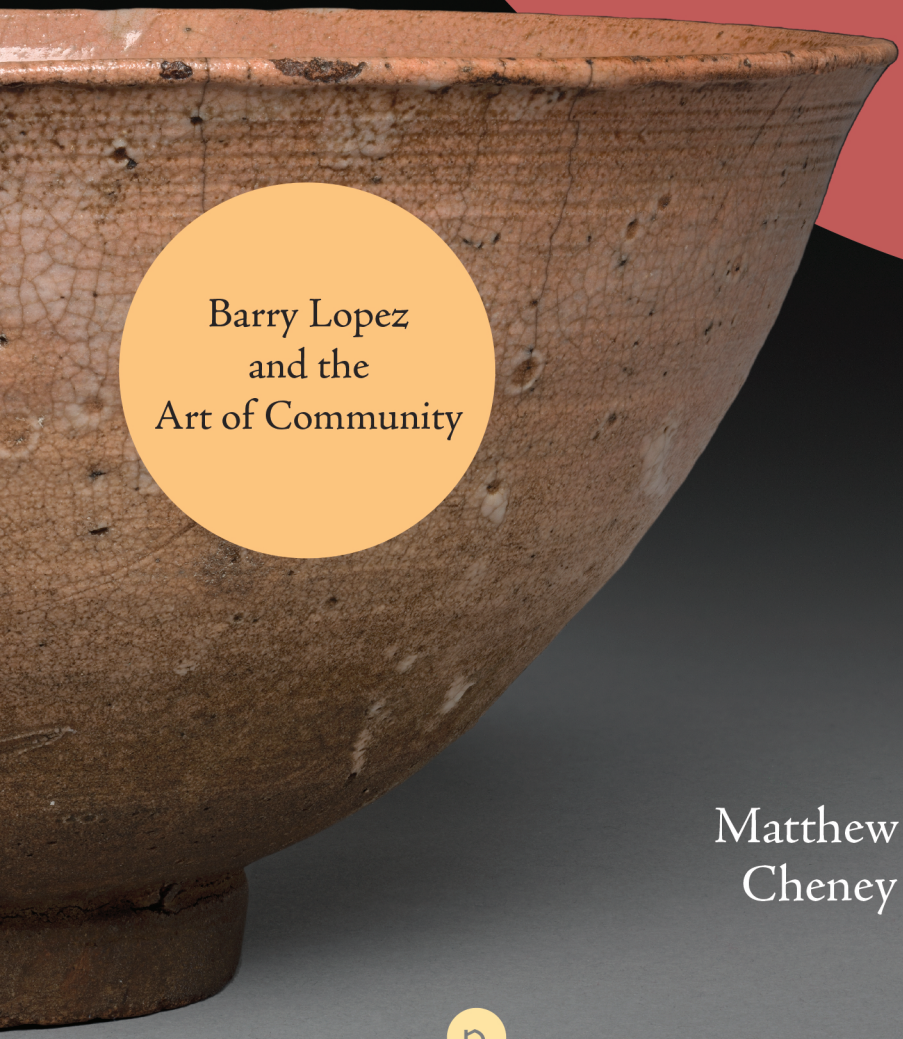
About That Life

Barry Lopez and the Art of Community



Matthew Cheney

ABOUT THAT LIFE

Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

First published in 2023 by dead letter office, BABEL Working Group, an imprint of punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.
https://punctumbooks.com

The BABEL Working Group is a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholar–gypsies with no leaders or followers, no top and no bottom, and only a middle. BABEL roams and stalks the ruins of the post-historical university as a multiplicity, a pack, looking for other roaming packs with which to cohabit and build temporary shelters for intellectual vagabonds. BABEL is an experiment in ephemerality. Find us if you can.

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-072-9 (print)
ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-073-6 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0409.1.00

LCCN: 2023935103
Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Hatim Eujayl and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei
Cover photograph: Tea bowl (1595), glazed stoneware (Karatsu ware), Japan, Momoyama period, from the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

punctumbooks
spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion

HIC SVNT MONSTRA

About That Life

Barry Lopez and the Art of Community

Matthew Cheney

Contents

For Rick, Beth, Scott, and Pat,
who know the landscape

something to catch like a burr in the wool of the mind

1

Zero Point

Three days before Barry Lopez died, I rediscovered my notes from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, where in the summer of 2000 I was a participant in Lopez's workshop, and where in many ways my adult life as a writer began. I thought I had lost the notes many years ago, but they had been with me the whole time, secreted in the middle of a notebook with unrelated items at front and back.

I was twenty-four years old that summer, and lost. I had grown up in rural New Hampshire, and I struggled to find an identity for myself, a kid who was queer in every possible sense of the word. Life bored and confused me, but words enchanted. To get through the boredom and confusion I filled notebooks with stories and poems. Writing was one thing I was good at, one thing I was committed to, one thing that brought me joy.

I learned to type first on an electric typewriter and then on a used Apple IIc computer that a family friend took out of storage to give me. I scoured local libraries for books that would show me the secrets of writing literature that would make me famous and beloved for all eternity, the equal of my heroes Isaac Asimov and Stephen King. I was likely one of the youngest subscribers to *Writer's Digest* magazine (a cherished birthday present one year). I began to think that writing might be able to carry me beyond the woods of New Hampshire, away to a place I could

barely imagine, a place where language, books, and learning were as fiercely necessary for other people as they were for me.

In high school, I melded my twin loves of writing and theater by deciding I would become a playwright, and writing really did free me, finally, with what I wrote earning me a scholarship to the Dramatic Writing Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. I was sure that once I got to NYU, I would be hailed as the next great American playwright, and I would be loved by everyone I met, and I would land a powerful agent and win a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award, and all the people who had thought I was a weird kid would regret their contempt for me. Every shame of my life would be obliterated by the adoration of the crowds.

New York offered new possibilities, an infinitely wider world, yet I soon discovered that the breadth of possibility was itself overwhelming. Having spent my entire life in a small and rural place, I had no idea how to navigate the opportunities and perils of one of the world's great cities. Suddenly everybody I knew was some sort of aspiring artist, and most of them were better at getting their work noticed than I was, better at connecting to other artists, better at making their presence known. New York requires hustle, and everybody around me seemed to enjoy it. They seemed to find the world's indifference an invigorating challenge.

I mostly hid in my dorm room.

The city's hard edges ground my confidence to dust. I began to wonder why I was bothering to put words onto paper day after day in plays, stories, poems, and essays that, if I ever showed them to anyone, received shrugs (at best) in response. My peers wanted to write the next *Pulp Fiction* while I wanted to write abstract, avant-garde plays. (I was still a weird kid.) The one reliable part of my self, the part that said *I am a writer,* was hollowed out. Even when everything else had seemed indistinct — my body gawky, my desires forbidden, my mind rambling from one esoteric obsession to another — no matter what, I'd had one solid concept to which I could tie myself: I was a writer.

Things got better after my first months in the city. I made a few friends, got a job through the new AmeriCorps program at a high school on the Lower East Side, and hung around with radical environmental activists who wondered why anybody would leave New Hampshire for New York. But I was still unmoored. By my third year at NYU, I realized the world of professional theater was not for me. The thought of writing another script that would not get produced — or, if it did happen to get produced, would be mangled by uncomprehending actors — was unbearable. I transferred to the University of New Hampshire for my final year of college, then got a job teaching at a small and non-prestigious boarding school. I stopped writing plays, and for a while stopped writing much of anything at all. I settled into the disappointment of being only myself.

Eventually, the desire to write returned. In adolescence, writing let me carry my mind away from a life I loathed, a life where I was always the weird one, often suspiciously so. ("Why are you so *strange*?" people would say. And sometimes: "What are you, a faggot?") The work of writing became, for me, inseparable from the urge to escape. Once I *had* escaped, why write? Classes at NYU and elsewhere could not answer this question for me, and often did not admit it was a question anyone might ever ask.

Done with plays, I returned to writing short stories, essays, and poems. Eventually, I felt confident enough to start sending things to potential publishers, mostly obscure literary journals. I knew I had some talent, maybe small, but enough to get by on. I had a couple of friends now who were writers, each seeming to get a bit more successful with each passing month: a personal rejection from a good publisher, a story in an interesting journal, an agent acquired, a book sold… Meanwhile, I had worked for years to write something somebody might care about, but aside from a pile of manuscripts, I had little to show for it except a bathroom wall covered with rejection slips. (Some of my friends found the wall depressing; I said I considered it an inspiring testament to persistence, and sometimes I actually believed that.) While writing had always been challenging, the challenge had been invigorating; now, though, it felt futile.

One day, a colleague at the school where I worked handed me a brochure for the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Bread Loaf is, reputedly, the oldest creative writing conference in the United States, a venerable literary institution sitting atop a hill outside Middlebury, Vermont.[1] At Bread Loaf, established literary writers lead small classes, give readings, offer lectures, sign books; agents meet with potential new clients, editors scout for hot new work, and writers of various levels of achievement trade knowledge, manuscripts, hopes, anxieties.

"Looks like your kind of thing," my colleague said.

I held back tears. At one time, it had very much been my kind of thing. Seven or eight years earlier, I had attended a mini version of the workshop designed for high school students, an experience I remembered with fondness. It had provided my first taste of what life might be like away from home, away from people who did not care about anything I cared about. In the bucolic hills of Vermont, I had spent days with peers who liked reading books and telling stories, who cared about art and language. The instructors invigorated us with conversations about our writing as if we were not children but something like colleagues. As I held the brochure for the full Writers' Conference, staring at the images of Bread Loaf's familiar yellow buildings, I dared imagine it might be possible to find some of that innocent sense of possibility again, that wonder and brief community.

I sensed an old ambition stir in me. I no longer thought I could escape the terror and shame of my life through fame and success, but I also felt a need to prove that all my education and effort were not for nothing. What could it hurt to apply? I doubted I would get accepted, and if I was accepted, I was certain I would not get a scholarship, so there was no way I would be able to afford it.

---

1 A year after I attended, *The New Yorker* published an article by Rebecca Mead about Bread Loaf's history and Mead's own visit to see what the contemporary Bread Loaf conference was all about. Her essay reads something like a gossipy report of a visit to an alien planet. For a more sober view, see David Haward Bain, *Whose Woods These Are: A History of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 1926–1992* (New York: Ecco, 1993).

But I did get accepted. Though I did not get a scholarship, the dean of the school where I worked offered to pay the tuition because she thought it would be good professional development for me. And so one day in August of 2000, I drove through the hills of Vermont to spend just over a week with a few hundred writers who were, I was sure, all more talented and successful than myself.

Barry Lopez was not my first choice of workshop leader. I don't remember who my first choice was; probably someone whose work I was more familiar with. Though I didn't know Lopez's fiction well, his essay (published as a small book unto itself) *The Rediscovery of North America* was important to me. The essay chronicles the Spanish incursion into North America and the destruction of native peoples and cultures that followed. It mixes history with poetic prose, and Lopez's deeply generous spirit dares to imagine forms of contact that might have been more equal and less violent, even as his perspective exudes anger and sadness at the founding carnage of the modern world. The book was assigned in an environmental studies course I took in college, and it put eloquent words to inchoate feelings of my own: feelings of horror at the destruction of people and land, but also feelings of hope for a better future, an ideal of human interaction that was sensitive to difference and also to responsibility, that celebrated contact but warned against arrogance, dominance, oppression.

As I expect most readers do, I thought of Lopez primarily as the writer of the acclaimed nonfiction book *Arctic Dreams,* a capacious, award-winning account of his experiences in the arctic infused with lyrical excursions into history and philosophy. It was a book I had not read and which I assumed (wrongly) was a work of straightforward journalism, quite the opposite of my own interests. Because I did not think of him as a fiction writer, Lopez was my second or third choice for a workshop leader, but I named him on my application instead of other fiction writers because some part of me suspected that the man who wrote *The Rediscovery of North America* would have something worth-

while to teach, and perhaps, if I was lucky, he might offer more than what I'd gotten from workshops in the past.

In the weeks before leaving for Bread Loaf, I borrowed from a local library Lopez's early story collections *Desert Notes, River Notes,* and *Winter Count*. The stories felt ethereal to me, more like prose poems than narrative fiction. I was intrigued by their steadfast refusal to sum themselves up, to offer clear epiphanies, to scream or coddle. I noticed how different many of the stories were on rereading, how single sentences, or even phrases, opened worlds. I grew excited by Lopez's apparent indifference to the conventions of the contemporary American short story. During the years when Lopez's first story collections were published, literary journals and writing workshops encouraged either absurdist postmodernism in the manner of Donald Barthelme or, more commonly, slice-of-life minimalism in the manner of Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel. Lopez's stories were only minimalist in their length. In subject matter, they reached across vast geographies and spans of time; in style, they tended toward the oracular and mythic.

During an era when "show, don't tell" was an absolute command, Lopez wrote stories where exposition crowded out narrative. I struggled to appreciate many of the stories because at the time I shared the aesthetic assumptions of the literary mainstream, making Lopez's achievement nearly invisible to me, but I could nonetheless sense that there was something there, even if it was, at first, beyond my perception. As I reread them that summer, though, I began to feel their magic working on me. I thought of Jorge Luis Borges's enigmatic tales, of Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," of countless myths, legends, and parables. That was what Lopez's fiction was best compared with, not the latest *Best American Short Stories* volume. Lopez's stories suggested that he was a writer immune to the fads of the literary marketplace, a writer who knew how and why he wrote in the way he did, who had a sense of mission that gave him a confident aesthetic identity — a confidence that I had never been able to discern in myself. After reading

these stories, I was happy that I had not gotten my first choice of workshop leader.

Workshops began the morning of our first full day at Bread Loaf. From the moment he sat down in the room with us, Lopez exuded calmness and confidence. Not arrogant or hubristic confidence, not ideological certainty, but something more like centeredness. I was drawn to the quality of his voice, which was a little higher than I expected from seeing photographs, and he spoke words slower and more carefully than the Northeastern rat-a-tat-tat common in my everyday life. There was a musicality to his speaking as well, as if within him flowed a steady rhythm from which he pulled his words.

Those words caused commotion, though. "We will not," he said, "conduct this workshop in the manner you may expect. We will not be workshopping your stories as a group. You are welcome and encouraged to share them with each other, but we will use our time together for a different purpose." The different purpose was this: We would talk with each other, we would work on some writing exercises and share them, we would appreciate each other rather than criticize each other. Later, we would each have an hour with Lopez and with our assistant workshop leader, the Canadian novelist Catherine Bush, to talk over the stories we had submitted in our applications to Bread Loaf.

While the other members of the workshop mostly seemed peeved at this uprooting of convention, I was thrilled. The story I had submitted in my application was not one I was especially attached to, so I didn't care whether it got workshopped, and I had survived plenty of writing workshops in the past without much sense of their usefulness. The quality of feedback depended on the other participants' backgrounds, tastes, and prejudices, and it was easy for workshops to get sidelined into arguing over minutiae relevant only to the story at hand. Most participants in workshops I'd been to had only ever read a small slice of American literature (almost all of it contemporary, almost all of it about heterosexual characters) and hardly any world literature, rendering their ideas of fiction's possibilities provincial. The workshops I attended that proved useful to me were ones that

emphasized discussion and experiment more than the detailed critique of individual manuscripts. Critique will only take you so far before you must confront the important questions that too many workshops don't have room for: *Why write? Why ask a reader to give their time and attention to your words? How can writing be more than narcissism and self-aggrandizement?*

Those were the questions I could not have answered when I arrived at Bread Loaf, and those were the questions Barry Lopez wanted to focus on.

