

Barry Lopez – SAL/on air Podcast Transcript

Barry Lopez

What many of us are hopeful of now, it seems, is being able to gain or regain a sense of allegiance with our chosen places—and along with that, a sense of affirmation with our neighbors, that the place we've chosen is beautiful, subtle, profound, worthy of our lives.

Rebecca Hoogs, Podcast Host

When Barry Lopez died at the age of 75 this past December, we knew we had lost one of the greats. His writings have frequently been compared to those of Henry David Thoreau, as he brought a depth of erudition to the text by immersing himself in his surroundings, deftly integrating his environmental and humanitarian concerns. In his nonfiction, he examined the relationship between human culture and physical landscape. In his fiction, he addressed issues of intimacy, ethics, and identity.

I'm Rebecca Hoogs, the Associate Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures. You're listening to *SAL/on air*, a collection of talks from the world's best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures.

In this talk, recorded in April of 2010, Barry Lopez spoke about the anthology, *Home Ground* (2016), which Lopez edited along with his wife Debra Gwartney. The anthology brought together 45 poets and writers to create more than 850 original definitions for words that describe our lands and waters.

Eleven years later, those lands and waters are still under attack, in increasing need of our attention. "Our issue with the land around us," he says in this talk, "is how to rekindle an informing conversation back and forth. And if we hope to develop policies that ensure our children will have a chance at a full life, alive, shaped as much by imagination as by need, we need to listen to what the land around us says.

Let's listen to what the land says. Let's listen to what Barry Lopez said, and what his writings still, today, say.

This is *SAL/on air*.

Barry Lopez

Linda asked if I might use at least as a point of departure. Some of the ideas in a book I edited with my wife, Deborah Gwartney, called *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*. I said that I'd be happy to. And I hope as things unfold here this evening, that I will live up to Linda's expectations for an audience that she and her colleagues, including our co-hosts this evening in the North Cascades Institute, know far better than I do. And I hope to live up to your expectations to whatever it is that might have brought you into this room this evening.

Barry Lopez

For those who haven't come across *Home Ground*, perhaps a brief summary of its history and intent might be helpful. Like many other writers I try to find the right word, the correct word for whatever it is I'm referring to or trying to describe. For example, I want to know whether that undulation in the landscape I'm looking at that prominence is a knoll, or a mound or perhaps a butte or a knob. Is this the Englishman's down, or the geologist's drumlin? And if I'm in Kruger National Park in South Africa would kopje, an Afrikaans word long ago adopted into South African English, be right? Or should I just leave it at hill and be done with it?

Barry Lopez

I couldn't find a book that would help me with these words. No reference was good enough. So Deborah, and I decided we would do one ourselves. That's the kind of self-delusion that sometimes produces good work. Little did we know what we were getting into. It took us four years and a lot of work with very good people. So here's what part of what I wrote in the introduction to *Home Ground*:

Barry Lopez

The language we employ to say what we're looking at, or to recall, what we've seen for many English speakers, is now collapsing toward an attenuated list of almost nondescript words, valley, lake mountain, used with like, these words now stand in for words like glade, tank, and escarpment. Most of us today are more aware of brown lands than we are of wetlands. The former in expanding urban habitat, the latter is shrinking natural one. Fewer of the people who once made up the country's farming cultures are now around to explain what an envelope field is. The old time loggers have taken the cow faced slopes with them into retirement. And the jackass miners of the Mojave are no longer around to tell us how an edit differs from an even at a time when the country's landscapes are increasingly treated as commodities subject to a debate over their relative and intrinsic worth. And when city planners, land conservators, real estate developers and indigenous title holders square off every day, over the fate of one place or another. This can be good for the writer. I think the initial thought at the beginning of *Home Ground* was let's serve this one purpose. Let's create something that helps other writers know what it is that we're talking about and for a writer intent on conveying something conveying something memorable about a place that it's not, of course simply a matter of the proper denotation or of regional accuracy that might add a little color, or verisimilitude. It's a matter of choosing a word with the right connotations, something that works within the larger context of the sentence, and then the paragraph, something that fits the tone and diction of the piece.

