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The Book of Water

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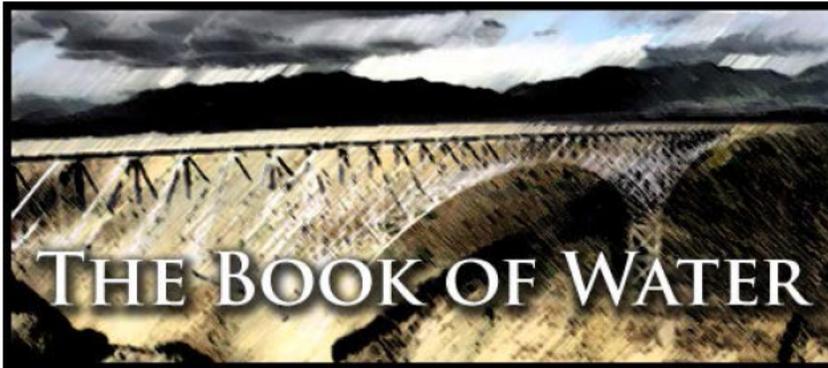
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Read poetry by Joe Wilkins
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by Joe Wilkins

I. Prologue

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I was born in drought.

For a quick moment my father held my red, wet body. Then he set me in my mother's arms and drove through the star-cut spring dark the 90 miles back to our sheep and hay ranch out on the Big Dry of eastern Montana. There, my father pulled on his hip-boots, grabbed a shovel, and trudged north to open the irrigation headgate, to bring what water he could to our thirsty fields.

Weeks later, after a long-prayed-for May storm, I was baptized in a barrel of runoff rain water. The priest took me from my mother and plunged me down and down.

Water pouring like sudden rivers from each thick sleeve of his vestments, he lifted me from rain to sky.

II. Only the Sufferer Knows His Grief

The sky is wide and white and I walk the dusty mile down Queens Point Road to what's left of the river.

At the bridge I slip between fence wires and climb down the dirt bank. I kick off my shoes and wade out into one of the few stagnant pools of water that still spot the stone belly of the Musselshell River. For most of the year the Musselshell is the only running water that cuts the hundreds of prairie miles between the Missouri and the Yellowstone. But it's August now. And the Musselshell too has dried.

I gather a pile of smooth, palm-sized rocks. I weigh them in my hands, spit on them, rub dust from their faces. In one of the pools, a few carp still dart about, their fins and tails breaking the shallow water here and there. I take aim.

With a barrage of six or eight well-thrown stones, I drive a fat one onto the gravel. I come closer. The fish flaps and twists and sucks at the air, its bright scales paling with dust.

III. A Hymn in Praise of Wisdom

I wake in the dark, watch for a moment the rise and fall of my younger brother's chest as he sleeps beside me. He is only nine, I think, as I ease out of bed and pull on jeans and a snap shirt, and that means he doesn't have to work like I do.

I walk quietly down the hallway, tiptoeing by my mother's closed door. She is alone in there. My father is a year dead. And so even though I am just ten, I must wake in the dark to go irrigate our fields.

I start at the ditch and walk along the raised dike until I come to the lip of the water, maybe 40 feet from the back fence. I sit on the dry ground and chew an alfalfa stem and wait. The water burbles and seeps into the cracks of the ground, spreading slowly around the rocks, wetting the dusty roots of alfalfa. This land is so dry. The Big Dry, I say out loud, to no one and close my eyes then, say it again. In the darkness behind my lids I see the sun rise and the fields steam only an hour and water snakes twist beneath the shade of rocks and everything go down to dust. I open my eyes, spit the alfalfa's green pith on the ground. I stand and shake thoughts of sun and dust and snakes from my head. The water has reached the fence. I walk back down the dike, the mud of the field sucking at my hip boots.

At the ditch bank, before wading into the water to pull the canvas dam, I pause. The brimming ditch is a runnel of reflected sky, the fish mouths of stars. Carefully, I step into the moon.

IV. Faith at Its Height in Total Desertion

I hoist a 50-pound bag of dry cement on my knee and pour it from the lip of the wide hole that will soon be the Melstone Public Swimming Pool.

