COLE P. THOMPSON

Against The Current

Barry Lopez On Writing About Nature And The Nature Of Writing

MICHAEL SHAPIRO

The beauty of Barry Lopez's writing is in the details. On the first page of Arctic Dreams *(Vintage), he writes about walking among birds in the high Arctic who, in the absence of trees, nest on the ground: "I gazed down at a single horned lark no bigger than my fist. She stared back resolute as iron." His response is to bow to these birds, a gesture of prayerful respect and humble appreciation.*

Lopez's first nonfiction book, 1978's Of Wolves and Men *(Scribner), examines humanity's relationship to the wolf. The book helped reshape Americans' attitudes toward this native predator and likely played a role in the reintroduction of the wolf in the Northwest. Since then Lopez has produced more than a dozen finely crafted books. In "A Voice," the introductory essay of his 1998 collection* About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory *(Vintage), Lopez recalls having pushed his alphabet blocks out the window at the age of three so his mother would have to take him out to the garden to retrieve them. It's a richly symbolic vignette — words propelling the author into nature — that foretells a life of conscious exploration. It's no accident that* About This Life *has only thirteen pages of autobiography. The rest of the book is a selection of Lopez's finest essays. The message is clear: "If you want to know me, read my work."*

Lopez spent much of his boyhood in the wild creeks and vast fields of the mid-twentieth-century San Fernando Valley. For his tenth birthday a family friend gave him a flock of twenty homing pigeons. Watching the birds soar and dive was "a source of indescribable joy," Lopez writes in the essay "A Voice." "I would turn slowly under them in circles of glee." When he was eleven, his family moved to New York City, and he studied at a Jesuit prep school in Manhattan. Though he missed, to the point of grief, the coyotes, snakes, and other creatures of the valley, he relished the academic challenges of his new urban environment. He devoured novels by John Steinbeck, Herman Melville, and others and went on to college at Notre Dame. As a young man Lopez considered becoming a Trappist monk and spent time at Gethsemani, the monastery where the author Thomas Merton lived. Though Lopez ultimately didn't choose the monastery, he views his writing as morally informed and sees parallels between the monastic life and the writer's life.

Lopez settled on the west slope of the Cascade Range along the McKenzie River, east of Eugene, Oregon, in 1970. He continued to maintain this home alone after a thirty-year marriage ended in the midnineties. He has long been committed to a domestic partner and her four grown children who live nearby. His home is decorated with friends' artwork, and the dining table where we conducted this interview is made of black walnut cut and milled by Lopez and a friend.

The evening before our meeting, Lopez asked if I could pick up a sign he'd requested from the Eugene office of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. An unusual number of salmon were spawning in the McKenzie River just across from Lopez's home, and he wanted to warn boaters not to disturb them. We met on a bracingly fresh morning on the autumnal equinox. Lopez poured me a steaming mug of herbal tea, and we sat down to talk. More than three hours later, we clicked off the tape recorder and walked down to the river. A couple of hefty chinook salmon wriggled in the clear water, sending out tiny waves in all directions.

This is an abridged and edited version of an interview that previously appeared in the Michigan Quarterly Review.

— Ed.

Shapiro: What are you working on now?

Lopez: Usually I'm uncomfortable talking about works in progress, but I can tell you what I'm doing besides writing. Lately I feel a sense of urgency, a sense of national threat, and because of that, I've become more involved with higher education, with public presentations and collaborative work, and with trying to advance the work of younger writers. For someone who's not a social activist, I seem suddenly to be up to my neck in such things.

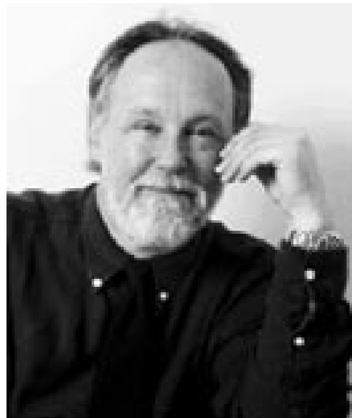
Shapiro: Political things?

Lopez: Yes. I really think the direction the country is headed is self-destructive: the psychological relief we pursue with consumption, the compulsion we have for distraction, the degree to which lying is now acceptable in business and politics.

Maybe what I'm really working on is grappling with my own reputation as a writer and what to do with it. In a very small

way I've become something of a public figure. If you find yourself in this position, what are you supposed to do? The answer, for me, is to take it for what it's worth: Lend your name to worthy causes and help younger writers. Read other people's manuscripts. Try to open doors for writers who are devoted to story and language, and who have serious questions about the fate of humanity.

The main focus of my written work now is a large nonfiction project, on the scale of *Arctic Dreams*. It's set in five different places I've been traveling to: the high Arctic, the Galápagos Islands, northern Kenya, the Tanami Desert in Australia, and Antarctica. It further develops the theme of *Arctic Dreams*, which is a relationship between landscape and imagination.



BARRY LOPEZ

I've also recently published a set of interrelated short stories called *Resistance* (Knopf). In it, a fictional Office of Inland Security sends a letter to several American writers and artists, informing them that the American public finds their work disturbing and regards their politics as a threat to democracy. It's a letter of indictment and notification. The government wants to have a talk with each of them. It's not the kind of letter we're used to seeing in the United States, but throughout history dictators and tyrants have behaved like this. There are nine testimonies in *Resistance* from people who refuse to cooperate.

Shapiro: When I heard you speak in 2001, you mentioned that you'd had meetings with an oil-company president.