2

The Responsibility of the Craftsman

As a young man, the Japanese art critic and curator Sōetsu Yanagi (1889–1961) had an interest in Christian mysticism, wrote a book about William Blake, and published a journal titled *Blake and Whitman*. Later, he developed a passion for Korean pottery and proposed the idea of *mingei* (folk crafts), helping to inspire the Japanese Folk Art Movement. Yanagi was also a pupil and friend of D.T. Suzuki, famous for helping to popularize Zen Buddhism in the West.

For fifty years, Yanagi was friends with the British potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979). In 1972, Leach published his own adaptations and translations of a selection of Yanagi's essays, which Leach titled *The Unknown Craftsman*. (Leach could not read Japanese, but he worked to render his friend's writings into English with the help of translators who had been pupils or assistants of Yanagi.) Yanagi celebrated the beauty in functional, ordinary craft — the kinds of objects that do not often come down through history with an individual creator's name attached. To Yanagi, the craftsperson could escape individualism and the duality of self versus other through immersion in tradition and usefulness. Tradition, Yanagi believed, is a kind of power, and the creator who submits to tradition allows beauty to inhere in the object that is created rather than in the self. The honest, humble craftsperson does not seek to glorify the

genius of the self, but instead seeks to use creativity as a way to surrender the self and reflect on — even embrace — one's own insignificance. Creation becomes a path *away* from ego rather than toward it.

The fullest explanation of these ideas is in an essay titled "The Buddhist Idea of Beauty," but Yanagi's knowledge of Western religions allowed him to make connections to expressions of humility in, for instance, the figure of St. Francis. For Yanagi, art and craft of value reach outward: "All works of art, it may be said, are more beautiful when they suggest something beyond themselves than when they end up being merely what they are."[1]

The idea of "the unknown craftsman" appears in the last essay in the book, "The Responsibility of the Craftsman":

> When the work of an artist has developed properly, he need not worry about recognition by others; also, naturally his work will not need his signature. Peacefully he will make things, though nobody will ask the name of the maker. If he must say occasionally, "I made this and this," then his circumstances are not yet such as will promise him true happiness. The most beautiful work will be completed when the artist entirely absorbs himself and his honor in his work. It does not mean killing himself; on the contrary, it is the best way to keep alive.[2]

1 Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman,* trans. Bernard Leach, rev. edn. (1972; Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 150.

2 Ibid., 222.

3

Bedrock

Included in my Bread Loaf notes are the writing prompts Lopez gave us, ideas Lopez tried to impart, and the sorts of jottings that time renders incomprehensible: "objects create tense," "causality," "sleeps, talks on phone, plays guitar." The first item is a writing exercise: "2 pages — 2 people in the meadow, that place, a betrayal." I don't remember what "that place" meant, exactly, but I expect it was Lopez telling us to look out the window at the landscape of meadows, trees, and hills, and to base what we wrote on what we saw around us. The betrayal, on the other hand — that was fun, because that was what put a story in the place, a sense of character and conflict. Utterly failed by my imagination, I wrote the exercise as a clichéd marital betrayal, but it was a useful exercise nonetheless, because even with an unoriginal premise, I was able to see how the attention to setting could provide texture and even meaning to the human interaction.

The next page of notes is a list of reading recommendations from everyone in the room. Lopez told us that these should be things we had read recently and been affected by, and he asked us to explain why they affected us, what it was we, as readers, responded to in the work. I wrote down people's recommendations (J.M. Coetzee, Paule Marshall, Susan Minot, Cormac McCarthy, Gloria Naylor, Alice Munro) but, unfortunately, not

their explanations. Lopez recommended *Being Dead* by Jim Crace and *Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf. In the margins of the page, I also wrote down another book he discussed reading, *Uttermost Part of the Earth,* a chronicle of the indigenous people of Tierra del Fuego written in the late 1940s by E. Lucas Bridges, who had grown up among the native people (his father established the first English mission in Tierra del Fuego) and wrote a richly detailed and ultimately tragic book about peoples and cultures destroyed by the encroachment of "civilization."

I had heard of most of the writers my peers mentioned, but I had never heard of Jim Crace or David Malouf before. Later, I would seek both out, reading various of their writings, but *Being Dead* and *Remembering Babylon* would remain my favorites, partly because of their own qualities, but equally because each remains, for me, a window into Barry Lopez as a reader. These are novels different from typical novels, yet novels that masterfully evoke specific landscapes and the ways human consciousness interacts with, and is affected by, those landscapes. Both books experiment with the intersections of human and nonhuman time, of history and identity, language and myth. *Being Dead* moves backward through the lives of two murdered zoologists and forward through the decomposition of their bodies. Something of a cousin to Lopez's *Rediscovery of North America, Remembering Babylon* is based on historical encounters between indigenous Australian people and British colonizers. Though quiet, and subtle, it poses real and complex questions of meaning, knowledge, culture, and being. These novels' concerns are close enough to those that fill Lopez's work that his attraction to them seems obvious, but it is in the precision of their enigmas that Crace and Malouf's books most evoke Lopez for me, especially his seemingly paradoxical obsession with precision in the service of mystery. This is not the precision that solves mystery, but the precision that strives to imbue ordinary words with the weight of magic, the precision that acknowledges both connotation and the breath of ancestors, the precision that seeks the sublime.

I would also eventually find a copy of *Uttermost Part of the Earth,* a book that presents personal stories, history, and ethnography together in such a detailed way that I've never managed to get far with it all, but I have read around in it enough to feel that I know what's there, and the quality of its attention to people presented as individuals whose lives and thoughts are shaped by landscape, tradition, and the changes that encounters with strangers inevitably bring. As Lopez's late masterpiece of travel and memoir, *Horizon,* demonstrates, he could forgive many travelers of earlier eras their assumptions and errors if he perceived in them a certain compassion, humility, and honest curiosity. What he had nothing but contempt for was the traveler who sought to impose rather than to encounter, to dominate rather than listen — a Columbus rather than a Bartolomé de las Casas. *Uttermost Part of the Earth* is not a book that could be written today, because our knowledge of the world is different, but I expect Lopez saw in it a care in observation that he aspired to himself. It is a book of witness as well as interpretation, an historical document that also documents a deeper history than its own.

I didn't jot in my notebook what my own recommendations were, but I expect I mentioned either the stories of Paul Bowles or Tatiana Tolstaya, as those were the writers whose work I was reading most seriously that summer — which I remember not because I have a good memory for what I was reading twenty years ago, but because I know what stories I wrote back then, and those stories declare their influences in obvious ways, through a certain approach to violence inspired by Bowles's tales of doomed travelers and a certain dark whimsy drawn from Tolstaya's collection *On the Golden Porch* (my Bread Loaf application story even included a reference to the Okkervil River in homage to Tolstaya's story of that name).

From our discussion of what we read and why it affected us, I jotted notes on two statements Lopez made:

Nothing new — we remind people what is worth remembering. Write what you <u>mean</u> as eloquently as you can.

Many of the ideas Lopez imparted to us can be found in a long interview Mike Newell conducted with him in October 1999, published by xoxox Press in 2007 as *No Bottom: In Conversation with Barry Lopez.* "The origin of story in human society, as I understand it," Lopez tells Newell, "is exactly there, the effort to place or replace the individual within the sustaining structure of a set of relationships — inside a community. It serves as an antidote to feelings of isolation — of failure, of shame. Stories, I think, do not so much instruct as reinforce in us, or revive in us, what we already know but have forgotten."[1]

That was a message Lopez repeated to us again and again. Stories have a purpose, it is a purpose related to community, and thus the telling of stories must be done with a sense of responsibility.

It is common in writing classes to talk of purpose and audience, but Lopez did so in a more meaningful and serious way than any other teacher I have encountered. He did not speak of the audience as a commercial mass that one must write toward, but rather he spoke of the ethical relationship between writer and reader. The reader, he said, is entrusting you with their time and, more importantly, with their imagination — and that is not a trust to be treated cavalierly. "I hope," Lopez said to Newell, "somebody walks away from a story of mine with a larger sense, a clearer sense, of their own possibility."[2] *Possibility for what?* we might ask, and I can imagine Lopez smiling mischievously and responding, "For whatever they need." The exact possibility itself isn't what's important. What matters is that the reader is in some way enriched by the story, their sensitivity enhanced, and their possibilities multiplied.

1 Mike Newell, *No Bottom: In Conversation with Barry Lopez* (Gambier: xoxox Press, 2007), 37.

2 Ibid., 34.

Perhaps what Lopez seeks to give readers is the sublime feeling that we experience when we look up at a clear night sky, a glimpse of the universe unfolding in our perception, our sense of self-importance receding in the beauty and wonder of all that lies beyond our self. Instead of epiphany, transcendence.

4

Elements

I have been reading texts by some of the original New Narrative writers of the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly Robert Glück, Kevin Killian, Bruce Boone, and Dodie Bellamy. I had read Glück's *Jack the Modernist* before, and I knew Killian for his work on the poet Jack Spicer, but hadn't read any of his own poetry or fiction until recently. Bruce Boone was not even a name I had noticed before, and Dodie Bellamy I am ashamed to say my unexamined homosexism led me to think of for too long as "Kevin Killian's wife" and so I didn't pay her the attention she deserves.

The inspiration to explore these writers' works came from a project I began and may yet one day complete, a challenge to myself to read all eight volumes of the *Men on Men* series of anthologies of "best new gay fiction" published between 1986 and 2000. The project began because I had a nagging sense that amidst a recent and welcome efflorescence of queer literature, something had been lost. But I wasn't sure what. It could have simply been that I was nostalgic for my late adolescence and early adulthood, for a time when queer lit felt dangerous to the status quo, because to be queer meant (I thought) embracing an antinormative perversity. While I remain grateful for new freedoms and happy for friends and family who are able to benefit from marriage and adoption, a devilish voice in my head

nonetheless groans at the domestication and commodification of what had once felt ineradicably radical.

Today, queer stories often center redemption and ultimate triumph, personal growth and healthy relationships. That all has its place, and certainly I would rather live in a world of redemption and triumph than a world of dejection and failure, but literature needs to be more than a particularly well-written Hallmark movie. The *Men on Men* anthologies appeared just as the AIDS crisis began, a crisis that dominated my own sense of queerness, since I was coming of age when the cultural narrative (especially in my rural New Hampshire home) declared that to be gay was to be doomed to die young, to waste away in the prime of life, to be killed by your own desire, to be alone and shunned. Though I have long been familiar with some of the major novels of the AIDS era, the annual *Men on Men* anthologies promised a view of how whole communities of writers responded as the disease destroyed those very communities.

After making my way through a few volumes, I had to stop. I had begun having nightmares I haven't had for thirty years. I remembered feelings I had long forgotten. My days got draped with despair. A sense of hovering ruination haunted me with a similar power as it had when I barely escaped my teenage years with my life.

Though I had to stop reading the anthologies, I stepped away from them with a renewed sense of admiration for those writers, even when their writing was clichéd or sentimental or awkward. The stories that demonstrated real craft, vision, and innovation were especially exciting, their energy fierce even now. What most fascinated, though, were the hints of community I could read in the authors' biographical notes and in occasional details of their texts.

Some of the most complex and interesting stories in the first volume are Glück's "Sex Story," Boone's "David's Charm," and Killian's "September." Glück's is the only story that is complete unto itself, since Boone's was part of an abandoned novel and Killian's became part of his first novel, *Shy,* but each confidently depicts a world of gay male sexuality and life both complex and

unashamed. Boone's story loomed in my memory. Its style is loose, conversational. The story feels unstructured, but it gains effect from the accumulation of details that create characters and situations (the character of a narrator who seems to be Bruce Boone himself and a man, David, who bounces all around in his sense of sexual identity), then resolves in an ending that is redemptive but not the least bit sentimental. The whole thing is quite a textual performance, like a mash-up of a journal entry, essay, and the kind of tale you might tell to friends over a few too many drinks one night.

It was only in seeking out more information about Boone that I discovered he was (and is) close friends with Glück and was one of the co-creators of San Francisco's New Narrative group, which Killian and Bellamy were also part of, though they arrived a bit later. The mixing of autobiography, explicit sex, and casual (but often carefully considered) structures common to the stories by these writers were some of the defining characteristics of the New Narrative, though *defining* may be too strong a word. The ambit of the New Narrative group was never tightly agreed upon, and many of the writers denied it even existed as anything other than the writings of some people who happened to know each other.

In the introduction to the anthology of New Narrative work that they edited together, *Writers Who Love Too Much,* Killian and Bellamy emphasize the importance of community to the movement (if that's what it was), especially in its early days, and the ways in which its specificity of place allowed it a foundation from which to move outward. "The action of writing and reading worked two ways, and the writing was fed by the community — and so we needed San Francisco to make our work. But Bob and Bruce continually emphasized that what Steve [Abbott] was calling 'New Narrative' had developed not in a vacuum, nor even in one city, but in conversation with critical inheritances from—and concurrent writing developments

across—the Americas, Asia, and Europe."[1] New Narrative became an identifiable thing because of writers working together. Their aesthetic inheritance came from their conversations, their sharing of books and ideas, their critiques of each others' writing. They wrote poems, stories, novels, and essays for (and about) each other, and those poems, stories, novels, and essays served as markers and beacons for the community. Collaboration was essential to their vision of what art and society could be: hybrid, theorized, personal, self-reflective, and collaged, and they never denied the absurdities of existence.

The community of New Narrative writers soon had to face tragedy together. "AIDS," Killian and Bellamy write, "made community all the more important, while decimating ours in particular."[2]

Faced with the ravages of the AIDS crisis, what consolation is there in the promise that your writing will live on after you? In "Sex Writing and the New Narrative," originally presented as a speech at the 1990 OUT Write conference in San Francisco, Kevin Killian remembers his friend Sam D'Allesandro, who had died of AIDS at age 31 in 1988:

> Sam admired what he called the "big statements," work like [Dennis] Cooper's "My Mark" or Robert Glück's "Sex Story." These were not exactly fiction to him but instead moral lessons like the Bible. Or the Tao Te Ching. He felt compelled to write out of his own life materials of his life but fortuitously and more firmly out of ideational principles, such as, what does the New Narrative mean? He wanted to change some lives but knew he wasn't going to do so by the same old same old, boy meets boy, a glass falls off the table, things will never be the same again.[3]

1 Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977–1997* (New York: Nightboat, 2017), ix.
2 Ibid., xviii.
3 Ibid., 294.

5

Home Ground

One of my favorite movies is Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together,* a story of Argentina viewed through the eyes of Hong Kong, a melancholy queer love story whose actors and crew were mostly heterosexuals. It gains power from the differences and alienations within its own conception; it is a film of identity but not ethnography, a tale of people seeking somewhere — or someone — that might offer a feeling of home. Home in the film becomes not about place but about sensation, even aesthetics: home is a quality of light, a taste of air, a strain of music.