Barry Lopez

Writers search for the right word, whatever the topic or situation and of course, it need not be physical geography. It is not just a matter of professional diligence, or of striving after felicitous prose, or of staying with a meter of the language in a particular sentence in order one hopes to

create something engaging. The search for the right word, I think consists of what might, one what of what one might imagine is two bows of respect. These bows of respect to give many, but not all kinds of writing its integrity. The first bow of respect is toward the material. The second is made in the direction of the reader.

Barry Lopez

Here's what I mean, it's a good idea, before you begin to write about, say, Puget Sound, to try to catch what that body of water is trying to say. And to consider what the proper form of address is. Which one of the available Appalachians seems most fitting for that body of water. And it's a good idea in asking for the readers time to consider that the reader is trusting you to get it right. It's also good to remember that we're certain content topics are concerned, like the fate of the land. The reader needs you to get it right. You got to get it right. And the reader needs you to make it memorable. So some years ago, I sat down with Deborah and some geographer friends concerned about the general imprecision of landscape language and public discourse and the deterioration of its vocabulary. And we worked up a list of about 900 terms to distinguish parts of the American landscape, favoring folk terms, like basket of eggs relief, and palouse over technical terms like syncline and opting for the arcane term, like nunatak, over the familiar one, like river we've added this list to eliminate regional redundancies and then invited a group of writers with very different kinds of backgrounds poem poets, like Bob Hass, Robert Hass, nonfiction writers like John Krakauer and Bill McKibben, fiction writers like Joey Williams and Tony Nelson, and people you're very likely familiar with like Barbara Kingsolver. And people you might not know when we thought that must have been somebody whom we didn't invite, some Phantom of the Opera, I guess.

Barry Lopez

So we invited this disparate group of people and we made an effort to invite some people whom as I said, you might not have heard of like Eva Salinas and Alaska and build a place in New Mexico. We asked all these people to join us. And we prepared for each of these 45 writers involved a separate list of 20 words partly tailored to each one's local geography, words like Yazhoo, as in Yazhoo, Mississippi, and Ronde as in Grand Ronde, Oregon, terms like looking glass prairie, and hogback ridge, and we asked them to define each word or term in a brief essay no more than a couple of 100 words. We asked them to follow their instincts on this, or on where to go with a definition and then we reviewed their definitions with a board of geographers. As you might imagine, we had a few heated discussions in this middle ground between the sciences and the humanities. But in the end, we were able to offer not only a good book, if I may say that, but a dependable book.

Barry Lopez

So here's another excerpt from that introduction. It is become a commonplace observation about American culture that we are a people groping for a renewed sense of place and

community that we want to be more meaningfully committed and less isolated. Many of us have come to wonder whether modern American life with its accelerated daily demands, and its polarizing choices, isn't indirectly undermining something foundational, something essential to our lives. We joke that one shopping mall looks just like another that a housing development on the outskirts of Denver feels no different to us than a housing development outside Kansas City. But we're not always amused by such observations. No more than we are amused when someone from the rural countryside implies that his life is spiritually richer than ours. Because the places that we've chosen to live are like Park Slope in Brooklyn or the South Side of Chicago.

What many of us are hopeful of now, it seems, is being able to gain or regain a sense of allegiance with our chosen places. And along with that, a sense of affirmation with our neighbors, that the place we've chosen is beautiful, subtle, profound, worthy of our lives. It is with these thoughts about the importance of belonging, of knowing the comfort that a feeling of intimate association with a place can bring that we began work on *Home Ground*, we wanted to recall and to explore a language more widespread today than most of us imagine, because we believed an acquaintance with it, using it to say more clearly and precisely what we mean would bring us a certain kind of relief. It would draw us closer to the landscapes upon which we originally and hopefully founded our democratic arrangement for governing ourselves, our systems of social organization, and our enterprise and economics.

