation to the world, we must first isolate ourselves in that world and acknowledge our separateness. Only then can we look about ourselves and place ourselves in that complex of island geographies. Only then can we comprehend the delicate lacework of connection.

Indeed, if Ehrlich pursues one truth through all of her work, it is the truth told of and by the individual body. Again and again in Islands, Ehrlich simultaneously laments and celebrates the physical fact of her (and our) embodiment. In “This Autumn Morning,” for example, Ehrlich once more places the body in relation to seasonal time and space:

It’s September. Light is on the wane. There is no fresh green breast of earth to embrace. None of that. Just to breathe is a kind of violence against death. To long for love, to have experienced passion’s deep pleasure, even once, is to understand the mercilessness of having a human body whose memory rides desire’s back unanchored from season to season. (70)

The curse of being human is to possess the body, and to possess the memory of that possession. To soften the bite of that curse, Ehrlich seeks out several cures. On the one hand, she looks close to home—to the lake on her ranch, to the familiar twinned geographies of body and earth; at one point, Ehrlich wonders “how many
ways water shapes the body, how the body shapes desire, how desire moves water, how water stirs color, how thought rises from land, how wind polishes thought, how spirit shapes matter, how a stream that carves through rock is shaped by rock" (81). In these proximate places, Ehrlich discovers the effective acts of body and desire, and the ways in which desire moves persistently over and through human-form and land-form. On the other hand, Ehrlich looks far afield—travels to Japan, to her native California and the Santa Barbara Channel Islands, to Hawaii and Florida and Mexico—all the time observing phenomena both natural and unnatural, both physical and spiritual, in order to piece together a satisfactory cosmology. In all of these places, Ehrlich finds connection—to the past, to the soul, to the complex hearts of the natural world—and a form of compassion that generously accommodates itself to the random offspring of desire.

In the final essay of the collection, “The Fasting Heart,” Ehrlich returns to her ranch, and to her island-on-the-ranch (she has named it “Alcatraz”), and contemplates the paradox of the hungering heart. Amidst the work of birthing and doctoring sick calves, of surviving late-winter and early-spring snowstorms—and amidst memories of excursions far away from this ranchworld—Ehrlich comes back to the central truth of her meditation and her search: “how the body itself is a complete truth” (165). If we can make at least partial sense of the text that is blood and lungs and flesh and brain and, most importantly, heart, then we can make at least partial sense of all that surrounds and envelops that bodily text. The trick, Ehrlich suggests, is first to empty the body—and the heart—and to make space available for hunger itself: “To fast does not mean to go without but to become empty and in so doing open oneself” (164). In that pure emptiness, in that frank opening of the self to experience, we begin again to replenish the heart’s need. At the very end of Islands, Ehrlich climbs to a spot in the mountains
near her ranch and considers the confluences there of time and space as evidenced in limestone tablets and birdflight and creek sounds. She senses the connection between her body and the world around that body:

At the end of the day a pigeon flutters around my head, dribbling crop milk into my mouth. Delicious . . . Then, pitching out over the precipice, I pass beyond this rock-studded mountain. So much has broken away already, there is nothing to drink but air, nothing left to walk on but water, yet the fasting heart grows full. (196)

Even as we break away from all that connects us—even as our island-selves take isolation’s embrace—we are nourished by the elements through which we move. We fill our “fasting hearts” with the movement of the body through time and space; like water, like air, we shape and transform all that we pass through and act upon, even as we are shaped and transformed by that very passage. Such, Ehrlich surmises, is the beatitude and the mystery of the human heart.

Ironically, and nearly tragically, that very human heart would become part of the dramatic material of Ehrlich’s next book, A Match to the Heart (1994), a work that recounts a pivotal, transitional period in Ehrlich’s life. The book, like so many of Ehrlich’s other books, begins in Wyoming. On 6 August 1991, during a late-afternoon ranch-walk with her two dogs, Ehrlich was struck (for the second time in her life) by lightning. Isolated from human help and contemplating death, Ehrlich made her agonizing, muddled way back to her ranch-house, made a hardly coherent 911 call, and lapsed into unconsciousness. She would wake in the presence of emergency medical helpers; she would be transported to a local hospital, where she would receive inadequate treatment (oddly but perhaps logically enough, as Ehrlich points out, Wyoming has the
highest death rate per capita from lightning strikes, probably because so few medical personnel know how to recognize and deal with such trauma); she would be released from the hospital and return to her ranch, where she would be attended to, for a time, by her husband, from whom Ehrlich was presently separated.

Eventually, Ehrlich was removed from Wyoming to Livingston, Montana, where friends were working on the filming of *A River Runs Through It* and where she could receive more full-time ministations. However, Ehrlich still made no significant progress toward wellness. Returning to Wyoming, Ehrlich fell further into physical, medical chaos (“the presence of death in the room was vivid”), and finally made a call to her parents in California seeking their help; Ehrlich’s father flew out to Greybull, loaded his daughter onto the plane, and carried Ehrlich back to her homeplace, to the same Santa Barbara hospital in which Ehrlich had been born.