Sitting in a bar in Argentina, brokenhearted and adrift, the protagonist of *Happy Together,* Fai (played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai), speaks of a lighthouse in Tierra del Fuego, a lighthouse at the end of the world. Heartbroken people, he says, go there to leave their unhappiness behind. A friend he seems to have something of a crush on, Chang (played by Chang Chen), is planning to travel south. Chang will go to the lighthouse. He offers a cassette recorder to Fai to record a message that Chang will play when he arrives. "I don't know what to say," Fai says. Say anything, Chang says, something from the heart, something sad or something not. He'll leave those words at the end of the world. As Chang dances happily with other people, Fai begins recording a message. We can't hear what he says, but we see him start to weep.

Later, Chang goes to the lighthouse in Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost lighthouse of the Americas. He has finally arrived at the end of the world. He takes out the tape recorder. "I'd promised Fai to leave his sorrows there. But I couldn't make out his words. Perhaps the recorder had broken. There was no-one speaking. Just some weird noise. Like someone sobbing." Throughout the scene, the camera is always in motion, swirling around Chang like a bird. He looks off into the distance, and all we hear is the shrieking sound of seagulls.

6

A Soul

I had a fling at Bread Loaf with a beautiful man, a lovely writer, a friend still. Though we've stayed in touch for more than twenty years now, we've never spoken of it, and I like that, because there is something about the experience that deserves to stay away from words, to live outside language. I wish, though, we had been brave enough for more words back then. We hesitated about each other, both certain in our own way that we had let our yearning leap beyond the other's desire. In this hesitation a world of possibilities escaped our grasp. I blame myself for this. He was kind and gentle, with a beautiful body and eyes and smile, all of which I was sure I did not deserve.

In *The Letters of Mina Harker,* Dodie Bellamy writes: "The only way to get rid of a sexual haunting is to sacrifice a soul."[1]

1 Dodie Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker* (1998; repr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 108.

7

Horizons

A few years after I went to Bread Loaf, I stumbled into something of a writing community for myself. It only happened because of the internet. We were all writing blogs, and that's how we found each other, because though blogs had just begun to become A Thing, there weren't many blogs about books and writing yet (most were about politics), so for a short time it was possible for more or less everybody who was writing about books via blogs to know each other. This is how I met various friends who were putting together zines and chapbooks and weird little websites. We all started writing for each other. One year, I published seven stories, a record for me then and now, and I published a lot of nonfiction: book reviews, an occasional essay, a regular column for the online magazine *Strange Horizons.* It was fun and exhausting. Literature felt alive, it felt important, it felt meaningful. We were aware of each other's work, and though we had varied tastes, there was a sense, for me at least, of a shared project. It didn't last long, because we were all quite different people, with different goals and ambitions in addition to our varied tastes, so inevitably we ended up dispersing in separate directions, with some people ascending to higher echelons of the writing world, other people going silent, most of us somewhere in between.

That was a long time ago.

8

Writers Who Love Too Much

In a 2020 interview with Maread Case for the *Los Angeles Review of Books,* Robert Glück described his famous (to anyone who cares about the New Narrative movement) writing workshops: "The workshops were formal — I read and discussed some writing that interested me and then we considered the work of the participants, many of them lifelong friends. Occasionally I gave writing prompts to those who wanted them. They tended to be impossible tasks, like write a novel in four pages, describe a film you never saw, describe eating an apple, or tell me what the truth is, no irony allowed (based on our reading the Gnostics). Leading a workshop is an act of love in the form of attention. That's the ideal."[1]

1 Maread Case, "Fifteenth-Century Cher: A Conversation with Robert Glück on 'Margery Kempe,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books,* August 6, 2020, http://dev.lareviewofbooks.org/article/fifteenth-century-cher-a-conversation-with-robert-gluck-on-margery-kempe.

9

Light Action

The writing exercises Barry Lopez gave us at Bread Loaf, as I wrote them in my notebook:

— This place, a different season, 1 character in relation to a human-made thing, evoke tenderness
— Violence — write a violent moment (any sort) — face it
— Create a scene between 2 people. Use architecture to reinforce their exchange. Shape, space, senses to parallel human activity. Use environment to reinforce the conversation.
— Listen to Bach cello suites — a story with form & phrases — try writing against it. Stringed instruments have a direction in time. There is increment, harmonics. Open your mind to imagery, put them down in order, then create a language/story that communicates that order. Something to catch like a burr in the wool of the mind.
— Write a scene in which someone does something we can admire, a gesture toward transcendent love, hope. Irony/detachment/cynicism will probably unhinge it, so avoid. Harder to write in language of Gabriel than language of Lucifer. Write as if we must believe it, but no pleading: need to see it.

Though it's the shortest in my notes, the prompt about violence is the one that had the biggest effect on me. We talked about

it in the workshop for some time, and I was too engaged with the conversation to transcribe it as more than those few words, but those few words still bring back strong memories, because no matter what form or purpose my writing took in the future, I knew violence would likely be its central concern. My father owned a gun shop that was attached to our house. I had grown up in a world of occasionally overt and mostly repressed violence; if there were anything I needed to write my way through, it was that.

One of the elements that so fascinated me in Paul Bowles's fiction was his approach to violence, which was chillingly matter-of-fact, rendering the terrible events disturbing in a way I had never found, for instance, popular horror stories to be disturbing. A story like "A Distant Episode" is discomfiting in its pessimistic view of cultural exchange (it is the story of the systematic brutalization and enslavement of a professor of linguistics in the North African desert), but it is the coldness of its sentences that terrifies — sentences such as, "He walked in and almost decapitated the man before the latter had even attempted to sit up. Then he threw his razor on the bed and ran out."[1] Though I was a perpetual reader of violent fiction, I had not read a writer aside from Bowles whose representation of violence inspired me both aesthetically and ethically. The horror and gore in Stephen King could be fun. The effect of reading Paul Bowles's most brutal stories was entirely different. Instead of fun, Bowles offered the clarity of philosophy, his stories challenging us to ask if, once we strip away any veneer of "civilization," the base of human being is a nightmare of exploitation, torture, and depravity. That vision itself is not comforting, but the story opens a space for readers to challenge its perspective if they wish, to provide in their imagination alternatives, to say, "I do not want this idea of the world. I want another world."

What I didn't know then was that Lopez himself had begun wrestling with approaches to violence in fiction. The collection that would be published soon after our workshop, *Light Action*

1 Paul Bowles, *The Stories of Paul Bowles* (New York: Ecco, 2001), 34.

in the Caribbean, got its title from a shockingly violent story about a couple of obnoxious Americans on vacation who hire a local man and his boat to take them to a remote diving area, where they are intercepted by pirates who kill all of them. Like Bowles, Lopez writes the violence matter-of-factly: "He laid her over the back of a bench seat and raped her. It took him a long time and in the middle of it he lit a cigarette. The man with the watches trussed David with monofilament fishing line and choked him to death while he raped him."[2] The effect, unfortunately, is less than Bowles achieves, perhaps because Lopez lacks Bowles's nihilism. The violence in "Light Action in the Caribbean" is precise but it is also perfunctory. Lopez wants to get away from it. He moves on as quickly as he can. At a human level, this is admirable, but it renders the story shocking and brutal without allowing it to be truly disturbing in a philosophically productive way. The story moves on at the same speed we do, letting us too easily escape any painful questions such a story ought to help us confront if it is to have any justification for putting terrible images into our minds.

Newell, in his commentary on Lopez's writing, notes that *Light Action* contains three stories that are more straightforwardly violent than any Lopez had written before (in addition to the title story, two that are significantly more subtle and effective are "Stolen Horses" and "The Deaf Girl"). Previously, violence in Lopez's fiction was either off-stage or handled in a metaphorical, even magical way. "These three *Light Action* stories," Newell writes, "speak of displaced people with displaced souls, reminding readers of what might be inevitable when cultures fragment and their inhabitants wander in a moral wasteland."[3]

After first reading *Light Action in the Caribbean,* I would go back through some of Lopez's older writings and notice violence throughout. Perhaps *violence* is the wrong word, though.

2 Barry Lopez, *Light Action in the Caribbean* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 144.
3 Mike Newell, *No Bottom: In Conversation with Barry Lopez* (Gambier: xoxox Press, 2007), 110.

Violence is part of it, but the idea I'm grasping for is wider and greater, something closer to suffering.

— Pause for a moment and consider the suffering in the world at this exact time. Not the unfathomable suffering of history or the unimaginable suffering of the future, but the immediate suffering of now, here, this second. The pain felt by people beaten, wounded, injured, sick, dying; the grief felt by people who love those beaten, wounded, injured, sick, dead. And not only the suffering of people. Living beings suffer, regardless of species. Think now of the suffering of all the life on this planet at this very moment, think of the starvation, disease, death. You can't imagine it all. You can't keep even one second of the world's total suffering in your mind. It defeats any sane imagination.

The epilogue of *Arctic Dreams* provides a statement that a sensitive reader will feel echoed throughout Lopez's entire oeuvre: "No culture has yet solved the dilemma each has faced with the growth of a conscious mind: how to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in all life, when one finds darkness not only in one's own culture but within oneself." And yet we go on, we live on, we ignore all but a tiny portion of the suffering around us, because otherwise we could not live. "There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions," Lopez adds. "You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of a leaning into the light."[4]

("He walked in and almost decapitated the man before the latter had even attempted to sit up.")

("It took him a long time and in the middle of it he lit a cigarette.")

4 Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 413.

10

About This Life

It is the horror inherent in all life, the darkness of culture and self, that most often proves an obstacle for my reading, since so little of what gets written seems aware of that horror, that darkness.

Too many stories I read seem to think things are fine. Things are not fine.

The horror inherent in all life holds me back from writing, too, and sometimes, especially late at night, worries the edges of my consciousness.

11

Scree

In the introduction to *Conversations with Barry Lopez: Walking the Path of Imagination,* William E. Tydeman describes a 2008 visit by Lopez to Texas Tech University: "For the seminar we held with faculty during Lopez's visit we had read, at his suggestion, *A Human Being Died That Night* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a woman who served on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa."[1]

Many years ago, I used *A Human Being Died That Night* in high school classes I taught on South African literature. It is a powerful, provocative book about confronting evil and keeping open the idea of forgiveness. When I first read Tydeman's description of the seminar at Texas Tech, I wondered if Lopez had mentioned the book to us at Bread Loaf and if that was where I first learned of it. Then I wondered if perhaps there was any chance, even a very small one, that I mentioned it to him during one of our sessions. What a wondrous possibility, I thought — perhaps I had actually made a tiny contribution to Lopez's own intellectual life, repaying in a minuscule way my great debt to him for all he had given to me. Even if it were not true, I thought, perhaps I could allow myself to believe it.

1 William E. Tydeman, *Conversations with Barry Lopez* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 19.

I found my copy of the book, which I had not looked at in at least a decade. The copyright is 2003, and the edition I have is from 2004: years after Bread Loaf. I was sad to have the slight chance of my influencing Lopez prove to be impossible, but soon I felt a new wonder at the fact we had both come to this particular book from our own very different paths, and it had meant enough to both of us that we had assigned it to other people for reading and discussion.

12

Suffering

Often, environmental activists and climate scientists will be asked where they find cause for hope. It seems to me that they should instead be asked where they see opportunities for the relief of suffering.

A generosity of spirit does not require hope. Compassion does not require hope. We can lack all hope that the future will be better than the present and we can still act with kindness and thoughtfulness. Why do otherwise? Believing that the future is bleak does not need to lead inevitably toward selfish, monstrous behavior. Indeed, it ought to lead to the opposite, because as the conditions for life worsen, we need whatever solace and consolation we can offer each other. *Hope,* as a concept, is too individual, too reliant on the one who hopes as a kind of savior figure. It does not admit enough the interdependence that ecology shows to be the way of the world or the interbeing that various faiths espouse as the condition of existence.

Kindness (rather than cruelty) and compassion (rather than indifference) are more useful concepts than hope, because instead of insisting on something we must believe in (the possibility of success, a better future) kindness and compassion offer ways to act, ways to be. It is both possible and necessary to recognize that suffering is ubiquitous and that suffering deserves to be relieved.

Asked how to stay active and committed even when the future seems doomed, the writer Jeff VanderMeer responded, "I focus past the frozenness by being attuned to the lifespans of the organisms in the yard and know that I can be of use to creatures, like opossums, for whom three years is a generation and who know nothing of the time beyond that."[1]

1 "What Passes for Hope: 19 Writers on Finding Meaning in the Face of the Climate Crisis," *Literary Hub,* April 22, 2022, https://lithub.com/what-passes-for-hope-19-writers-on-finding-meaning-in-the-face-of-the-climate-crisis/.

13

Empire of the Senseless

Barry Lopez died a few weeks before his 76th birthday, which would have been on January 6, 2021. That date has now become infamous, as it was the day the President's mob stormed the Capitol building in Washington, DC, bringing chaos and murder to the electoral process. Lopez was a man of strong convictions, but he did not believe conviction ought to obliterate conversation. One of his strong convictions was that we must listen to each other, that history offers countless examples of atrocities caused by the failure to recognize the basic humanity in the people we encounter, of massacres caused less by the hatred of one side for another than by the indifference of people who might have lessened the hatred.

The attack on the Capitol presents many examples of both hatred and indifference. What sticks with me most vividly is a brief but highly disturbing moment in one of the many videos that circulated later, a shot in which the mob is crushing a police officer's head in a door. Watching him being beaten, I do not see a police officer, I do not see a man in a uniform, someone himself given the responsibility for and burden of state violence — I only see what he is in that moment: a body in pain. The man screams with the most basic, primal terror. I still struggle to imagine how anyone could have been so enraptured with rage that they would continue to hurt him; how anyone could have

seen his face or listened to his screams and not recognized him as a human being but as an object, an obstacle, an enemy; how anyone could have kept filming instead of tossing the camera aside and intervening to stop the brutality.

I know Barry Lopez would have had thoughts about the events of his 76th birthday, and one of the many reasons I wish he had been able to live longer is that I would have liked to read what he might have written or said about those events. But I also know that many of the answers are already available, because so much of his writing is about the kinds of feelings that led to the violence of the insurrection. To Lopez, violence is a failure of imagination and attention. A violent mindset seeks to reduce the world rather than to enlarge it, it seeks to impose rather than listen, to dominate rather than cooperate. Violence venerates the individual rather than community, and it results from the alienations of unmoored life, life without a sense of place or spirit.

A supreme antidote to violence, Lopez suggests, is the willingness to embrace mystery. In the epilogue to his 1978 book *Of Wolves and Men,* he wrote:

> To allow mystery, which is to say to yourself, "There could be more, there could be things we don't understand," is not to damn knowledge. It is to take a wider view. It is to permit yourself an extraordinary freedom: someone else does not have to be wrong in order that you may be right.[1]

Mystery and imagination are linked. In one of the last essays he wrote, Lopez says:

> To survive what's headed our way — global climate disruption, a new pandemic, additional authoritarian governments — and to endure, we will have to stretch our imaginations. We will need to trust each other, because today, it's as if ev-

1 Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 284.