Barry Lopez

If we could speak more accurately, more evocatively more familiarly about the physical places we occupy, perhaps we could speak more penetratingly more insightfully more compassionately about the flaws in these various systems, which we regularly assert, we wish to address and make better. Part of what I wanted to accomplish in the introduction to *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape* was to suggest the great range of history of cultural geography, and of natural history that would be under consideration in the book. I also wanted to be clear that the development of the book was driven in part by the common desire of the writers involved to be of use to inform a conversation that most everyone who worked on the project agreed had to take place. If we were successfully to address some of the problems our culture faces today, a litany of serious environmental issues so familiar to us that it now can be enumerated by most fifth graders. What we wanted in writing and editing the book was to rekindle a sense of wonder where the American landscape was concerned and at the same time, a sense of identity with the physical places, the local landscapes that provide our lives with our daily context. It is hard to miss in the book, however, an inference we expected readers to make that in considering this language, we were coming face to face with a kind of menace.

Barry Lopez

If I may, I would like to suggest hear something about our times that you might not agree with. Though it is not agreement that I am after, what I'm looking for is illumination. most traders I think, would say that it is easier to write a convincing piece about the extent of the physical and spiritual darkness around us. The way for example, consumerism has reshaped our culture, or the extent to which pelagic fish are feeding and what we now call trash vortexes in the world's oceans. That it is to tell a convincing story about what is hopeful for humanity, about the future of its many varied and often contradictory cultures. Were up to our hips, most of us in skepticism, if not cynicism, and for many of us, detachment and indifference have become a preferred way of managing a reality that threatens to crush us with the insistence of its bleak and electable logic. What strikes me as necessary about literature today, and what is I think the most difficult thing to do in a literary way now is not to pull a punch about how biologically threatening say the chemical waste from manufacturing is, and yet not leaves the reader paralyzed with grief, and despair. Cormac McCarthy, for me does just this at the end of his recent novel *The Road*. The terror that underscores this novel is heightened by the diabolical nature of the post-apocalyptic landscape in which it unfolds. But more particularly, the novel has to do with the suffering of a father, who cannot protect his young son from the literal infinity. curative cannibals who want to devour him. In the end, his father dead, the boy puts his faith in strangers. And in that moment, flames flicker in the small pitiful campfire around which humanity gathers.

Barry Lopez

The first step in the creation of a story that matters, a story that will help is to develop a language that is evocative and useful. One of the most satisfying compliments we received after the publication of *Home Ground* came from a couple of attorneys representing conservationists in California. They told us, the book had become right away for them an indispensable reference. With its definitions to hand, they said they could now argue their cases more cogently. with greater precision and accuracy. They could argue more forcefully and eloquently, and they could argue more convincingly before a judge. I would like to think that every day more attorneys arguing to protect land from the various kinds of marauders are finding the book to be a sort of thought they may come. I would like to think that in creating this book, a community of writers offered the body politic of the country something useful, something that grew out of their art, out of their profession, and out of their citizenship.

Barry Lopez

Activism, I suppose, is what this is now called. I am not an activist, not in the sense of being a martyr, or a letter writer or directly confrontational when it comes to what threatens humanity. My activism is in essays and books and short stories, which I hope enhance more skilled than mine might serve a laudable political goal. But I can also understand that in some way, I am an activist, especially around certain ideas, certain cultural abstractions, which I have been writing

about for more than 40 years. One is justice, environment, environmental justice, social justice, racial justice, political justice, and another is beauty. An ideal in art, but also in our ideal for human behavior, and one as complex and as elusive in its attainment, as Justice. Here is how the whole introduction to *Home Ground* ends. Once on the upper boreal river in Botswana, traveling and dugout canoes called mokoros with local tribesmen. I went ashore with 10 or 12 others to rest in the shade of acacia trees during the heat of the day. The men conversed quietly and Tswana, the sound of the language, was so beautiful in my ear, I turned on a portable tape recorder so I could listen to it again in the years ahead. Or maybe play it one day for Adirondack people in Australia, whose language I also like to hear the run of it. Mellifluous, like birdsong.

