

Conversations with Place

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*If I were asked what I want to accomplish as a writer,
I would say it's to contribute to a literature of hope.*

Barry Lopez, *About This Life*

Elizabeth Wangfu, the narrator of one of the stories in Barry Lopez's collection of short fiction, *Resistance*, tells about her quest to understand a mere handful of the many languages spoken in China. Fleeting, she grasps the depth of meaning conveyed in a word of Manchu dialect spoken by the Xibe, or the essence of the notion of "family" as it is conveyed in myriad tongues. Naming things, speaking accurately about the places we visit or inhabit, appreciating language for its power to evoke a landscape in our imagination—including vanished landscapes and those in danger of disappearing—has long been a preoccupation of Lopez's. But language is more than verbal communication. Elizabeth Wangfu recognizes her limitations as a Westerner and a Caucasian when she camps within the ancient walls of Yogpar, a fort constructed in the second millennium before Christ in the Takla Makan desert of northern Xinjing, an Autonomous Region within China. "Before I slept I stood atop the stone arch of the west gate and watched the wind flickering on the star-bitten edges of the dunes. But for the cold stone beneath my feet, all I could name were the constellations, my ancestors' arrangements of the stars."

In "Searching for Depth in Bonaire," one of the essays in the collection entitled *About This Life*, Lopez describes a scuba diving trip to the Caribbean island off the coast of Venezuela. The profusion of underwater life in this still-pristine environment both thrills and discourages him. How can he hope to penetrate this complex seascape, to distinguish between the corals and sponges, the various species of reef fish and other small aquatic creatures, when he cannot master the descriptive vocabulary he needs for this enormous task? "What I wanted to experience in the water, I realized, was how life on the reef was layered and intertwined. I now had many individual pieces at hand, named images, nouns. How were they related? What were the verbs? Which syntaxes were indigenous to the place?" The language of Bonaire's coral reefs was inaccessible to Lopez in the same way that the Takla Makan desert remained impenetrable to Elizabeth Wangfu because he had yet to enter into a conversation with the place.

Conversations with place. I find this theme everywhere in Lopez's writings. "To hunt means to have the land around you like clothing. To engage in a wordless dialogue with it, one so absorbing that you cease to talk with your human companions," he writes in *Arctic Dreams*, explaining not merely how Eskimos tracked the animals they hunted, but their intimate relationship with the arctic environment. And in "Flight from Berlin," the final story in *Resistance*, an artist living among the Tukano people in the Brazilian Amazon learns to interact with the subjects of his drawings, entering into a dialogue with the orchids and



lilies, the birds and animals. The Uta river. Entering into a wordless accord with the quiet world of his hosts. “When I lie outside the house on a warm evening looking at the stars and feel comforted, and know this feeling is real even though it is beyond language, at least as I understand language, I’m not suspicious of the sense of peace I obtain,” the artist muses. “As the Tukano say, I am ‘speaking to the stars,’ the stars are responding, and the emotion of redemption I feel is just another form of my drawing, the result of uncalculating conversation with the elements of the world.

Lopez’s new book, *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, initiates a conversation with the elements of our world. “Many of us have come from ranching, farming, or logging families, and might have listened with a measure of envy while a grandparent spoke of these places of origin, using a language so suited to the place being described it fit against it like another kind of air,” Lopez writes in his Introduction. “A language capable of conveying the most evanescent of the place’s characteristics.” This language is what we have lost and with it, he seems to be saying, we have lost touch with who we are as a people: our values, institutions, and ideals. The vast American landscape, with its array of geographical features and wondrous multiplicity of names for landforms, like the rich complexity of American English, is the wellspring of all that is best in our nation; only through regaining our intimate connection with our landscape through our language, by learning the precise definitions our ancestors employed to speak about the land they used and the places they dwelled, can we hope to retrieve our purpose.

Here is Lopez’s definition of a blind creek:

To most eyes a dry creek is a place where a creek once flowed and after a rain will likely flow again. Such a waterway is an ephemeral creek, technically. But by another way of seeing, some such creeks never entirely disappear. A ghost, if you will, holds the creek’s place, moving slowly in darkness below the dry, sun-baked surface. In the mind of a local resident finely attuned to such things, you’ve come upon the invisible but real when you stand above a blind creek. Dig, and the water will come to light, like the blind floor revealed when the carpenter’s floor is taken up.

I trust that I am not misunderstanding his intention when I say that Lopez’s enterprise brings to light the vital source of our identity, the idealism and compassion still flowing beneath the dry surface of modern-day America. The sense of belonging to this landscape that wells up in our literature and flows through our democracy is found not in our laws, but in the terminology used by the many peoples whose conversations with place have shaped our country’s history.