> ery safe place has melted into the sameness of water. We are searching for the boats we forgot to build."[2]

There is another part of me that does not want to know what Barry Lopez would have thought about the insurrection on his birthday, a part of me that thinks those events, and so much of the politics of our era, deserve not serious consideration and thoughtful engagement as much as they deserve ferocious punk rage and contempt. The world Lopez depicts, the world he engages with, is one of conflict, certainly, as well as mystery, but it is a world in which right thinking and right feeling can lead to a better life, a more enlightened existence. In 1990, when he published *The Rediscovery of North America,* he ended with a vision of a new and better world on the horizon because, a decade before the turn of the millennium, we "feel ourselves on the verge of something vague but extraordinary."[3] The turn to overt violence in some of the stories he wrote not long after *Rediscovery* hints at the fears he worked hard to keep at bay. In a 2002 essay, "A Scary Abundance of Water," he exalted "diverse humanity, engaged, adapting to whatever mean threat or wild beauty may lie in the path" and said that this vision of humanity, along with an appreciation for the natural landscape, helps him find "the ground that propels me past the great temptation of our time: to put one's faith in despair."[4] He never did give in to despair, at least publicly, but his work after "A Scary Abundance of Water" becomes more and more specific about contemporary problems of society and government, problems that in his earlier work are more often alluded to than named. His final collection of essays, which he did not live to see published, got its title from the almost shockingly specific (in comparison to much of Lopez's earlier work) last paragraph of a 2020 essay:

---

2 Barry Lopez, *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World* (New York: Random House, 2022), 188.

3 Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 55.

4 Lopez, *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World,* 256.

> In this trembling moment, with light armor under several flags rolling across northern Syria, with civilians beaten to death in the streets of Occupied Palestine, with fires roaring across the vineyards of California, and forests being felled to ensure more space for development, with student loans from profiteers breaking the backs of the young, and with Niagaras of water falling into the oceans from every sector of Greenland, in this moment, is it still possible to face the gathering darkness, and say to the physical Earth, and to all its creatures, including ourselves, fiercely and without embarrassment, I love you, and to embrace fearlessly the burning world?[5]

The younger Barry Lopez would not have ended that paragraph with a question. He would have said *it is* still possible to face the gathering darkness. Twenty years into the new century, though, it was hard even for him to hold the faith. Can we blame him? If the brutality of our politics and the cruelty of our world are the result of failures of imagination and attention, then what answers exist beyond exhortations to do better? What quality of attention will save us from rapacious billionaires, from murderous mobs, from bloodthirsty police? Against a will to power, what good is a veneration of mystery?

Whatever my reservations about his capacity to add anything useful to the discourse about January 6, I do wish Lopez had lived long enough to write something about it, because it is beyond my ability to imagine what he would have made of the man who devoted himself to far-right conspiracy theories and dressed up in a Hollywood-inspired idea of a "shaman," head adorned with animal pelts and horns, face painted red, white, and blue, tattooed chest bare — the incoherence, delusion, vulgarity, and absurdity of centuries of American power fantasies brought to murderous shape in a single bombastic body.[6] How

5 Ibid., 122.

6 See Alan Feuer, "Capitol Rioter Known as QAnon Shaman Pleads Guilty," *The New York Times,* September 3, 2021, https://www.nytimes.

do you write about *that* with tenderness? How do you write about *that* without irony, detachment, or cynicism? How can you speak the language of Gabriel when Lucifer has torn out your tongue?

com/2021/09/03/us/politics/qanon-shaman-capitol-guilty.html.

14

Rediscovery

I bought Robert Glück's novel *Jack the Modernist* at the Shakespeare & Company bookstore in Manhattan shortly after it was published by High Risk Books in 1995 (ten years after its first publication) when I was a college student. I don't know why I bought it; I didn't have a lot of money for books in those days, especially new books. (Maybe my memory is wrong and I didn't buy it at Shakespeare & Company but rather at The Strand where maybe it was $3.99, but I just don't know.) Looking at the book now, reading the description and the blurbs, I don't see anything there that would have drawn my attention except maybe the description of it as "a classic of postmodern gay fiction." (I was tired of social realist gay fiction, I remember; I wanted wild, experimental gay fiction.) It was a book I felt I needed, clearly — the cover drew me in, the blues and whites and yellows of the doubled image of a naked male torso. Maybe I liked that the book was illustrated with various artwork that was made to apply to the text, something that perhaps caused me to think of a writer I cherished then (and still), Donald Barthelme.

Whatever it was that first pulled my attention to *Jack the Modernist* is long forgotten, lost to time. I do remember first reading it, though, because I soon found myself disappointed. (Disappointment is a feeling I long remember.) Perhaps I had expected a novel like Michael Cunningham or Andrew Holleran

might write, and instead found myself reading a fragmentary, hybrid text with illustrations from random sources (old engravings, recent pornography, movie stills) and little in the way of character development or plot. I remember wondering when Glück would get around to saying anything about modernism. I remember wondering why the narrator expected us to know anything about characters who never seemed to get introduced — who is Bruce and why should we care about? Is Bob the narrator or a character? Why does Jack keep appearing and disappearing? It was exasperating to read without any sense of bearings. I just wanted another of my beloved tragic gay novels that would help me feel great feelings; instead, I got something I did not have the experience, knowledge, or patience to distinguish from a few random pages out of the San Francisco phone directory.

Nonetheless, even though *Jack the Modernist* felt empty and distant to me, there was still something in it that captured my imagination. I kept the book with me wherever I happened to live over the next ten years, reading a page here or a page there. The fragmentary structure made this perhaps the ideal way to read *Jack the Modernist.* When I first read it, I wanted a coherent narrative, but part of what Glück shows us is that some of the most meaningful experiences of life only get deformed by being squeezed into the structure of a story. A collage like *Jack the Modernist* offers different satisfactions, different ways of apprehending experience. Reading it a sentence here and sentence there, a paragraph on page 117 and then a paragraph on page 68, I began to build the book in my mind and memory, to let it accumulate in my subconscious rather than try to tame it with analysis.

Eventually, I knew the book well enough to read it comfortably and with appreciation front to back. Now I was ready for it. Now it expanded in my mind and what had, to my younger self, seemed thin and random felt richly resonant and carefully patterned.

I hold *Jack the Modernist* now and more than almost any other object it brings me back to the night I remember, or imagine

I remember, buying it: a rainy night, the lights of lower Broadway smearing across the wet lenses of my glasses, a lonely night and yet also one of possibility, because the bookstores were still open and stories still waited to be found. I even think fondly of the disappointment I felt when I read the novel, because I paid enough attention to know that there was *something* in the book I would appreciate later, something I would grow into, or grow toward. Instead of an annoyance, eventually the book became a mystery.

I open to a page. This chapter is a letter to the future:

> When you read this I will be ashes one way or another. The thought makes me wistful, confidential; can I be nostalgic for the future? Thinking to improve my diet and live long (salt, schmaltz) I asked my mom what our blood relations mostly died of. She replied *Fascism*.[1]

1 Robert Glück, *Jack the Modernist* (New York: High Risk Books, 1995), 102.

15

Outside

Two uncollected stories by Barry Lopez could be called queer: "The Hitter," published in *The North American Review* in 1993, and "The San Joaquin," published in *Freeman's* in 2017. Both are stories of community.

"The Hitter" is set in the years after World War II and tells the story of two rival baseball players who leave the major leagues and eventually find themselves living in the same town, and then the same house. "They had gradually fallen in love, though neither of them would ever have said that," the story tells us. "Their private life was marked by tenderness. In public they tended to remain aloof, behavior that seemed transparent to those who knew them but which they thought of as protection."[1] A fan tracks them down. One of the players seems to have a date with a woman. The fan is obsessed with getting the better of the two players back into baseball. The players have moved on with their lives and think he's a bit annoying. He gets a gun, and we fear he might be heading off to kill these men who live together, who have so disappointed him, but instead he goes and kills himself. His connection to the players is not remarked on by the police or press. The better player continues to wonder if he ought to

1 Barry Lopez, "The Hitter," *The North American Review* 278, no. 4 (1993): 33–34.

have stayed with baseball. But then he stops thinking about it, and never again answers a letter from a fan. End of story.

Unlike "The Hitter," "The San Joaquin" is, like the majority of Lopez's fiction, written in the first-person point of view, but it covers more of a lifetime, because its narrator is an older gay man who is reflecting on life after his longtime partner has died. The story has an extraordinary geographical and historical sweep, beginning, "My late mother, Betsy Krall van der Meer, grew up on a farm in the Transvaal, after the Boer War, near the town of Beestekraal." The narrator is born in the Netherlands, and as a child moves with the family to San Francisco. "Perhaps," the narrator says, "it was the tenor of all the stories my parents told us about growing up happily in an agricultural district in South Africa, the neighborliness and camaraderie that prevailed, that fueled my determination to move to the San Joaquin Valley in 1973, with David."[2] Their experiences of family were different: the narrator had siblings and nieces and nephews; David was an only child from Charleston and the "polite way to convey what happened to him in South Carolina is to say that his family and relatives simply distanced themselves after he came out."[3] The two men are both lawyers, and set up a practice first specializing in labor law, then immigration law. In 2006, David dies of cancer and the narrator struggles to know quite what to do with his life. His garden produces too many vegetables, too much fruit, and so he gives a lot of it away to neighbors. He and a Mexican neighbor, Ernesto Rulfo, talk about books and the politics of water. Ernesto's wife brings him meals. He remembers how Ernesto's children were fascinated by the shells he and David brought back from their travels to the Gulf Coast and the South Pacific. He decides to give the shells away to Ernesto's children and grandchildren. "It's that time in my life now when I'm considering giving away things that, before, I could not imagine living without. […] I'll tell them about searching

2 Barry Lopez, "The San Joaquin," in *Freeman's: The Best New Writing on Home,* ed. John Freeman (New York: Grove Press, 2017), 167–68.

3 Ibid., 169.

for shells with David in Tahiti and wading in the South China Sea."[4] He decides to start reading a book of Juan Rulfo stories Ernesto has brought over.

Though "The Hitter" is written in the third-person point of view and "The San Joaquin" in the first, they both eschew scenes for narrative statements and thus read more like histories or reports than what we conventionally think of as short fiction. This allows Lopez great breadth within a short space. "The San Joaquin" in particular has an epic quality, despite being only seven pages long. What we lose in character development gets replaced with a great sense of connection between eras, places, people, and events.

I am glad that Lopez wrote these stories. His fiction tries to encompass a tremendous breadth of experiences, and it would be strange were he not to include gay characters somewhere in his work. And yet these seem to me to be very much stories written by a straight writer. I think that is, in fact, part of why I like them. There is a value in the work of extending the writerly imagination beyond one's own experience, a value that shows itself in writing that is then carefully constructed, even if I find it impossible to imagine a gay man writing these stories this way. Lopez's is a kind of view from outside, but not a bad view, any more than the perspective of a guest is necessarily a bad one. Certainly, the lives in the story are lives I can imagine, lives rather similar to ones I do, in fact, know. It's not the substance that seems straight to me, but rather the perspective, a perspective that does not see community in queerness but rather, in both stories, sees one gay couple finding all the community they need among straight people.

4 Ibid., 173.

16

Scars of Awareness

An entire chapter of Sōetsu Yanagi's *The Unknown Craftsman* is devoted to a Korean tea-bowl, the Kizaemon Ido bowl, which Yanagi says "is considered to be the finest in the world,"[1] even though it seems to be quite ordinary. He says when he first saw it, he was disappointed. This was just a bowl a poor person would use in everyday life:

> A typical thing for his use; costing next to nothing; made by a poor man; an article without the flavor of personality; used carelessly by its owner; bought without pride; something anyone could have bought anywhere and everywhere. That is the nature of this bowl. The clay had been dug from the hill at the back of the house; the glaze was made with the ash from the hearth; the potter's wheel had been irregular. The shape revealed no particular thought: it was one of many. The work had been fast; the turning was rough, done with dirty hands; the throwing slipshot; the glaze had run over the foot. The throwing room had been dark. The thrower could not read. The kiln was a wretched affair; the firing careless. Sand had stuck to the pot, but nobody minded; no one invested

1 Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman,* trans. Bernard Leach, rev. edn. (1972; repr. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 190.

> the thing with any dreams. It is enough to make one give up working as a potter.[2]

What makes this unremarkable pot so remarkable, then, so valued as to be, now, nearly priceless? According to Yanagi, the bowl's absolute, unselfconscious ordinariness is what has drawn people to it for centuries. He says that Japanese masters of the tea ceremony prize Korean bowls over all others because "Japanese bowls bear the scars of awareness. […] It is all very well to find irregularities of form in Ido bowls charming, but to make pots with deliberate distortions immediately loses that charm."[3] It is the effortlessness that matters, an utter adherence to nature and to the object's own nature, rather than to aesthetic rules. But the beauty is beyond words, beyond concepts. "The beauty of the Kizaemon Ido bowl is that of strifeless peace, and it is fitting that it should rest in that chapel, the Kōho-an, for in that quiet place it offers its silent answer to the seeker."[4]

2 Ibid., 191–92.
3 Ibid., 194.
4 Ibid., 193.

17

Sound

On January 8, 2021, the Grammy Award-winning cellist David Darling died peacefully at the age of 79. Barry Lopez first met Darling in the early 1980s when they were participants on a river trip through the Grand Canyon led by the composer and bandleader Paul Winter, a trip chronicled in Lopez's essay "Gone Back into the Earth" (in *Crossing Open Ground*) and Winter's album *Canyon.* Not long after the trip, Lopez and Darling collaborated on *River Notes,* an album drawn from Lopez's short story collection of the same name, with Darling playing cello accompaniment to Lopez's reading of some of his stories. Later, Lopez wrote a short story, "Disturbing the Night," that was included as liner notes for Darling's 1995 album *Dark Wood,* a collaboration that came about when the head of ECM, which released the album, asked Lopez to write something for an album's notes, and Lopez suggested that ECM send him something by a single composer and played on a single instrument, with no information about the music. They sent him *Dark Wood,* not knowing he and Darling were already acquainted. Lopez listened to the music and wrote a story, as he told William Tydeman, "in emotional parallel to it."[1] The resulting story is not among

1 William E. Tydeman, *Conversations with Barry Lopez* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 102.

Lopez's best — it's a parable more than a story, and, for me at least, unaffecting — but the idea of writing with and from music (and not just with music as aural wallpaper in the background while writing) is a powerful one. It brings us back to Lopez's great theme of the need for real listening. Can we sit with music, truly listen to it, absorb its shapes and structures, then let those shapes and structures influence our own?

Something to catch like a burr in the wool of the mind.

18

Rill

I must confess I have not read every page of Barry Lopez's three big nonfiction books, *Of Wolves and Men, Arctic Dreams,* and *Horizon,* though I have read around in them, and appreciate certain passages in each, even as their wholes are too densely descriptive to hold my interest through long engagement. It is Lopez's essays, interviews, and especially his short stories that I treasure. His best short fiction is fiercely concise, but in narrative nonfiction he tended to sprawl, seeking to capture the beauty of the world via words. My own preferences seem at odds with most people's. Lopez is better known for his big nonfiction books than he is for his more narrowly focused, gem-like writing, and it is for the big books that he won accolades and audiences. Indeed, I expect his other work would have had a harder time getting published if not for the reputation his big books built and the money their sales brought his publishers. But I much prefer the shortest things he wrote. Also the interviews — he was a wonderful interview subject, as he let himself wander philosophically in that form more than he did in any other, and I would rather read philosophy than read descriptions of landscapes, which I prefer to leave to painters and photographers.