Barry Lopez

We have a shapely language, American English. a polyglot speech grown up from a score of European, African, and Asian immigrant tongues, and complexity veined with the hundreds of expressions native to the places we now occupy. And we've held on to the names to make ourselves abiding and real, to enable us to resist the appeal of make believe lands hocked daily as an ordains by opportunists whose many schemes for wealth hinge on our loss of memory, the anxiety of our alienation, our hunger, after substance, in trying to understand what I wanted to address with you this evening, coming onto your home ground here, and trying to be abuse to bring something more than what is ordinarily expected on evenings like this, a desire that I hope doesn't sound arrogant, or presumptuous. I understood that over the years, I have been endeavoring to listen as a writer to what the landscape itself might be saying feeble as my ability to hear it might be. So in Han China, and in the nonmember in the Namib Desert in Bali and Patagonia and up on a polar plateau in Antarctica, in the Orinoco Basin, Venezuela, and in northern Hokkaido and on the islands of French Polynesia, I've pushed myself to be silent. And to put away my templates to defer to another voice.

Barry Lopez

What I was asking of the land was that it deign to speak with me, an outsider and untutored person. I wanted to take whatever I heard as imperfect as I knew my ear to be, and shape it into something representative and engaging, even beautiful, and give it away to my neighbors. And so I thought to call this talk this evening speak, landscape, a kind of homage, of course, to Nabokov to speak memory, and thereby suggest the quest to understand and discern. And also that memory speaks to us like the land with his own mind. Memory speaks about how things were yesterday, or how they were when we were five, or when our first love decided that we were not finally enough for them. Here are a few paragraphs from a memoir by the American writer James Agee, about an evening in Knoxville, Tennessee in the summer of 1915, when he was six. I chose these lines because the language is beautiful, and risky in pursuit of its goal. And because Agee reminds us that these days, we would do well in our discussions of landscape and other matters bearing on the evolution of natural history and

ecology and prospects of homo sapiens to remember that we are today largely an urban species. Also, I want to suggest that just as some have, I think, misunderstood the writing of memoir today as a kind of journalism, or have come to regard it as a narcissistic exercise when in fact, it's closest literary relative is the poem, a cascade of images from which a reality akin to memory's labyrinth emerges. So to have we misconstrued the discussion of the fate of landscapes, thinking of it as an exercise in environmental awareness. When we worry about the fate of the land, we're not talking about environmentalism, the land is not a thing, an object made up of many pieces and alder flat here, arroyo there, a glacier, up there on Rainier. It cannot be figured out or improved upon or obviated. We are conjoined with it. We are its descendants, and whatever we have made of it in any corner of the world, from the grain fields of the Asian steppes to the cities of the Adriatic coast, to the trenches of Flanders and the pyramids at Giza, it is our everlasting companion.

Our issue with the land around us is how to rekindle an informing conversation back and forth. And if we hope to develop policies that ensure our children will have a chance at a full life, alive, shaped as much by imagination, as by need, we need to listen to what the land around us says. I do not mean literally to the crow's voice from the fence line, the serrations of a creek somewhere in the Olympic Peninsula, a night wind coming in off the sound here, but to the infinitude of what we are want to call nature's silence. That is the sound of the vacuum that exists now where once a conversation used to take place. What we are after in our lives, it seems to me, is that gap between unmanipulated nature and industrial culture. In that gap is a relationship with a nonhuman world in which we do not speak as though we were owners, or the stewards, or the only wisdom keepers, but as attentive and fallible companions as fellow creatures with a parallel fate, though ours seems more precarious now by far.