Though the noon sun is nearly unbearable, everyone is smiling and joking. We are building a pool. Melstone, the little outpost town my family calls home, sits at the north bend of the Musselshell River, the Big Dry opening up to the east. Maybe fifty people live in the city limits. Another hundred or so farm and ranch in the scrubland about. So when the cement is solid and the diving boards bolted down, Melstone, Montana, will be the smallest incorporated town in the United State with a public swimming pool.

Now, Melstone isn't the kind of place where taxes and public projects are looked on kindly, but we're so dry out here no one cares—farm wives have brought heaping plates of cookies and jugs of lemonade, the volunteer fire department has driven a truck over to hose us down every hour or so, and we all wear neon t-shirts featuring a cartoon cowboy trying to cool off in a horse trough. *Boy, the cramped cowboy laments, we sure could use a pool in Melstone!*

I don't really like the t-shirts. Bright green, a grinning horse standing on his hind hooves—they seem to me undignified, childish, like we are somehow delighted by our forsaken circumstances: less than twelve inches of rain a year, creeks that slick to mud come May, wells pumping water so alkaline you can't water houseplants with it, shouldn't even slop it into your dog's dish.

T-shirts or not, though, we'll have this one wet place, I think, as I smooth the cement with a long-handled shovel, as the sun bears down. The wind blowing dust over all our faces.

V. His Former Happiness

I step and splash through the dark, swampy water and am still dry in my good rubber hip-boots.

I think that there is nothing like this: the weight and heft of water against your dry skin. It pleases me, as does this unexpected flood in the valley, the first I've ever seen—every slough and bend running like a river, the fields new lakes, catfish gathering in the deep channels of the ditches.

I know these few days of flood will probably do as much damage as the last three summers of drought—the alfalfa will rot and drown, and the hay, when it comes, will be thin and full of weeds—but right now I don't care. We're always in the middle of a drought and this flood is some kind of miracle. I have never seen such water.

I come to a rise of land and step up onto it. I feel reckless, full of the wingbeats of birds. I look at my boots and wiggle my dry, invisible toes. I smile. My toes are thirsty birds, I think, as I sit in the dirt and pull off my boots, run barefooted back into the flood.

VI. His Present Misery

I follow the polished, dirt tracks of the road out onto a treeless plain and idle on the four-wheeler for a moment. It is July, the sun a white hole in the cloudless sky. I breathe, and the very air is a breath of fire.

I drive the fence line, stopping now and then to pull a rotten post or untangle fence wires. Since we leased our place last year, I no longer irrigate, no longer get to slop and muck through the water. Now, I wake at 5:30 every morning and drive south an hour down Queens Point Road into the sandrocks and jackpines of the Bull Mountains, where I work another man's ranch. There are no rivers or creeks that run in the Bulls, only a few artesian springs here and there, so I spend my days fixing fence or driving grain truck or trailing cattle in the dry air, in the interminable sun.

Today I wait until it is nearly unbearable—the burnt skin of my arms and face, sweat and dust and bits of dry grass in my mouth, my throat—then turn the four-wheeler away from the fence line and bump over the prairie. I pull up in the shade of a pine and get down on my knees at the muddy burble of Fulton's Spring. I splash water on my neck, put my lips to the puddle, to the rotting mass of leaves and black mud, and drink.

VII. Wisdom Is Beyond Human Reach

In the 1920s, over 60,000 thirsty farmers left Montana with dusty boots and broken hearts. At least that's what Mr. Lloyd tells me and the other half-dozen farmers' kids in his Montana history class. We laugh, call the quitters candy-asses. Someone boasts that it takes a meaner breed than most to make it out on the Big Dry, that it doesn't matter if rain don't follow the plow when you're smart as a coyote and tough as a jackrabbit. Mr. Lloyd shakes his head, his long hair swaying about his bearded face.

Mr. Lloyd is a Democrat, like my mother, but he doesn't know how to lay low or stay out of trouble. He eats his sprout sandwiches in front of everyone in the teacher's lounge, wears sandals so you can see his toes. And in class he keeps messing with our myths. He tells us that Burton K. Wheeler, a labor activist and politician who was long known as Bolshevik Burt, was the greatest Montanan that ever lived. He calls Montana a colony for outside interests and shows us pictures of the mountain they turned inside out over in Butte. Half the town fell in that hole, he says. And now the water at the bottom is so toxic it'll kill any bird that lands on it. He points at us and with a flourish finishes, saying Federal giveaways and BLM land are the only thing keeping your farms afloat. You aren't so tough. You're just dying slower than most.