19

Mirage

Lydia Davis wrote:

> Doubt, uneasiness, dissatisfaction with writing or with existing forms may result in the formal integration of these doubts by the creation of new forms, forms that in one way or another exceed or surpass our expectations. Whereas repeating old forms implies a lack of desire or compulsion, or a refusal, to entertain doubt or feel dissatisfaction.[1]

Sōetsu Yanagi wrote: "All art movements tend to the pursuit of novelty, but the true essence of beauty can exist only where the distinction between the old and the new has been eliminated."[2]

---

1 Lydia Davis, "Form as Response to Doubt," in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* eds. Mary Burger et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004), 35.

2 Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman,* trans. Bernard Leach, rev. edn. (1972; repr. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 131.

20

Meridian

It is tradition at Bread Loaf for each workshop leader to give a reading in the narrow theater space on the campus, a space I barely remember beyond the feeling of sitting in a rickety wooden school bus. Barry Lopez read a story that had just appeared that spring in *The Georgia Review:* "The Mappist." I do not generally get much from fiction readings — something about my brain refuses to process narrative read aloud — but I sat enraptured during Lopez's reading, his careful articulation and exact sense of rhythm bringing the story alive. But there was something else, too, something in the way he marshalled information through his sentences that made it not only comprehensible to me, but gripping. Even now, two decades later, I remember that reading more vividly than I remember many things I've experienced far more recently.

"The Mappist" had such an effect on me that I did not know how to speak about it. Some of my friends at the reading did not care for the story, and the few who did appreciate it did not respond with the force that I did. They did not *need* the story in the way I did. It is the story of an improbably accomplished cartographer, a person of wizardly vision; it is a story of quests, of expertise and precision, of magic and knowledge and beauty, of craft and art. It is a story of people in relationships to human-made things that are also extensions of the non-human world,

and it is a story of tenderness — not sentimental tenderness, but tenderness that is hard-earned and impermanent.

In some way I still can't define, and perhaps don't want to define, "The Mappist" spoke (and speaks) to my own deepest yearnings. The final two paragraphs are transcendent and beautiful, a pure vision of the first steps toward something I must call enlightenment, an effect I've only ever felt before at the end of some of Anton Chekhov's stories and the end of some of Virginia Woolf's novels, a vision that goes far beyond the narrow possibilities of epiphany and instead opens wide the universe:

> After a few moments I turned off the headlights and rolled down the window. I listened to the tires crushing gravel in the roadbed. The sound of it helped me hold the road, together with instinct and the memory of earlier having driven it. I felt the volume of space beneath the clear, star-ridden sky, and moved over the dark prairie like a barn-bound horse.[1]

Human perception links landscape and thought, person and animal. Darkness brings mystery, but also wonder. A story about the world's greatest cartographer ends as a story about all that can't be mapped.

Lopez writes most often with a first-person narrator, but the effect is not that of a naval-gazer or narcissist. Partly, this is a matter of technique (his stories are often layered with other types of narration, particularly texts-within-texts, so the individual point of view gets diffused), but even more than technique, I think it is a matter of attitude and perspective, the same humble sureness I perceived in him as a person.

First-person narrative is so often unsatisfying because it feels like a failure of imagination, a surrender to self and solipsism. While the vast majority of his writing, fiction and nonfiction, is in the first person voice, Lopez demonstrated a distinct discomfort with the I-figure as self. He told Newell that Russell Banks identified Lopez's stories as told by "non-autobiographical,

1 Barry Lopez, *Light Action in the Caribbean* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 162.

19th-century, first-person narrators,"[2] though I would be tempted to go back to the 18th century and earlier, to times when the separation of story and teller was more inconceivable. There has been a paradoxical impoverishment of fiction as the limited third-person point of view offered modern writers a pose of objectivity — instead of the wandering third-person perspective that allows Tolstoy, for instance, to render the consciousness of animals in his scenes. American writers in particular seem to have lost a whole range of expression by often confining themselves either to a bland and narrow third-person perspective or, if they want to show off a "voice," a mannered, terminally self-conscious first-person narrator who ends up sounding rather similar to all the other self-conscious "voices" of the sorts of stories that win literary awards. This is related to the perpetual American suspicion of imagination, a suspicion that not only assumes fiction to be autobiography, but insists it must be.

Dodie Bellamy, in an essay titled "Crimes against Genre," writes:

> It's hammered into fiction students that first person narration is weird, fringy. A close third person point of view is preferable to first person, but an omniscient third should be everybody's goal. One should never tell anything, but show show show. […] The goal of most MFA programs is to turn out students well-groomed and disciplined as dogs from a dog training school. The anomalous is often labeled as dangerous.[3]

First-person fiction that begins from the idea that all stories have a teller is a style of fiction especially open to imagination because that fiction builds from the blank slate wonder offered by the words, *I'm going to tell you a story.* There is an authority to a storyteller, to any speaker who says, "I saw, I heard, I felt, I

2 Mike Newell, N*o Bottom: In Conversation with Barry Lopez* (Gambier: xoxox Press, 2007), 20.

3 Dodie Bellamy, *Academonia* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2006), 55.

dreamed…" But that authority must reach outward. Lopez told Newell that he was dogged by the problem of "how to combine the authority of the self with the authority of the world beyond the self. How can you occupy the shared world, the historical world, and, at the same time, the personal world and still gain the reader's trust? This is an impenetrable problem for me right now. It's always there, right at the edge of my thoughts."[4] A few years later, he discussed with Tydeman his growing openness to writing autobiographically:

> I contain, for whatever it may be worth, a certain measure of what is distinctive about my generation; and if I keep track of those things, I can disappear but that record will still be there, some kind of spine to make sense of a time of unprecedented change.[5]

As a person who spent much of his life looking outward — while always acknowledging positionality, the fact that he was someone looking out *from* somewhere — he was then able to look inward with an expanded (and expanding) sense of sight, a sense of perspective that valued his own thoughts, feelings, and experiences not for what they said about him as an individual but as evidence of the world beyond that individual.

Similarly, Lopez's fiction takes on personas so as to show the paths individual consciousness travels as it seeks connection with other people, with animals, and with the landscape. There is an animism to the worldview of his stories, a sense that every being and every object has something like consciousness, and that our individual consciousness is one node in a network, one entrance to an infinite labyrinth. Alongside consciousness, there is also dignity. Both require attention, which is one of Lopez's recurring themes: without attention, the world's wonders and terrors remain inaccessible, inscrutable. The genius of Corlis

4 Newell, *No Bottom,* 54.

5 William E. Tydeman, *Conversations with Barry Lopez* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 83.

Benefideo in "The Mappist" lies not so much in his talent for cartography as in the care and persistence with which he has honed his attention. "The world is a miracle," Benefideo says, "unfolding in the pitch dark. We're lighting candles. Those maps — they are my candles."[6]

For writers, our stories are our candles. What is the point of illuminating an empty darkness? Words may accumulate into something like maps. Like maps, stories presume an audience, a listener. We write from an assumption that, whatever depth of solitude we may write from, we are not forever alone. Language allows us a space in which to work alongside the reader, even if the reader is unknown to us or unknowable — the potential is always there for a reader somewhere, somehow to see our words. The assumption of a reader (even if distant, unknown, unknowable) implies an ethic. Lopez believed fervently that the best writers are companions to their readers, not authorities over them. "Writing is a way of taking care of each other," Lopez told our workshop, words I scrawled hastily into my notebook lest I lose them. "Intimacy," he said, "comes from sensual contact with the reader."

The fiction writer opens an imaginative space and welcomes the reader into it as a place of thought and care, a place to share responses to the question, "How do you live?"

6 Lopez, *Light Action in the Caribbean,* 161.

21

Metes and Bounds

In a 2009 interview with Tony Leuzzi (eventually published in 2011 in the online magazine *EOAGH*), Robert Glück says:

> I generally know what a work is going to do before I start. The question is what pattern will it take. How is it going to be organized. In that sense, I give myself more elbow room than many other writers. In prose, when you are telling a story, two things have to happen at once: one event has to follow another with a sense of inevitability; but you also want to create a field of possibility in each moment. I try to pressure that proposition by increasing the possible directions in which a story or a next sentence can go by creating a larger view, say, a long view, or a too-intimate close-up, or I jump to the subject of storytelling itself, or to the reader — I abandon the middle distance.[1]

This reminds me of something Barry Lopez said at Bread Loaf about a poem by James Galvin, "Against the Rest of the Year." After we read the poem, Lopez led us through it line by line. He pointed to the way it uses direction right from its opening: "The

1 Tony Leuzzi, "Interview with Robert Glück," *EOAGH,* October 23, 2011, https://eoagh.com/interview-with-robert-gluck/.

meadow's a dream I'm working to wake to."[2] Directional words fill the first stanza of the poem: *under, over, in, out, through* (also the title: *Against*). Then the poem begins to do strange things with time and tense. Most of the verbs don't call attention to themselves, I remember Lopez saying, but they've got tricks up their sleeves nonetheless. The poem begins in the present tense, then moves into the future: "After this we won't be haying anymore. / Lyle is going to concentrate on dying for a while / And then he is going to die."[3] The poem offers a future tense vision of a world gone still from death, then returns to the present tense, albeit a present with a sense of a deeper past ("the air is the haydust that was a hundred years"[4]) that leads to a final line giving a sense of the infinite: "*Forever* comes to mind, and peaks where the snow stays."[5]

I don't have much memory of the context that Lopez brought this poem into, how he related it to fiction writing, but I know he did. Something about expanding the possibilities of our prose, something about learning from poetry, something about pushing against the conventions that lead us to think stories must be one thing, when they could, in fact, be much more. Something like that.

In the interview with Tony Leuzzi, Robert Glück goes on to explain his idea of "the middle distance" and how much it limits writers:

> Most narrative takes place in the middle distance, which is basically what someone can see. So, Tony walks into the room: He walks into the room, he sits down at the pine table, he wears a green blazer and a fedora with a green feather. Working on this level, I create a kind of guided daydream. Readers project into it and make a story-world in their brains.

2 James Galvin, *Resurrection Update: Collected Poems, 1975–1997* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1997), 147.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 148.
5 Ibid.

> But why? The naturalism this method supports is a set of conventions that leads to the status quo. The more "normal" the convention, the more it supports the status quo. We take this kind of writing as natural but Chaucer would not have, or Sappho, or some tribal writer. Since I'm the writer, and I can include anything I want, what has made me confine my work to this small palette? Why don't I say, Tony walks in and relives the orgasm he had that morning. I could say how much money Tony has in his wallet or bank account, as Balzac might have done. I could say what Tony will be thinking about tomorrow, what he will dream tonight, how he emerged from his mother's vagina, how English torques his brain, what he knows subliminally, Bob's smell perhaps. I could say how a flu virus is commencing but not yet experienced, how Tony is going to die. I could talk about Tony's Grandfather's journey to America. A human being is large and complicated, and the middle distance diminishes him or her.[6]

One of the challenges readers have with a lot of Barry Lopez's fiction is that it does not live in the middle distance. Lopez was in most ways a completely different sort of writer from Robert Glück, but they share an approach to fiction that eschews limits imposed by narrative forms common to both literary and popular American fiction. Glück tells Leuzzi, "To put pressure on the expectations of the middle distance is a kind of politics. Anything that reorients the reader and writer is political, because organizing a reader's mind and psychic life involve power." I think Lopez would have agreed, though he might not have been drawn to the word *political*. But one of the things I learned most forcefully from him was to recognize that writing does, in fact, seek to organize (or at least affect) the reader's mind and psychic life, and we must take that organization seriously, must recognize the responsibility within it.

6 Leuzzi, "Interview with Robert Glück."

22

Stoneware

I have been reading the translator and poet David Hinton's book about the life and poetry of Tu Fu, *Awakened Cosmos: The Mind of Classical Chinese Poetry.* "Virtually synonymous with Absence," Hinton writes, "Tao is reality seen as a single formless tissue that, in its mysteriously generative nature, shapes itself into ten thousand forms. This Tao cannot be seen in the formless, for there is no form to see there. And of course the formless cannot be seen in forms. So Tao can only be glimpsed at that edge where form and formlessness blur together." Hinton says this edge can be seen in the mist and minimalism of Chinese painting, and it is also "the very fabric from which Chinese poems are made, the minimal grammar where images and meaning itself seem so tenuous, wavering between appearing from and disappearing into empty tissue surrounding the words."[1] This edge of form and formlessness, Hinton seems to suggest, often defeats translation. He does his best — and his translations are remarkable in almost creating a language of their own — but the poems always fall back into form or else disperse into formlessness. Nonetheless, something still survives even in translation, if you know to stay open to it. (I find myself, for instance, com-

1 David Hinton, *Awakened Cosmos: The Mind of Classical Chinese Poetry* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), 87–88.

ing back again and again to the final line of the poem Hinton translates as "Night at the Tower": *And the story of our lives just opens away — vacant, silent.*[2])

My own ideal for short fiction in particular is this edge of form and formlessness. Rather than epiphany, this is what I look for in an ending of a story, or even, if possible, throughout: some note or gesture that opens the story's form, that renders its vision wider than its narrated circumstances. Such stories run the risk of fragility, even preciousness, but at their best they are more like pottery: they may break if dropped on the floor, but they can also withstand temperatures that turn everything else to smoke.

2 Ibid., 93.

23

Against a Field Sinister

Though he sometimes said he was working on a novel, the closest thing that Barry Lopez published to a novel was a collection of loosely linked short stories titled *Resistance*. It appeared from Knopf in June 2004. George W. Bush was re-elected that November (for once with an actual majority of votes). Though not as widely or thoroughly reviewed as Lopez's nonfiction, *Resistance* received reviews that were mostly positive, which surprises me now, not because I think the book deserved more critical skepticism, but because on the surface it presents little to satisfy readers who come to Lopez expecting a nature writer, and just as little to satisfy readers who come expecting conventional American fiction. It's a book that feels like it might have been translated from a samizdat manuscript smuggled out of a small Eastern European country that no longer exists.

The summary of *Resistance* offered by the publisher says that it is a book of "nine fictional testimonies," and that's as good a description as I can come up with, because it is not a collection of short stories — or, at least, not stories that can stand on their own — nor is it helpful to call it a novel. The basic concept of the book, explained in the first text (titled "Apocalypse"), is that a group of artists, craftspeople, and renegades have been targeted by a government and must now all flee into hiding. Each testimony ends with the narrator's name, something about their

occupation, and where they were fleeing from, such as, "Owen Daniels, independent curator, author, *Commerce and Art in America,* on leaving Paris" and "Marion Taylor, alternative energy consultant, producer, *Changing Woman's Sons,* on leaving Dar es Salaam, Tanzania." The first text (Owen Daniels) is the most explicit about the situation, and also the most straightforwardly pedantic, reading more like a political essay than any sort of fictional narrative, and some of the opinions sound quite similar to ones Lopez himself has expressed:

> It was our belief that within the histories of other, older cultures we would find cause not to be incapacitated by the ludicracy of our own. It was our intuition that even in those cultures into which our own had injected its peculiar folklore — that success is financial achievement, that the future is better, that life is an entertainment — we would encounter enduring stories to trade in. We thought we might be able to discern a path in stories and performances rooted in disparaged pasts that would spring our culture out of its adolescence.[1]

The next sentence, though, offers a little less hope for such an intuition than Lopez's nonfiction had up until that point: "This remains to be seen." It's not *hopeless,* it's not declaring the futility of everything these outsiders had tried to do in previous decades, but it does point to some sense of the huge difficulty, and perhaps folly, of the resistance they had offered. After all, within the world of the book, their resistance failed. Each of these characters set out to live a life based on a lot of the principles Lopez articulated through his own life, but while their efforts may have led to some small and individual moments of insight and compassion, they did nothing to change a world that has only become worse during their lifetimes.