The Australian anthropologist Deborah Byrd rose wrote recently that we have two tasks here as citizens. One is to resituate the human within the ecological, the other is to resituate the nonhuman within the ethical, resituate the human within the ecological, resituate the nonhuman within the ethical. It is a long way, certainly from where I began, 20 minutes ago suggesting the rudiments of a language with which we might talk more precisely more accurately among ourselves about the landscape and seascapes we occupy and this piece by James Agee, which I'm about to read. Which I want to read, for the beauty and risk of its language, for its reminders of the suburban life so many of us know or once knew. And for what will strike many of you, I think has its innocence, coming as it does during World War I, but before America entered that war. But bear with me in elucidating what threatens us today in our daily search for politics that will work, an activism that will effect change, strategy to determine, to undermine the rapacity of materialism. We're talking about longing and the yearning for tranquility that drives our memories in the moments before sleep. So here is Agee, looking back at the age of 29, to that evening in Tennessee when he was six years old. If I

read this, well, you will hear the sonic landscape that he is recalling and it will create the physical space in which he is speaking.

Barry Lopez

"We're talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there, so successfully disguised myself as a child. It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their spheres of possession, of the trees, of birds hung havens, hangers. People go buy things, go buy a horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt, a loud auto, a quiet auto. People in pairs not in a hurry. Scuffling, switching their weight of festival body, talking casually. The taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard, and starched milk. The image of them as lovers, as horsemen squared with clowns and hueless amber. A street car raising its iron mon stopping, belling and starting, rousing and raising again it's iron increasing moan. And swimming it's gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past. The bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks. The iron wine rises on rising speed. Still risen, faints, halts. The faint stinging bell rises again, still fainter, fainting, lifting, lifts, faints for gone. Forgotten."

Barry Lopez

"Now is the night one blue dew. Now is the night. One blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled hose. Low on the length of lawns a frailing of fire who breathes. Parents on porches, rock and rock. From damp strings, morning glories hang their ancient faces. On the rough wet grass of the backyard, my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there. My mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too, am lying there. They are not talking much. And the talk is quiet, have nothing in particular. Nothing at all, in particular, have nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive. They seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine. With voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother, who is good to me. One is my father, always good to me. By some chance, here they are on this earth, and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying on quilts on the grass in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble, and in the hour of their taking away. After a little I am taken in and put to bed, sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her. And those receive me, who quietly treat me as one familiar and well beloved in that home, but will not, oh will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am."

We look back in time to get a sense of the trajectory that has landed us here, individually and as a culture. But as he says, the safety of the past, that absence of threat does not stay with

us. The future though, is ours to shape to fashion, as the history of humanity. If you want to go back to those lines and read them at your own pace, and in your own voice, you can find that piece called Knoxville in Agee's posthumously published book *A Death in the Family*. In one sense, I stand here this evening is one of the editors of *Home Ground*, an effort to rediscover and celebrate a certain kind of language. More broadly speaking, though, I'm here tonight as a writer, a person anxious about the fate of language and story, and equally about the fate of the nonhuman world, which does not compose novels, or draft legislation, but whose fate of course, is also our fate. I'm also here, by virtue of the invitation extended me to speak in by your difference this evening. As a citizen, I'm not agile enough of mind to know how actually to separate the letter to the writer and the citizen, and don't really believe it's possible. But I want to offer as lines that signal in some way, my intent in the remainder of this talk, the words of several poets who have guided and informed me, this is Czeslaw Miłosz, from a piece called a Goal. "On one side, there is luminosity, trust, faith, the beauty of the earth, on the other side, darkness, doubt, unbelief, the cruelty of the earth, the capacity of people to do evil. When I write, the first side is true, when I do not write, the second is, does I have to write to save myself from disintegration." And this, which I just found recently, in a letter that Emily Dickinson wrote in 1860: "This world is just a little place, just the red in the sky, before the sun rises. So, let us keep fast hold of hands, that when the birds begin, none of us be missing."