This move would mark the beginning of Ehrlich’s leavetaking of Wyoming and her homecoming to California. A landscape which once had provided Ehrlich with solace and healing now offered her only the ironic and immediate possibility of her own death; to save herself (once again, it seems), Ehrlich had to uproot herself, leave Wyoming and her constructed homeplace in the Big Horns. At the same time, Ehrlich found herself heading back in the direction of her birthplace, of her family (to her parents, both alive at the time, and to her sister Gale), and of a coastal landscape that occupied a profound place in Ehrlich’s imagination.

More immediately, though, Ehrlich returned to a “hospitalscape” (42) in which her body provided one of the significant, observed landforms. So much of *Match to the Heart* concerns itself with Ehrlich’s coming to know the secret, intricate physiognomy of her own body; as she explains:

> How odd that we walk around with these bodies, live in them, die in them, make love with them, yet know almost
nothing of their intimate workings, the judicious balancing act of homeostasis, the delicate architecture of their organs and systems, or the varying weather of their private, internal environments. Up to this point my living and breathing had been an act of faith. I existed but I didn’t know how. I was a stranger to the body whose consciousness said, “I know myself,” which meant only that I had decoded the brain’s electrochemical message that told me to think such a thought. (27)

Stricken and debilitated, Ehrlich journeys once again over the topography of the body, looking vividly into that topography now. With the help of her cardiologist, Dr. Blaine Braniff, Ehrlich educates herself in the physiology of her physical self; she pores over books, she talks of anatomy, she goes on rounds (as she gradually improves in her own condition), and most dramatically observes the human heart itself, held in the hand of a surgeon over an opened, living body (an “organscape” Ehrlich calls it). In some ways, Ehrlich here reaches her destination as a writer: at last, Ehrlich sees and studies the heart-as-organ, stands as close as she possibly can to what might be called the essential “heartness” of things.

Yet A Match to the Heart is also a book about California, about Ehrlich’s reacquainting herself with a landscape she had left (or abandoned) over twenty years earlier. Back at the ocean’s edge, Ehrlich rediscovers and reacknowledges the primacy of water in her life; indeed, even at the book’s beginning, when Ehrlich describes herself as she lies unconscious, felled by the stroke of lightning, she imagines that unconsciousness as a watery, aqueous state. And as Ehrlich recovers, she takes up residence at the shore, where she studies the biotic communities that constitute those tidal areas, those vital ecotones. Just as in The Solace of Open Spaces Ehrlich came to be home through the close study of a
new place, so in A Match to the Heart she comes to be at home again by uncovering the newness of an old place.

As if to confirm her own reconfigured sense of place, Ehrlich makes more than one driving trip back to Wyoming during her two-year recuperation. On one of her final visits, Ehrlich sees the ranch—the same place where so much of her original healing took place, the same place where a now-failing marriage had begun so promisingly in love, the same place where Ehrlich enjoyed a rejuvenating relation to a meaningful landscape—as a suddenly alien and altered territory:

The ranch looked the same but was different. [...] this was no longer my home and I knew I had to leave. [...] I felt like a river moving inside a river: I was moving but something else was rushing over top of me. There was too much to take in: the deep familiarity with a place where I had lived for so long and the detachment a year away brings. The rivers were layers of grief sliding, the love of open spaces being nudged under fallen logs, pressed flat against cutbanks and point bars. I felt as if I'd never left, and at the same time as if I could never come home. (140)

With much significance, Ehrlich captures her experience in the images of water; all those compassionate "open spaces" give way to new spaces of shoreline and ocean-horizon. Ehrlich circles back in this passage—and in this book—to her beginnings as a Westerner. Here, Ehrlich writes, "at the edge of the continent, time and distance stopped; in the lull between sets of waves I could get a fresh start" (199). How far Ehrlich has come from those "open spaces" of Wyoming, from the towering shelter of the Big Horns, from the redeeming expanses of land. Embracing family, embracing water, embracing her past, Ehrlich manages to illuminate once again the heart's own mysteries.
Ehrlich’s next book would endow her career with a degree of symmetry and maintain the dominant arc of her nonfiction work. A photobiography, *John Muir: Nature’s Visionary* (2000) brings Ehrlich back both to her home-state and to the life of one of her culture-heroes. Having already offered abbreviated comment on Muir in an introduction to his first book, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911; Penguin Nature Library, 1987), Ehrlich here expands her view and presents a contained life of this writer-naturalist-activist—“contained” in the sense that the biography is not exhaustive nor intensely investigative. Ehrlich’s text is adorned, though, with an abundance of splendid photographs of Muir’s descendants and of the landscapes so intimate to Muir’s world, which complement the written word and stretch, in their own fashion, the frame of Ehrlich’s portrait.