And the world in this book is one where artists, writers, and weirdos matter a whole lot more than they do in our world.

1 Barry Lopez, *Resistance* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 9.

Autocrats in the United States, at least, find artists easy to ignore. *Resistance* is ultimately a book premised on a comforting fantasy — the fantasy of writers and artists and intellectuals as enemies of the state.

When Donald Trump was elected, I sent copies of *Resistance* to various friends. Like many people, I had deluded myself into thinking Trump could not win the election. I should have known better — I live in a rural place that tends toward eccentric inflections of conservatism, I knew how uniquely hated Hillary Clinton was by right-wingers, and I knew how much they loved Trump's arrogance and murderous hatred. Still, despite plenty of experiences that should have taught me otherwise, I thought Americans valued superficial decency enough not to elect quite so vulgar a demagogue as Trump. And certainly, millions more people voted against Trump than voted for him (he won the Electoral College only), but nonetheless something like sixty-three million people — 63,000,000 — *voted for Trump.* I thought I was cynical enough not to be shocked by political events in the US anymore, but November 2016 shocked me. Deeply. And then I felt a queasiness about my shock, because I should have known. Never underestimate the appeal of a pose of cruel authoritarianism to people who feel that the cruelty and authoritarianism are for their benefit.

And so I reached for Lopez's sentences, his fictional testimonies of good people in flight, targeted by a government that detests imagination and compassion. I kept the book near in the time between the election and the inauguration. I needed the comfort provided by its gentle fantasy of artists, writers, and scholars mattering enough to a government to be targeted by it. I needed the comfort of Lopez's calm diction. I also needed his quiet vision. That vision sat in contrast to the screams of pain and defiance coming from my ideological compatriots and the screams of righteous hate spewing from Trump's followers, people who felt vindicated after eight years of a Black man in the White House, who felt emboldened in their hatred, who felt that the power and authority that had been taken from them was now returned. I knew from the moment Trump was elected

that the next four years would be filled with brazen cruelty, and one of the few things to keep me from collapsing completely into despair was Lopez's patient perception, as expressed in *Resistance,* of compassion's value and power.

The Trump years showed us how little threat artists, writers, scholars, and compassion pose to autocrats. Trump is a man with no interest in or knowledge of literature or philosophy, a person whose highest ideal of art is despotic kitsch. His is a remarkably self-absorbed psyche incapable of perceiving beauty in anything except himself, his power, and whatever reflects, projects, or honors that power. Autocracy and narcissism work together, shaping reality into a feedback loop. There is no need to jail or assassinate rebels when power can fix it so that only what flatters that power gets through the gates. This is something even beyond Deleuze's idea of the control society, where control is so dispersed that it is perceived as freedom. Instead of the control society, Trump regressed us to something more monarchical, where whatever the ruler says is true *is* true and all else is false and fake. George Bush, Dick Cheney, and their crew had aimed for this (remember their disparaging of the "reality-based community"?), but they lacked what Trump (and Reagan before him) brought. Trump moved power away from politicians and toward what America most loves: celebrity and fantasies of dominance.

In that first testimony in *Resistance,* Owen Daniels says, "We will champion what is beautiful, and so finally make our opponents irrelevant."[2] The Trump years, like many autocratic and demagogic eras before, showed that the joke was on anybody (like Owen Daniels) who thought their love of beauty was itself a form of power. In attempting to make opponents irrelevant, such aesthetes instead became irrelevant themselves. Other characters in *Resistance* say similar things, arguing for an ability to step outside the purview of enemies by building beauty that can't be touched by the purveyors of ugliness. It is important to see, though, that most of this sentimental fantasy sits at the

2 Ibid., 15.

beginning and end of the book, while the middle offers something a bit harder-edged, particularly in the text titled "Laguna de Bay in A-Sharp," said to be the testimony of "Jefferson de-Shay, physician, social historian, editor, *The Correspondence of Corazon Aquino,* three volumes."[3] This testimony denounces the indifference that can grow "out of the need to separate oneself from the brutality one witnessed," a need "to make the suffering an abstraction."[4] It is a testimony against egotism: "I no longer needed to be regarded as a man with campaign ribbons from the most just of human wars. Or even to be recognized as a smart fellow. All I needed to do now was to reduce somewhat the level of suffering where I encountered it, to moderate the levels of cruelty to which so many remained inured."[5] No grand bloviation about the power of artists or intellectuals to stand strong against murderous dictators; instead we have the story of someone who had to learn how little he mattered, and to embrace that littleness not as a tool for indifference or despair, but for proper perspective. You may not be able to write a poem so powerful that it undoes injustice, but you certainly can do something, somehow to alleviate a bit of someone's suffering.

There, then, is the power of beauty. Not to blast through barricades, but rather to provide a moment of peace in a landscape of misery. I keep returning to *Resistance,* more than any other of Lopez's books, because each page offers to me that beauty, that peace.

3 Ibid., 125.
4 Ibid., 115.
5 Ibid., 123.

24

Earthenware

In an interview with Robert Glück collected in the anthology *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* Dennis Cooper says of his early novels:

> I wanted the work to be about the cruel, self-defeating nature of aestheticism itself, and how art could only short-circuit in relation to experiences that were too deep or frightening or complex to be represented by language. I felt, and still feel, that when language tries to encompass those kinds of experiences, it becomes overly infected with the consciousness of the artist who tries to represent them and, as a result, it flatters the artist and lies to the audience.[1]

1 "The Tell-Tale Heart: Dennis Cooper Interviewed by Robert Glück," in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* eds. Mary Burger et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004), 256.

25

Flights

Every writer — every person — has areas of ignorance, lacunae. Focus and attention on one thing means lack of focus and attention on countless others. The missing elements that catch a reader's curiosity and perhaps dismay are rarely what sits entirely outside the writer's sight, but rather what hides in the penumbra: questions unasked, echoes unheard.

The question I wish I had been able to ask Barry Lopez is: How did you pay for your life and work?

Economics didn't much interest him, it seems. One of the most economically oriented essays he wrote is "Flights" in *About This Life,* which chronicles a kind of stunt where Lopez tagged along on forty flights around the world via air freighters. It's a fascinating view of global commerce, and a different writer would have emphasized more of the commerce side of it where Lopez is more (or at least as much) interested in the way such planes can condense time and space. He does, though, write about the cargo, providing a unique view of how wealth and desire move objects (and animals!) across the planet.

Most of Lopez's adult life was spent traveling, but I can remember nowhere that he lays out exactly how this got accomplished. He seemed aware, particularly in his later years, that his was a highly privileged view, one not only not available to most people but that in fact *should not be available* to most

other people, lest fragile places and cultures be damaged. He seemed genuinely troubled by the effect the popularity of *Arctic Dreams* had on the places he wrote about — people of means read the book, were inspired by it, and then traveled by the tens and hundreds and maybe even thousands to some of the book's locations. After that, Lopez deliberately obscured the details of locations he wrote about.

For all his humility, the question Lopez cannot answer well in his writings or interviews is: *Why you?* Why do you, Barry Lopez, have the right and power to be a world traveler? Why do you get to describe the world you see, while most other people are left silent? The answers present themselves easily enough: knowledge, talent, past experience, interest, skills, opportunity. I would be more satisfied with those answers if the scaffolding were more apparent, if more of the writing acknowledged its material circumstances — perhaps expense accounts from publishers, perhaps grants from individuals and organizations, perhaps personal wealth. I don't know if any of those *were* consistently the ways Lopez funded his work, and the not knowing bothers me. Money is power, and it is hard to know quite what to make of an experience if the source of power allowing that experience is hidden from view.

In contemporary writing, vulgar language and explicit sex are hardly transgressive, but one avenue to produce true shock remains open to writers: share your bank statements. Instead of asking simply, "How do you live?" we might better ask, "How do you pay for your life?"[1]

---

1 The cost of my attendance at Bread Loaf was paid for by my employer at the time, a private boarding school where I taught English and theater. Bread Loaf cost significantly more than we were given for annual professional development funds, but the conference's prestige made it enticing to the school, and so their only requirement was that I write a brief report of my experience for the parents and alumni magazine. I don't remember if I applied for one of the work scholarships that Bread Loaf provides. I don't think I did. There is a long tradition of excellent writers working as waiters at Bread Loaf, but I'm not sure I had any confidence that I was talented enough to have earned such a scholarship, and previous experience made me wary of working as a waiter in any situation. My salary at the time was

around $20,000 a year, plus housing provided by the school. My largest regular expenses were a car loan and school loans, which all together came to a bit more than $500/month, if I remember correctly. Nowadays, I am a public employee and my annual salary is available on the University System of New Hampshire website. I am also grateful to be a member of a union, and our bargained contract is available at http://plymouth-aaup.org/documents/.

26

Reduction

In recent decades, Sōetsu Yanagi has been re-evaluated, and his presentation of Korean pottery and the idea of "the unknown craftsman" is now seen by some scholars as serving the ideological needs of imperial Japan. While Yanagi shows a considerable appreciation of Korean pottery, it is at the expense of actual Koreans, including Korean potters. In Yanagi's view, Koreans are the most "authentic" potters, but they do not appreciate what they create. Yanagi disparages Japanese potters who try too deliberately to create effects that Korean potters created by accident or ignorance, but to Yanagi it is the Japanese sensibility that allows a true appreciation for objects the Koreans consider ordinary. Yanagi's view fits into a long history of Japanese obsession with Korean pottery — an obsession that included the enslavement of Korean potters during Japanese invasions in the 1590s, events that led scholars Jon Carter Covell and Alan Covell to declare that "Japan's ceramic production, which had not been too extensive nor varied previous to the 1590s (thus tea wares had often been imported), now suddenly took a tremendous leap forward — it was the 'quantum leap,' for never again was ceramics to be an unimportant art form in the islands."[1] Japan's

1 Jon Carter Covell and Alan Carter Covell, *The World of Korean Ceramics* (Honolulu: Si-sa Yong-o-sa, 1986), 92.

pottery industry began with the enslavement of unknown Korean craftsmen who were forcibly brought to Japan to build kilns and produce wares for the Japanese.

Yanagi's valorization of the object over the maker, of transcendental beauty over the circumstances of making, allowed him to present Korean pottery to a Japanese (and, later, international) audience in a way that washed away all the dirt of market forces as well as all the blood of war, enslavement, and colonialism. He was also able to elide his own social and class status, positioning himself as an expert interpreter of people quite different from himself. Edmund de Waal has identified a shared set of stereotypes shared by Yanagi and Bernard Leach:

> Leach's constant imaging of Orientals as childlike, or mystical, or more attuned to the spiritual was a concomitant part of his imaging of Orientals' pottery as ego-less, mystically alive or, in some nebulous way, spiritual. […] For Yanagi, as an urbane young aristocratic intellectual, his own relationship with rural Japan was similar to that of an ethnographer: rural potters or weavers, any Korean makers at all, were almost as exotic to him as to Leach.[2]

A sensitive modern reader can perceive much of this in *The Unknown Craftsman* without digging deeply into academic scholarship. Though I have only been skimming through the scholarship recently myself, I have long thought there was something condescending and patronizing in Yanagi's presentation of Korean pottery. Nonetheless, I also can't let go of some of what I have learned from Yanagi's aesthetics. It is not an aesthetic vision I subscribe to entirely, but my yearning for an egoless art is strong enough that I am drawn to the solace his viewpoint offers. I do not know the answers to all the questions I have about Yanagi's elision of imperialism, the unstable balance between cosmopolitanism and nationalism his writing

2 Edmund de Waal, "Homo Orientalis: Bernard Leach and the Image of the Japanese Craftsman," *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 4 (1997): 360–61.

suggests, the simplifications he and Bernard Leach inspired in each other, but I know that I want to stay aware of those failures even as I recognize that there is a truth of some sort within Yanagi's work that I do not want to let go of. The ideal of art that is not bound to personality or identity remains powerful for me because it suggests that art may contribute to communities and coalitions of imagination instead of individual aggrandizement. Yanagi's celebration of the ordinary is commendable. His ability to see beauty in humility deserves to be emulated. We can hold onto these ideas while also remaining clear-eyed about the limitations of Yanagi's viewpoint, the failures of his imagination.

27

Declination

In her essay "Low Culture," Dodie Bellamy writes:

> I find it interesting, and at times dismaying, how my work changes within the context in which it is read. In a gay culture, where there is a vocabulary for talking about sex, my work doesn't feel all that transgressive. But then place the same work within a straight world, with all those things one doesn't talk about "in mixed company," and I become a pervert. To me transgression is a tedious position. But I am excited by pushing the reader to the point where he or she cannot maintain a safe distance from the work.[1]

1 Dodie Bellamy, "Low Culture," in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* eds. Mary Burger et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004), 231.

28

Reliquary

Barry Lopez's essay "Effleurage: The Stroke of Fire" details a community in Oregon devoted to a giant anagama pottery kiln. "Licked and scorched by wood flame, glazed and encrusted with wood ash, anagama ware contrasts sharply with ware produced in tamer environments like that in an electric kiln," Lopez writes. His interest, though, is less in the ceramic products of the kiln than in the community of craftspeople it summons.

> The physical effort required to prepare wood and feed the fire night and day for several days means a small human community has to coalesce. The communal aspect of this protracted firing, and the fact that the fire changes its nature with a change in stokers or the type of wood being burned, attract potters drawn to social cooperation, physical work, and subtle firings.[1]

At the outset Lopez tells us that this community needs to preserve its local identity, its necessary mysteries, and so he has fictionalized some names and locations. It is not so fictionalized as to be unrecognizable to those with local knowledge, but it is protected from casual curiosity — we non-local readers can not

1 Barry Lopez, *About This Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 147–48.

use Lopez's details to plot our next adventure tourism vacation. Though Lopez has rendered fully these craftspeople we don't know personally, he shows that they are not unknown to each other, and that their individual qualities, their quirks and passions, directly affect what comes out of the kiln. While their art can certainly be appreciated by anyone who seeks this particular form of beauty, that art originates from a particular place and particular people, and its first purpose was to allow the people of that place to craft beautiful objects together from the most ordinary, natural, local materials. At the same time, their craft connected them to an ancient tradition from far away. The first prototypical anagama kilns can be traced to China around 1000 BCE. The principles underlying these kilns made their way to Korea, and then, significantly later, they crossed into Japan sometime in the first half of the fifth century CE.