And to bring us back around to my purpose this evening, urging the rediscovery of a language that helps and the use of that language in the way of Agee to evoke the scenes of our insight and awareness and to say with this language, what we mean as citizens what we desire. Before the indifferent citadels of government and commerce were on too many occasions a serious plea is met with prevarication, misdirection, insincerity, manipulation and divisiveness. To put us on the difficult path of that desire, here's the California poet Robinson Jeffers speaking succinctly about our predicament, our acute awareness, that beauty and savagery in the same moment ask us what we want. And how to achieve it and describing what indeed is inbred within us:

Barry Lopez

"On the television, in the living room, you are watching stark footage from a refugee camp in Darfur, of famished and desolate human beings stripped of nearly every shred of identity. The barely perceptible movement of bony chests of people a week from their ends, forced to expire this way over matters of ownership and politics. And just across the room, at a table, where you wrote as a child, your daughter is making perfectly legible her five sentence essay on the celestial body that we call Jupiter. The glory of it. You turn the TV off, and you will read that piece three times after she goes to bed. For the promise in it." This is Jeffers, the first stanza of his *Apology for Bad Dreams* and please excuse me if you find a moment of cruelty here to vivid.

"In the purple light, heavy with redwood, the slopes drop seaward, headlong convexities of forest drawn in together to the steep ravine below. On the sea cliff, a lonely clearing a little field of corn by the stream side a roof under spared trees than the ocean. Like a great stone someone has cut to a sharp edge and polished to shining beyond it, the fountain and furnace of incredible light flowing up from the sunk sun. In the little clearing, a woman is punishing a horse. She had tied the halter to a sapling at the edge of the wood. But when the great whip clung to the flanks, the creature kicked so hard she feared he would snap the halter. She called from the house for the young man, her son, who fetched a chain tie rope. They, working together, noosed the small rusty links around the horse's tongue and tied him by the swollen tongue to the tree. Seen from this height they are shrunk to insect size out of all human relation. You cannot distinguish the blood dripping from where the chain is fastened. The beast shuttering, but the thrust neck and the legs far apart. You can see the whip fall on the flanks the gesture of the arm, you cannot see the face of the woman. The enormous light beats up out of the west across the cloud bars of the trade wind. The ocean darkens, the high clouds brighten, the hills darkened together, unbridled and unbelievable beauty covers the evening world, not covers grows apparent out of it. As Venus down there grows out from the lit sky. What's the profit? I create good and I create evil. I am the Lord."

Barry Lopez

Earlier this evening, I referred to a list of threats to the integrity of the biosphere. I said they were so familiar to us, most any fifth grader could enumerate them. Let me be explicit about this now by borrowing from a talk that Gus Beth, the Dean of the School of Forestry at Yale, gave in Washington DC a couple of months ago to the National Council for Science and Environment:

Barry Lopez

"Half of the world's tropical and temperate rainforests are now gone. The rate of deforestation in the tropics at the close of business this evening was about an acre a second half of the planet's wetlands are gone. 90% of the oceans large predatory fish are gone. And 75% of marine fisheries are now either over fished, or are being fished to capacity. About half the world's corals are either gone or severely threatened by pollution, dynamite fishing and mining venters species are disappearing at rates about 1000 times faster than would be expected without habitat destruction, global climate change the human quest for food, and other modern forcing pressures, the greatest spasm of extinction in 65 million years. Nearly every person in this theater tonight carries dozens of toxic chemicals in the tissues of his or her body. in a single year in the United States of America alone, something like 3 million tonnes of toxic chemicals are released into the air we breathe and to the reservoirs of our water. Complex industrial processes are now fixing the atmospheres free nitrogen, making it biologically active

at a rate equal to the fixing of nitrogen by the earth itself. One result of this is the development of hundreds of dead zones in the world's oceans from over fertilization. freshwater withdrawals from irrigation, manufacturing, and municipal use now account for about half the accessible runoff from precipitation.

Soon it will be 70% the following rivers no longer reach the ocean in their dry seasons. The Colorado the yellow, Ganges, and denial. We have treaties and laws to arrest this catastrophe and to reduce the level of damage in all of these areas, but they are an annoyance to people in power."

Barry Lopez

A few days ago, I spoke with a friend of mine the filmmaker Toby McLeod. He was leaving for Papua New Guinea, where he begins today actually, shooting footage to document the laying to waste of traditional lands along the Ramu River and elsewhere by the China Metallurgical Group Corporation, often called simply MCC, which is mining nickel in the Ramu River and piping the toxic heavy metal refinery waste to the coast for disposal directly onto the ocean floor with the cooperation of the Papua New Guinea government.