Lopez: Yes, the president of Arco called me and said he'd been reading my work for ten years and really wanted to talk to me about civilization and oil and, as he put it, "where the hell we're going." I thought this was a strange request, but we're living in strange times, so I said yes. We flew up to the North Slope of Alaska and walked around for a couple of days. This man was really serious and deeply concerned. He was looking for solutions.

Through him, I began to meet a number of executives who were profoundly embarrassed by the Enron fiasco, and by the arrogance with which the tobacco industry had testified before Congress, and by a certain kind of ruthlessness in American corporate culture. Being businesspeople, however, such men and women have very few outlets for frankly expressing their concerns. They can't speak about them at a stockholders' meeting; they can't address these issues at a board of directors' meeting; they can't even speak openly among other executives without drawing suspicion. I want to get these savvy, ethical, powerful businesspeople together to talk. Often they don't even know of one another. They've been politically isolated by our polarizing society.

Shapiro: And by laws that require them to try to earn the greatest profit for shareholders. These people are legally prevented from acting first in an ethical and moral way.

Lopez: They are. So I've been trying to create venues where they can talk to each other. I'm interested in how the citizenry can address issues such as the availability of fresh water without involving government and business. Businesses are interested in solving problems to their advantage. Nothing against them — that's what they do. And government is interested in solving domestic problems in a way that helps the economy, which may not be what citizens want.

Part of what has happened to me recently is that, like so many others, I've become acutely aware of the political danger the country is in. The champions of material wealth, the acolytes of technology, and the religious extremists are so loud, so bellicose, so uncompromising. Who will rein them in? Who's not afraid to criticize their notions of "progress"? The hallmark of their progress now in Third World countries is not further stratification into the haves and have-nots; it's social disintegration. The social cohesion that defines a village; that provides healthcare, insurance, love — everything that's been turned into a product or an industry in our culture — is threatened by the indifference of corporate capitalism.

As a writer, I have a responsibility, as I see it, to society. I want to be careful, however, not to take up a position of thinking that I actually know something, that I have answers. The only thing I know as a writer is how to tell a story. I sit at the typewriter and make a pattern, a story about how my culture works or behaves. Do you know that essay "Flight"?

Shapiro: Yes, in *About This Life*.

Lopez: I had this question: Why are air freighters flying all over the planet every day with all these products? What's behind this? "Flight" is a piece of journalism, a reporter experiencing a set of events and then writing about them in such a way that you can grasp something as abstract as high-speed consumption. I don't have any particular skill with economic data.

Shapiro: But the reader probably would not be drawn in by the economics. I was interested in that essay because it's personal: you're on the phone with your wife saying, "I'm just so disoriented," and she says, "That's because you're not going anywhere; you're just going." That human story is compelling.

Lopez: I feel the same way. I think the writer should serve that function in society. The writer should be a person who sojourns in that chaos and comes back to write something cogent and coherent. That's one's service to society, and that's the relationship I want with the reader. I want to say, "This is what I saw — what do you think?"

Shapiro: Most of your nonfiction involves travel to remote places.

Lopez: I think my compulsion to leave town is based on a belief that it is only by leaving the security of the familiar that I can learn whether my particular metaphors can continue to ground the reader in something trustworthy. If I put myself, say, at a social and cultural disadvantage in an Eskimo village, where nobody wants to talk to me, and I go through all of that

self-doubt about whether or not I should be there, totally confused — if I have those thoughts, I think, *Good, I'm in the right place*. Now I just have to hold on in that windstorm.

When I come back from these places and tell readers something utterly remarkable about those people, the last thing I want them to think is: *I want to go live in that village*. You can posit that many traditional societies have basically solved the problems of maintaining stable social organization: holding a family together around sexual infidelity, spiritual infidelity, economic infidelity. But they can't solve our problems for us. We have to fend for ourselves to straighten out the social chaos we've created; our families have been torn apart by the pressure of consumption and having to get and keep jobs.

Here's something disturbing: We can't survive economically in this country without a high rate of divorce. Social disintegration is required for the economy to work. The family has got to be broken down into independent consumer units. In divorced families, kids often have two homes, two sets of clothes, two sets of toys, two of this, two of that. Unless you undermine stable extended families, unless you regularly change the "answer" to filling a wide range of individual human needs and constantly subdivide those needs, you can't keep the American consumer juggernaut going.

So if I go to Australia and visit with Warlpiri people, what can I learn from them about long-term social stability? They don't have the latest cars or clothes, or this pervasive, hyperkinetic milieu of distraction in which we live. But they have to deal with the same basic social problems. And perhaps we can learn from them.

My writerly responsibility is to try to be discerning — even when camped in the Transantarctic Mountains — about how these circumstances I've put myself in relate to readers who are just trying to hold a family together, stay employed, deal with dying parents, and change the baby's diapers when they haven't slept in twenty-four hours. How can I help? The one thing I know how to do, I think, is turn a pattern I see into language. I like to go a long ways away, try to recognize a human pattern there, and then put it in an accessible form for people at home, so they might recognize the outline of what's been troubling them and figure out what to do about it.

Shapiro: I remember as a child reading Loren Eiseley. He wrote about fields being plowed over for shopping malls and wondered what would happen to the rabbits and the mice and the other creatures who'd made that piece of land their home. And I thought, *Finally, somebody feels the same way I do*. I think that's one of the greatest services a writer can provide, to say, "You're not alone in these feelings."

Lopez: One of the things you have to do when you edit your work is make sure that when you use the first person, it's about more than just you. We need the story of *us*. If I feel compelled to share something about my private life, I say to myself, *This had better be good*. When I put *About This Life* together, I decided, for the first time, that I'd include something about my private life, hoping my experiences would be easy for people to identify with.

(end of excerpt)

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