In an essay published by *The Georgia Review* in 2010 (twelve years after "Effleurage" first appeared in *Harper's*), Lopez reveals the actual name of the potter who built the kiln he wrote about, and he places the kiln in or near a specific town: Astoria, "the site of the fur-trading post John Jacob Astor had built there in 1811 at the mouth of the Columbia River."[2] Lopez does not say why he chose to reveal what he had previously hidden from view, but the context gives a clue. The essay is titled "A Dark Light in the West: Racism and Reconciliation," and it is a memoir of coming to recognize the racial fault lines that crackled across his own life and the landscapes he cared about. "Effleurage" hides certain details for the sake of protecting community, but "A Dark Light in the West" reveals a different kind of hiding and protection — horrors deliberately rendered invisible and forgotten so that one type of community (white people) can remain strong and respected while all other communities are repressed. Lopez writes:

2 Barry Lopez, "A Dark Light in the West: Racism and Reconciliation," *The Georgia Review* 64, no. 3 (2010): 375.

> Oregon, the only free state ever admitted to the Union with a black exclusion clause in its constitution, has a long, virulent, and occluded history of racism. […] Today, looking back at the racial situation I encountered in Oregon at the age of twenty-three, I can see that it was consequential in determining the direction of my life.[3]

The man who built the anagama kiln was, Lopez says, Richard Rowland. "Richard's father was a white veteran of World War II, his mother a native Hawaiian. Richard was born and raised in the Coast Ranges south of Astoria, in the drainage of the Nestucca River on what was once Tillamook land, but he had spent most of his adult life near the mouth of the Columbia." These details of place are important, because Rowland shows Lopez a history invisible to most people not from this specific place: he brings Lopez to the remains of a 19th-century trash dump used by Chinese workers who were prohibited from using the city facilities.

> The remains of the dump, now a kind of reliquary, lie in an open copse of red alder. […] Not until that day with Richard did my imprecise and unorganized sense of Oregon's Chinese history begin to come into focus. The fragile quality of a child's sense of self still adhered to the derelict toys; and who knows what palliatives had once filled the empty medicine bottles? The undistinguished trash before me triggered an acute awareness of the tenuousness of human existence.[4]

Lopez details the violence committed against the Chinese in the West ("the shootings at Rock Springs and Deep Creek, a series of seventeen lynchings in Los Angeles in 1871, thirteen Chinese murdered over a three-month period in San Francisco

3 Ibid., 371.
4 Ibid., 376.

in 1885"[5]), and is spurred to deeper research by what Richard Rowland revealed to him.

But what can be done with such knowledge, he wonders? The history of the country is awash in blood and misery brought forth by hatred of what seems foreign and by psychopathic attachment to ideas of private property and group exceptionalism. Even justice seems impossible — history doesn't offer much evidence that punishment can repair what crime destroys. "If any such deadly act can be redeemed," Lopez muses, "it will be through some kind of enlightenment that, for most of us, is still some ways off."[6]

5 Ibid., 375.
6 Ibid., 379.

Violence — write a violent moment (any sort) — face it

29

Awakening

In *Awakened Cosmos,* David Hinton writes that translation of Chinese poetry "fails fundamentally because English grammar itself erases everything that is embodied in the minimal and empty grammar of Chinese poetry,"[1] and further, there's a particular failure because, much more easily than English, Chinese can escape the first-person pronoun *I.* And yet, as Tu Fu's poetry demonstrates,

> the machinery of self won't go away. Although Cha'an practice seems to be a struggle against that machinery, empty-mind awakening opens the possibility of inhabiting that self not as an isolated center of identity radically separate from the world around it, but as also woven wholly into the Cosmos. This insight is embodied in the classical Chinese poetic language, where the self is simultaneously absent and acting in the world: the fabric of awakening that is the very structure of the poems.[2]

1 David Hinton, *Awakened Cosmos: The Mind of Classical Chinese Poetry* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), 121.

2 Ibid., 120.

30

Revelation

Though Barry Lopez frequently exhorted writers to consider the communities they were writing for, and though he wrote carefully and thoughtfully about communities, he also wrote respectfully, even lovingly (longingly?) about hermits.

What Lopez understood in a way few people do is that hermits are not the enemies of community. The sign of a healthy community is its ability to respect and sustain its hermits. Hermits in Lopez's stories represent quiet, contemplative, scholarly observation of the world. They tend to become obsessed with unorthodox projects and their careful attention can lead those projects toward something like mystical power. (In "The Mappist," for instance, Corlis Benefideo's cartographic skill and knowledge ultimately seem beyond any natural human ability.) One of many examples of Lopez's hermits is Jane Weddel in the story "The Open Lot" in *Field Notes,* a woman who works for the Museum of Natural History in New York and has a preternatural gift for pulling fossils out of rocks:

> The shadow across Jane Weddell's life did not come from living alone, a condition that offered her a peace she esteemed like fresh water; nor from being patronized for her great gift by people who avoided her company. It was thrown by the geometry of a life her professional colleagues implied was fi-

> nally innocuous. No one, perhaps no one in the world, could make the essential pieces of the first puzzle of Earthly life so apparent. But in the eyes of her associates she wandered thoughtlessly outside any orthodoxy in discussing fossils. She strayed from recognized subdivisions of geological time, so people had trouble agreeing on the value of her ideas. Many tried to give meaning to what she did; but because she would neither insist upon nor defend any one theoretical basis for her thought she was ultimately regarded as a technician only. The pattern in her work, what propelled her to the next thing and then the next, was the joy of revelation. She saw no greater purpose in life than to reveal and behold.[1]

To reveal and behold might be the motto of much of Lopez's own work. It's one of the qualities that makes his fiction so strange in comparison to that of his contemporaries among US short story writers, because while his stories provide epiphanies, they are not the kind of psychological epiphanies that US short fiction is terminally addicted to, but are rather closer to the original religious meaning of the word — instead of an insight into the self alone, Lopez's characters experience the revelation of divine patterns, usually through a new perception of the breadth and mystery of the natural world. Lopez graduated from a Jesuit high school and earned both his BA and MA from Notre Dame. He visited Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani and seriously considered becoming a Trappist monk himself. Even as he drifted away from Catholic practice, he held to "the centrality of a life of prayer, which I broadly took to be a continuous, respectful attendance to the presence of the Divine."[2] While his presentation of other cultures' beliefs are always respectful, his own vision remained inflected with the religion of his upbringing, a vision that is often clearest in the

1 Barry Lopez, *Field Notes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 39–40.
2 Barry Lopez, *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World* (New York: Random House, 2022), 216.

revelations of his fiction, where he has greater freedom to depict transcendental and supernatural moments.

His stories' evocation of the rich breadth of the universe explains, at least partly, the style whereby he narrates more than dramatizes most of his stories, making so many of them, despite their first-person narration, feel more like reports than monologues. The occasional third-person stories can sometimes read like character summaries, and in a certain sense they are, but the summary is always in service to a moment of insight. So, for example, "The Lover of Words" (in *Winter Count*) provides the summary of a man's life and struggles and then, in the final five paragraphs, slows down to portray two moments. The first concerns the main character's interactions with his father, who "regarded the son as dangerously imaginative and was suspicious of his impenetrable privacy. For years he had thought his son a homosexual. He projected impertinence on him and accused him sharply of cowardice."[3] The story then moves forward with barely any transition to a later time when the import of the moment with his father becomes apparent to the protagonist and he settles into something like contentment as "the afternoon heat hung in suspension in the air and he felt a delicateness in his belly. He thought of the inscrutable life buried in a wheelbarrow full of bulbs, of the sound of his spade going into the earth, and of his cleverness with water."[4] There is no explanation to us of what any of this means. Instead, we see that the protagonist has, in some unspoken way, healed through attention to delicate and even ethereal elements of nature. The story's juxtapositions suggest a connection between those elements and himself, but the connection is left to us to make as we let the story settle in our imaginations. The healing comes from the recognition of connection, a sense of life, nature, and the universe united as one experience.

3 Barry Lopez, *Winter Count* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 96.
4 Ibid., 97.

31

Pattern

In a 1952 essay titled "Pattern," collected in *The Unknown Craftsman,* Sōetsu Yanagi stresses that pattern is not realism, that it is not a scientific rendering but is, rather, the result of intuition and imagination. "A good pattern is pregnant with beauty," he writes. "The maker of a pattern draws the essence of the thing seen with his own heartbeat, life to life."[1] Interestingly, for all of his Buddhist commitment and interest in the most ordinary objects, Yanagi did not believe beauty had to be austere:

> A pattern is not merely an exaggeration, but an enhancing of what is true. Without this enhancement, a pattern is not true, it lacks conviction. This is why a good pattern is frequently rather terrifying. Any pattern, if it is a good one, naturally has an element of the grotesque, since it is a reinforcing of beauty — an exaggeration, one might say, without deceit. A pattern, rather than presenting the thing as it is, is a vivid representation of what the thing could never be. Thus, though not a literal depiction, it achieves a verity that transcends realism. Pattern is the power of beauty.[2]

1 Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman,* trans. Bernard Leach, rev. edn. (1972; repr. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 114.
2 Ibid., 115.

32

Stuff

In the Bread Loaf bookshop, I bought Lopez's essay collection *About This Life,* which had recently come out in paperback. The introduction to that book, "A Voice," is one of the best essays I know about writing, and it ends with some of the only advice I've ever found consistently useful.

Lopez tells the story of being on a flight and being asked by his seatmate if he has any advice for his seatmate's fifteen-year-old daughter, who wants to be a writer. He offers three pieces of advice: Tell her to read widely, let her read whatever interests her, "and protect her if someone declares what she's reading to be trash. No one can fathom what happens between a human being and written language."[1] She should read classics, certainly, because they have endured ("the patterns in them have proved endlessly useful, and, to borrow Evan Connell's observation, with a good book you never touch bottom"), but she'll have to be careful with the classics, because "ideas of heroism, of love, of human duty and devotion that women have been writing about for centuries will not be available to her in this form. To find these voices she will have to search."[2]

1 Barry Lopez, *About This Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 13.
2 Ibid., 13–14.

Second, he says, while reading is vital and necessary, "if she wishes to write well she will have to become someone. She will have to discover her beliefs, and then speak to us from within those beliefs. If her prose doesn't come out of her belief, whatever that proves to be, she will only be passing along information, of which we are in no great need."[3]

Third, he says, "tell your daughter to get out of town, and help her do that." He doesn't mean travel to the far corners of the Earth, though there's nothing wrong with that. Rather, he says she should seek out the unfamiliar. Learn about other languages. Be with people who are not like her. It will broaden her perspective and also render a deeper appreciation of the familiar.

"Read," he says. "Find out what you truly believe. Get away from the familiar. Every writer, I told him, will offer you thoughts about writing that are different, but these are three I trust."[4]

He ends the essay with ideas I've wrestled with ever since first encountering them in our Bread Loaf workshop:

> I want to help create a body of stories in which men and women can discover trustworthy patterns. Every story is an act of trust between a writer and a reader: each story, in the end, is social. Whatever a writer sets down can harm or help the community of which he or she is a part. […] I know it can take a lifetime to convey what you mean, to find the opening. You watch, you set it down, then you try again.[5]

The centeredness I perceived in Lopez may have come from a kind of knowledge he expressed in a 2005 interview with Michael Shapiro for the *Michigan Quarterly Review*:

3 Ibid., 14.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 15.

> As a writer, I see that […] I have a set of concerns: What's happening to community in America? What is consumerism about? How deep does prejudice go in the social fabric of our culture? I have a handful of metaphors: anthropology, archeology, natural history, geography; that's my stuff.[6]

This was the kind of knowledge I lacked about myself as a writer when I arrived at Bread Loaf. I did not know what *my stuff* was. All I had was a desire to write, and certain genres and forms I had more or less stumbled into. Because of my lack of a sense of my deepest concerns, passions, and patterns, I further lacked an ability to say why I wanted anybody to read my work. Lopez continued in that interview to show what his knowledge of himself allowed: "So I move into those realms, talk to those kinds of people, and write. If it's done correctly, a reader can say, I can fit a lot of my own complex feelings into this story, into this extended metaphor. I can now say better what I myself mean, because I read this essay."

Metaphors and meanings. Patterns and purpose. Many creative writing teachers will use the same words, but they rarely mean them in the way Barry Lopez did when talking with us. For instance, Lopez saw metaphor not so much as a tool in the writer's toolbox as an epistemological necessity. In his 2020 essay "Love in a Time of Terror," he said:

> Some consider it unsophisticated to explore the nonhuman world for clues to solving human dilemmas, and wisdom's oldest tool, metaphor, is often regarded with wariness, or even suspicion in my culture. But abandoning metaphor entirely only paves the way to the rigidity of fundamentalism.[7]

---

6 Michael Shapiro, "The Big Rhythm: A Conversation with Barry Lopez on the McKenzie River," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, no. 4 (Fall 2005), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0044.405.

7 Barry Lopez, *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World* (New York: Random House, 2022), 114.

Similarly, he spoke of seeking and creating patterns as a sacred activity. We had arrived on the Bread Loaf campus expecting shoptalk and workshopping; we received, instead, ideas that challenged us to see our work as a sacred duty and honor. We were encouraged to embrace whatever talent we might have, but then to aspire for more than the indulgence of talent. Though he never said it outright, Lopez wanted us to put our talent in service to a vision greater than ourselves.

I left Bread Loaf with those ideas — those challenges — in mind. On the drive home through the woods and mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire, I asked myself what I believed, and what community I was part of, and what responsibility I had to language and my use of it, to stories, to the world. I wasn't entirely comfortable with these questions, wasn't sure they were appropriate to my own interests and situation. But I had nothing else. I was unmoored by the failure of my ambitions, distant from the impulse that set me writing stories in the first place, and thus arrived at Bread Loaf thinking I might never write fiction again. "Why bother to keep writing?" I had wondered more than once before going to Bread Loaf. My assumptions inspiring the question were too deeply based in superficial yearning for material success and public recognition, but the question itself was not wrong.

What I learned from Barry Lopez is that stories do not need to be about an atomized individual; indeed, if they are that, then they are likely false. Stories, whatever else they may offer, allow a vision of interconnection. This is what I have held to, and what has sustained me.

Why bother? Because writing can aspire to a quality of attention and imagination that reaches beyond the writer and toward the world, in all its messiness, terror, and beauty. Because language is a gift from our ancestors. Because witness is noble and necessary. Because stories transmit knowledge and wisdom. Because humans have always shared stories.

In the weeks, months, and years after the workshop, whenever I thought about writing, I thought about Lopez's teachings. I thought about the intimacy and responsibility of offering my

words to another person. I thought about what I was asking readers to think about, what images I built in their minds, what sounds I asked them to hear and sensations I asked them to feel. I sought clarity, precision, connection, and mystery. I found purpose in examining my own quirks and obsessions, the sorts of things that made me a weird (and queer) kid-who-somehow-became-an-adult, as well as my fears, anxieties, uncertainties. The purpose came not from obsessing over myself but from seeking, through writing, an expansion out toward other people, toward animals and landscapes, toward the world and the universe. We begin with the self, because that is what we have deepest access to, but what I learned from Lopez was that, to write well, we must not stop there.

Nothing changed quickly. I did not suddenly go from rejection slips to acceptance letters from prestigious publishers. But slowly, fitfully, I got more and more personalized rejections ("Great story, but not quite right for us at the moment"), and then some acceptance letters appeared, sprinkled in amidst the rejections, including from publishers I had long respected. More importantly, my sense of mission was restored, and for one of the only times in my life, I wrote one story after another after another, stories that had been waiting for me, but I didn't know it. Not many of them were published or publishable, but all of them felt different to me, because all of them came from a sense that these were stories I needed to write. Publication became, for the first time since childhood, irrelevant to me. The writing itself was what mattered.