He's fired, of course, midway through the school year. And he goes home that last day and rolls and smokes a joint and leaves it burning in an ashtray near the curtains. Hours after he is gone for good, the sky midnight black and cold, the house he rents near the swimming pool goes up in flame.

VIII. Transcendence

The day is hot already and too bright—the cool, moonless twilight of an hour ago obliterated. I stand at the edge of the lot, waiting for my friends, waiting to climb back in the van and drive into the true heat of the day. We are traveling cross-country. We are all 20 or 22, all wearing patchy beards and dirty sandals, all unwashed and hungover most every morning—and all entirely beside ourselves with joy for this trip.

We are in northeast Arizona now, a true desert, and it reminds me mightily of home. I shift on my feet, breathe, sip at my 25-cent coffee. It's terrible, and I love it. My friends step out of the grocery, packing cake donuts and coffee cups and half gallons of generic orange juice. As if on cue now they all stretch up their arms in the long, glaring light. We look out at the still rising sun, at the sweeping scablands and red hills. We talk a bit about today's roads, blow on our coffee.

There is a man standing near us. He is small, skinny, as bent and knotted as cholla. His long hair greasy, the skin of his face studded with dark pits. A mashed, unlit cigarette rides his trembling lips. He is walking our way. Embarrassed, thinking he must have seen me staring, I step toward the van, hoping my friends will follow.

I know you, the man calls, pointing at me, from Vietnam. Yeah, man, I know you. Christ. Ain't you glad to be out of that rain? Back in the desert?

I don't know what to say. I don't say anything.

The man stares at me a moment longer. Fuck yeah, man. I know you.

IX. Facts Give the Lie

I heave a shovelful of dirt at the flames dancing up the pine.

There is an explosion. Despite my shoveling, the tree has topped out, the whole great, branchy crown of it flowering with fire. The wind and heat drive me back. I think I am falling. I taste earth and ash. I scramble up and spit and stumble down the trail.

Someone yells something about needing more shovels on the ridge. I don't know who it is that's yelling. I don't know who anyone is anymore. I am a few weeks back from college, working again this summer on that dryland Bull Mountain ranch. This morning my boss and I were the only men out on the fire, but it's spread fast. Whenever I turn around now there is some new body—sweat-streaked and ash-smudged, back bent, working a shovel.

I hear the voice again. Again about the ridge. Through the smoke I see it some ways in front of me. I am trying to get there. I am trying. I trip on root or rock, fall to my knees. I am in the dirt.

Now there is a voice very near me. There is a sure hand on my shoulder, the metal rim of a canteen at my lips: *Here, lean your head back.*

I do. I close my eyes and drink. The water is cool and tastes of earth and iron, is somehow just sweet, like wild plums or chokecherries. I think I have never had something so good. I breathe. I'm sitting on my ass in the dirt in the middle of a fire. Alone.

I rise and walk toward the flame-bright ridge.

X. Epilogue

Later, I will walk the dirt path to the river and pull off my shirt and boots and pants, pile them beneath a tangle of willows. I will slip then out of my boxer-

shorts and set them too in the buzzing shade.

With the river at my thighs and my back to the current, I will sit down. The chill like a blow to the chest. I will lean back and back anyway, until water rushes just below my chin.

I will place the heels of my hands against the rocky bottom, dig my feet into the gravel. And close my eyes, lay my whole self down: river over my face and chest, roaring in my ears, that cold taste of stone on my lips.

I will open my eyes: the pines, the mountains, the rippling sky: all the world: water.

Joe Wilkins lives with his wife and son on the north Iowa prairie, where he teaches writing at Waldorf College. He is the author of two books of poems, *Killing the Murnion Dogs* (forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press) and *Ragged Point Road* (Main Street Rag, 2006), and his work appears in *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Sun*, *Orion*, and *Slate*, among other magazines and literary journals.

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