By writing Muir’s life, Ehrlich in some ways also acknowledges the significant influence his work has exerted on her own life and work. Early on in the biography, Ehrlich reveals some of their shared territory, writing of Muir that “the more he surrendered to the natural world, the more wide awake he became” (8). This particular relationship with the natural world—this act of submission, accompanied by a subsequent awakening and quickening of self—is the same kind of relationship Ehrlich describes for herself in *The Solace of Open Spaces*. Likewise, Ehrlich looks for and uncovers the “wild heart” (159) that beats fervently throughout Muir’s life and work; wildness is at the center of all things close to Muir, and the heart functions for Ehrlich as the emblem of all things wild and all things beloved for their wildness. At the end of every one of Ehrlich’s explorations lies the human heart: muscled, pulsating, unbound, the source and origin of natural desire.

In the case of John Muir, that heart was an interior landscape in and of itself. As Ehrlich only half-playfully suggests: “If open-heart surgery had been performed on John Muir, a mountain stippled
with glaciers might have been found where the heart should have been” (90). Of course, Muir came to his love of mountainscapes gradually, having been born (like Ehrlich) near the sea; he would have to leave his native Scotland (which he did in 1849, at the age of ten), endure hard work and physical punishment on the family’s eighty-acre farm in Wisconsin, study briefly at the University of Wisconsin, evade the Civil War draft by walking to Canada, and simply wander. No more peripatetic naturalist lived in America, surely, than John Muir; known for his 1,000-mile walk from Jeffersonville, Indiana, to Cedar Key, Florida, taken in 1867, when he was twenty-nine, Muir would continue repeatedly to “answer the call of the wild,” as Ehrlich puts it, his body and his ear ever attuned to the rhythms of the natural world. And, as Ehrlich points out, Muir always would take consolation in wild things, seeking in them the same kind of solace that Ehrlich first discovered for herself in Wyoming.

For Muir, “foot-hungry” and curious, that consolation would come to center itself in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California; finally coming to these mountains and locating himself in the high fastnesses of this place, Muir would discover his “vocation as witness, celebrant and author” (76). (One cannot help but wonder if the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming did not also bring to Ehrlich a similar kind of epiphany, a similar sense of vocation.) In the Sierra Nevadas, Muir would spend a good part of his lifetime detailing “the etiquette of the wild” and (like a later Wisconsin farmboy, Aldo Leopold) plotting an “ethic of how to live in the natural world” (78). What held particular fascination for Muir in his mountains were the glaciers, which he saw as the solution to the puzzle of Yosemite’s origins. Like so many naturalists after him, Muir became an interpreter of landscapes, developing what Ehrlich calls his “mountain intimacy” and telling “mountain truths.” In time, says Ehrlich, Muir was “doing nothing less than
reading the history of ice, rock, and mountain building” (97). Without reducing the landscape to mere sign, Muir imagined the natural world as a text: readable, thick with meaning and story, packed with legible, significant detail.

While Ehrlich clearly is Muir’s kin as a naturalist, as a “witness” and “celebrant” of the natural world, she is also drawn to the other dominant impulse of his life: that of the activist and the preservationist. Having recognized and celebrated—first as a wanderer, and later as a writer—the magnificence of these mountain-places, Muir finally and necessarily had to situate himself as the defender of these places. This man, who “carried a whole mountain range in his heart” (164), had to find a way to externalize the meaning and value of these mountains and of all wild places in a time when meaning and value were defined predominantly in terms of economic utility. What was primarily a spiritual experience had somehow to be translated into a political vocabulary. And so Muir entered the fray; he came down from the mountain to write his books, to court the conservation interests of Theodore Roosevelt, to take on the “wise-use” philosophy of Gifford Pinchot, and to assume in 1892 the first presidency of the Sierra Club.

The history of Muir’s battles on behalf of American wildness and wilderness would prove to be a mixed one: victories for Yosemite, losses over the Hetch Hetchy. But as Ehrlich points out, Muir summoned all of his energies to challenge what were the dominant nineteenth-century American values and ideologies, pushing hard and persistently “against the grain of Industrial America” (180). He engaged himself on behalf of the landscapes he so loved and which had fed his “wild heart”; he worked to promote “the healing spirituality of the wilderness” as a thing of value in a materially minded culture. In so doing, Muir helped reshape the environmental history and environmental thinking of that culture.
It is hard, in truth, to imagine a more appropriate biographical subject for Ehrlich than John Muir, so similar are their sympathies and their loves. The desire of the human heart for what is wild—in both the body's flesh and the earth's abundance—impels the works and the worlds of both Muir and Ehrlich. Both are taken with the sweet mystery near the center of things, with the solace that abides in the intimate landscapes. At the end of her biography, Ehrlich writes: "To John Muir, a sacred thread ran through all things" (222). That same "sacred thread" winds its red way through all that is close to Gretel Ehrlich, connecting the disparate landscapes of her American West in a fine weave of spiritual solace and heart's ease.
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