This place, a different season,
1 character in relation to a human-made thing,
evoke tenderness

33

Effleurage

Excited to learn about the potter Lopez had written about in "A Dark Light in the West," I researched Richard Rowland. Right around the time that Lopez wrote this essay, Rowland and the kiln were featured on the PBS show *Oregon Art Beat,* and television cameras gave more exposure to the community than Lopez's words likely would.[1] A short article about Rowland, titled "Clay Culture: Kiln and Community," appears in the April 2020 issue of *Ceramics Monthly.* The kiln Lopez described was retired (its roof began to fall in on the pottery) and the community raised funds and provided the labor to build a new one.

What strikes me in what I have read about Rowland since Lopez revealed his name is the humility of his project. In the *Oregon Art Beat* episode, one of the potters who regularly places work in the kiln says that she never has expectations, and so the result is always good. Rowland sees his own purpose as firing the kiln — it is, he says, when he feels most himself, most alive, and so it is what he feels he was put on Earth to do. The kiln exists not to create art for the rich, but to build a community and to support the communities around it. Rowland provides pottery to cancer survivors at a local hospital, and he and other

1 "Oregon Art Beat," Season 11, Episode 1118, *PBS,* originally broadcast March 18, 2010, https://www.pbs.org/video/oregon-art-beat-august-19-2010/.

potters donate hundreds of bowls to a fundraiser for women's resource centers each year. The art is beautiful, it brings joy to those who behold it, but Rowland has found ways for it to serve purposes beyond its beauty, to let the making of art link people together through shared tasks and shared events, to let each object express an ethic of care.

34

Dismembered

Thinking about community, writing, and publishing, I wonder how the New Narrative writers who are still alive feel about how few of their writings have stayed in print for very long. Thanks to the work of adventurous publishers in recent years, we live in an excellent time for revisiting the work of those writers. Semiotext(e) has published some new collections and reissued some long unavailable works, NYRB Classics recently reprinted Robert Glück's novel *Margery Kempe,* and in addition to the anthology *Writers Who Love Too Much,* Nightboat Books has published a generous one-volume selection of Bruce Boone's writings. More is available right now than has been for a long time. But *Jack the Modernist* hasn't been in print for many years, and whole swathes of Kevin Killian's and Dodie Bellamy's writings are unavailable. Those are just a few of the fairly prominent writers from the movement. I'm sure there are many others whose work hasn't been generally available for decades.

As much as I would like more of the texts from the New Narrative writers to be out there for general readers to discover, I also admire the ephemerality. The only guarantee is that everything eventually fades away, so why pretend otherwise? It's a good lesson to those of us who may daydream of eternal fame and universal love for our creations: How might the products of our pens serve a purpose that does not require them to be

everywhere forever? After all, that's the reality. The past is gone, the future can't be known. The present is all we have. Most books, regardless of the size and wealth of their publishers, disappear within a few years of their first publication, a small number of books last longer, and an unpredictable handful get read through the ages. Chasing posterity is a fool's game, and I feel something akin to embarrassment for writers who fret over their "legacy." I suspect they say to themselves every night before bed, "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

That was my own inclination when I was young, all the way up through my encounter with Barry Lopez at Bread Loaf. After that, I slowly began to understand the pleasure of impermanence. It's the beauty in the ideal of the unknown craftsman. Now, I am charmed and impressed by somebody like Bruce Boone as described by Rob Halpern in the introduction to Nightboat's collection of Boone's writings, *Dismembered,* which Halpern edited:

> I asked him between sips of sweet jasmine and threads of conversation if he might help me compile a list of all his published works. Well, you know, I really didn't keep a very good record of that sort of thing, Bruce responded, and besides, he went on, who would ever be interested?, to which I replied, How about *me* for starters![1]

Halpern then tells the story of Boone reaching under the sofa and pulling out "a clutch of manually typed drafts of several texts that looked as though they'd been collecting dust for decades," one of which turned out to be an important essay on Georges Bataille (some of whose books Boone has translated). Boone couldn't remember if the essay had been published, and it took Halpern five years to confirm that, in fact, it had, which he discovered from materials by Boone from the 1970s in Robert Duncan's archive in New York. I am grateful to be able to

1 Bruce Boone, *Dismembered: Selected Poems, Stories, and Essays,* ed. Rob Halpern (New York: Nightboat Books, 2020), I.

read *Dismembered,* grateful for all of Halpern's hard work tracking down fugitive Boone texts, but I am also thrilled by Boone's apparently cavalier attitude toward his writing after it is written. This seems to me the least deluded approach.

I don't really know what the New Narrative writers felt or feel about publication and ephemerality, because I haven't noticed any commentary on it in any of the pieces I've read. They just seem to write what they want to write and let it find the audience it finds. This may not be true — they are probably as starved for attention as I am and you (likely) are — but nonetheless I'm going to continue to believe that they agree with me that posterity is bullshit. I am going to continue to believe this because it allows me some sense of community, some sense that there are other people out there compelled to write and also compelled not to care much about what happens to their writing after the act of writing is over. Of course, any of us who say such things could be lying to ourselves or lying to each other. As long as we truly aspire to live the little lies we tell, I see no harm. It takes practice, after all, to let go of the self. I am practicing.

Perhaps, instead of ephemerality, instead of our self's inevitable passing into obscurity, we might borrow an idea from Ocean Vuong and think instead about the difference between living and making. In an interview with *Tricycle* magazine, Vuong said:

> [T]o me, making a book is akin to sending a raft downriver, and you have to stay on the shore to live your life. You can't live on the raft. I think I've seen a lot of my peers live on that raft, and that raft starts to chip away and before you know it, they're neck deep in the river, and it's a big struggle. It's a big shock when that raft goes away. And so for me, there has to be a difference between living and making. You make something, you send it down river, but you have to stay on the steady ground of the shore.[2]

2 James Shaheen and Sharon Salzberg (interviewers), "Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review,* April 27, 2002,

Why bother to send a raft down the river? Because it's doing no good stuck on the shore. Somebody down there might need it. And even if they don't, perhaps they will smile to see a raft on the river, and be grateful that somebody thought to let it go.

https://tricycle.org/podcast/ocean-vuong/.

35

What We Mean

In a 2006 interview with Christian Martin for *The Georgia Review,* Barry Lopez spoke to the title of *Resistance*. He said, "We forget, you know, who we want to be. What literature does is remind us of that, of what it is we mean. I think what these characters are saying is that through their lives and in the way they conduct their lives, they're trying to address forgetting. They'll create art or music or works of history or books so that others can recall, in their own lives of chaos and turmoil, what it is they really want to do in life — because it is so easy to forget."[1]

In the years after I participated in Barry Lopez's workshop at Bread Loaf, I did not become the writer my young, egocentric ambition led me to dream of becoming; but after that workshop, and in many ways thanks to it, I stumbled upon some paths to being a person I could live with. I have had plenty of disappointments, frustrations, and crises of confidence since then, but Lopez gave me the foundation I always go back to as I work through the great question of why I write, and what I want from literature. His own work, fiction and nonfiction, stands as a model and testament, a guide to both community and to resistance.

1 Christian Martin, "On Resistance: An Interview with Barry Lopez," *The Georgia Review* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 20–21.

And yet… writing these sentences, I feel some hesitation, because by writing them, I am trying to convince myself that community and resistance are worthwhile. While philosophically I believe quite deeply in the value of both community and resistance, I struggled to believe in the reality of either twenty years ago, and I struggle still today. It's not that I think community and resistance aren't real, but they seem to me like pottery: something beautiful, seemingly solid, but easily shattered.

"If it weren't for the ways we love each other," Lopez told us, in words I wrote directly into my notebook, "we'd never write a word. You'll never compromise your gifts by being attentive to other people, other things." These are noble thoughts — but if I am being truly honest, I must admit… I don't believe them. I write not because of the ways we love each other, but because of the ways we fail to (I fail to). And I am certain there are things we ought not to pay attention to, things that will, indeed, sap us of whatever it is we might consider our talent. What those things may be depends on who the attentive person is and what their talents are. But attention is not of value unto itself. What you pay attention to, and how you do so, matters. Lopez himself knew this, and it is the lesson of the many hermits in his stories, the obsessives who don't pay attention to everything, but rather pay deep, careful attention to just a few things.

Perhaps I should have said some of this to Barry Lopez back then. Perhaps I should have asked him how to be a better hermit, or how to hold faith in community despite its breakages, or what good, really, are words when the wind blows them into nothing. I did not have the guts. Or, if not guts, the sense that it would lead to anything more than what I had already learned. There were gaps in our experiences and beliefs that I knew could not be bridged. I have always recognized that my pessimistic, melancholic view of life is not shared by most people, not even comprehensible to most people, and I push against it myself, which is one reason why I tried (and try!) hard to believe what Lopez said at the beginning of *About This Life:* "It is through story that we embrace the great breadth of memory, that we can

distinguish what is true, and that we may glimpse, at least occasionally, how to live without despair in the midst of the horror that dogs and unhinges us."[2]

Today, however, not long after Barry Lopez's death, I am glad I didn't challenge him, glad I didn't foist my pessimism onto his greater faith in meaning. Today, I want to believe what Barry Lopez believed. I want to find inspiration in community, in language, in story. I want to feel less hopelessness and pessimism. I want to believe that human life is good and human accomplishments worthy of celebration. I envy not just Barry Lopez, but people far more hopeful than he, maybe even Pollyanna and Dr. Pangloss — imagine how much happier it would be to wake each morning with an unshakeable belief that we live in the best of all possible worlds! Or, if not quite so obviously deluded, to wake and believe that human life is, on the whole, a good thing, a noble thing. Imagine how much easier it would be to live as a writer if one believed that community and language are strong enough to overcome, or at least make bearable, the suffering of the world.

2 Barry Lopez, *About This Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 13.

36

Silence

In *Awakened Cosmos,* David Hinton describes Tu Fu's writing as "poetry that aspires to silence." It could hardly do otherwise, because language is a failure of oneness.

> Once we speak, the identity-center replaces the silent mystery of the Cosmos with our constructions of it, and the result is a breach between consciousness and Cosmos. Ancient poets, shaped as they were by Taoist and Cha'an thought, were acutely aware of this. They knew that in writing a poem they necessarily lost the deepest insight, and they therefore sometimes spoke of poetry as a curse.[1]

1 David Hinton, *Awakened Cosmos: The Mind of Classical Chinese Poetry* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), 127.

37

Obsidian

In a memorial note about Barry Lopez for *The Georgia Review's* website *GR2,* Janisse Ray shares sentences from a letter Lopez sent her: "You ask what it is you might do for me. My answer is that for me you just need to carry on, to push your work ahead, to take care of your family, and to raise your voice when it's needed. We're in a hellfire time and it's sure to get worse."[1]

1 Janisse Ray, "In Memoriam, Barry Lopez," *GR2,* n.d., https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/gr2/in-memoriam-barry-lopez/.

Write a scene in which someone does something we can admire, a gesture toward transcendent love, hope.

Bibliography

Bain, David Haward. *Whose Woods These Are: A History of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 1926–1992.* New York: Ecco, 1993.

Bellamy, Dodie. *Academonia*. San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2006.

———. "Low Culture." In *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* edited by Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott, 226–37. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004.

———. *The Letters of Mina Harker.* 1998; repr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

Bellamy, Dodie, and Kevin Killian. *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977–1997.* New York: Nightboat, 2017.

Boone, Bruce. *Dismembered: Selected Poems, Stories, and Essays.* Edited by Rob Halpern. New York: Nightboat Books, 2020.

Bowles, Paul. *The Stories of Paul Bowles.* New York: Ecco, 2001.

Case, Mairead. "Fifteenth-Century Cher: A Conversation with Robert Glück on 'Margery Kempe.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books,* August 6, 2020. http://dev.lareviewofbooks.org/article/fifteenth-century-cher-a-conversation-with-robert-gluck-on-margery-kempe.

Covell, Jon Carter, and Alan Carter Covell. *The World of Korean Ceramics.* Honolulu: Si-sa Yong-o-sa, 1986.

Davis, Lydia. "Form as Response to Doubt." In *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* edited by Mary Burger, Robert

Glück, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott, 35–37. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004.
de Waal, Edmund. "Homo Orientalis: Bernard Leach and the Image of the Japanese Craftsman." *Journal of Design History 10,* no. 4 (1997): 355–62. DOI: 10.1093/jdh/10.4.355.
Feuer, Alan. "Capitol Rioter Known as QAnon Shaman Pleads Guilty." *The New York Times,* September 3, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/us/politics/qanon-shaman-capitol-guilty.html.
Galvin, James. *Resurrection Update: Collected Poems, 1975–1997.* Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1997.
Glück, Robert. *Jack the Modernist.* New York: High Risk Books, 1995.
Hinton, David. *Awakened Cosmos: The Mind of Classical Chinese Poetry.* Boulder: Shambhala, 2019.
Leuzzi, Tony. "Interview with Robert Glück." *EOAGH,* October 23, 2011. https://eoagh.com/interview-with-robert-gluck/.
Lopez, Barry. *About This Life.* New York: Vintage Books, 1999.
———. "A Dark Light in the West: Racism and Reconciliation." *The Georgia Review* 64, no. 3 (2010): 365–86. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41403230.
———. *Arctic Dreams.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986.
———. *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World.* New York: Random House, 2022.
———. *Field Notes.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.
———. *Light Action in the Caribbean.* New York: Knopf, 2000.
———. *Resistance.* New York: Knopf, 2004.
———. "The Hitter." *The North American Review* 278, no. 4 (1993): 32–34.
———. *The Rediscovery of North America.* New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
———. "The San Joaquin." *In Freeman's: The Best New Writing on Home,* ed. John Freeman, 167–73. New York: Grove Press, 2017.
———. *Winter Count.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981.

Martin, Christian. "On Resistance: An Interview with Barry Lopez." *The Georgia Review* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 13–30. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41402698.

Mead, Rebecca. "How to Be a Writer." *The New Yorker,* October 15, 2001, 147–54.

Newell, Mike. *No Bottom: In Conversation with Barry Lopez.* Gambier: XOXOX Press, 2007.

Ray, Janisse. "In Memoriam, Barry Lopez." *GR2,* n.d. https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/gr2/in-memoriam-barry-lopez/.

Shaheen, James, and Sharon Salzberg. "Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong." *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review,* April 27, 2002. https://tricycle.org/podcast/ocean-vuong/.

Shapiro, Michael. "The Big Rhythm: A Conversation with Barry Lopez on the McKenzie River." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, no. 4 (Fall 2005). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0044.405.

"The Tell-Tale Heart: Dennis Cooper Interviewed by Robert Glück." In *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* edited by Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott, 245–56. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004.

Tydeman, William E. *Conversations with Barry Lopez.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013.

"What Passes for Hope: 19 Writers on Finding Meaning in the Face of the Climate Crisis." *Literary Hub,* April 22, 2022. https://lithub.com/what-passes-for-hope-19-writers-on-finding-meaning-in-the-face-of-the-climate-crisis/.

Yanagi, Sōetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman.* Translated by Bernard Leach. Revised edition. 1972; repr. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989.

— this book was written from December 2020–February 2023 in Plymouth, New Hampshire, a name imposed on N'dakinna, the traditional ancestral homeland of the Abenaki, Pennacook, and Wabanaki Peoples past and present.