Barry Lopez

The government is not objecting. It is actually profiting from this and from the construction of ten tuna processing plants on its North Coast by the Chinese, and it is profiting from the vacuuming of its territorial waters in the Bismark Sea by a Canadian Corporation looking for manganese, gold, and copper. During late February and early March, when Toby was scouting the areas in Papua New Guinea where he wanted to film, I happened to be in the northern part of Western Australia, in an area called Pilbara, where Rio Tinto and other national and international mining companies are extracting iron ore on a scale that must be called mythic.

Barry Lopez

The ore leaves the open pits and hopper cars, two to 400 cars at a time, and diesel engines, six diesel engines, pulling them for ports on the northwest coast, Dampier and Port Hedland, mainly. There, the ore is poured into ships like sand, reddening the air for miles around at whatever moment in the day or night when you think to check your watch. The ore is cascading into the holds. 200,000 tonnes into one ship in 24 hours, 130 tonnes a minute. Loaded, the ship set sail for China. Nine ships a day, every day.

Barry Lopez

Traveling in Cartagena National Park in the Pilbara with several companions a couple of weeks ago was like traveling through a land still damp from the original creation. Gin clear air, transparent water, wheeling flocks of white corellas and pink galahs. North of there, we pass

the open pits, cauldrons of dust and noise and following the gravel and bitumen roads to Port Hedland brought us to something like Mordor.

Barry Lopez

I told a friend this traverse, a single day's drive, was like walking out of the caves of Lascaux and finding yourself on the docks of Marseille. From the quietude, the deep history and the brilliant colors of the petroglyphs, to the diesel drenched air and the brutal efficiency of the wharfs, coated with grime and humming and clanging with profit. Perhaps you read last December of the deal that MCC recently made with the Karzai government to purchase a copper deposit about 20 miles southeast of Kabul. near a village called Aynak. The Chinese expect to extract 11 million tonnes of refined copper here over the next 25 years using power from a new coal powered plant which will offer blackout prone cobble a steady flow of electricity. I do not wish to point at the Chinese here. American corporations, driven by the same quest for profit and material wealth, are punishing the earth this very evening in Nigeria, and a dozen other countries, rapacious in their outlook and indifferent to criticism.

Barry Lopez

My point is that most of us despite our diligence and watchfulness, know little to nothing about what is going on, in Papua New Guinea, in the Pilbara, or in Afghanistan, let alone in Gabon, and other outposts where the last ore deposits are buried. The scale of it is mythic in its proportions, effect reports from these regions do not emphasize and the effect on our lives is also mythic, the most of us lack of vantage point from which to appreciate what is happening, because one way or another, we are asked not to speak of it. Not to frighten each other with this news, as though we were infants or men and women in whom it would be inconvenient to stir courage. The poet Robert Duncan said once that the drama of our time is the coming of all men into one fate. This is where we are now. The last pieces of the earth are being torn out of the ground to fuel a juggernaut that like Cormac McCarthy's cannibal psychopaths, feeds on the bodies of any human being who cannot defend herself or himself or who finds herself friendless in this end game.

Barry Lopez

Begin, I would like to ask you, with the books that matter to you, the works of nonfiction you trust the works of fiction that clarify for you. Whenever you return to them, what it is you want your life to mean. Begin with the language in which you feel steeped. Its music, its tropes, its grammar and syntax, its rich vocabulary. Craft your sentences, your letter to the editor, with compassion and equanimity, and with the fierceness of everything that dwells in you. Stand before the social groups of which you are apart, and speak with compassion and equanimity and resist it every turn the urge to vilify to blame to identify an enemy right to your friends in the same manner, calling on a sense of what it is that the children, yours and mine and theirs, are going to have to face take possession of the language and compose it. Be precise, and

send it to the places in the world where you believe it will encourage galvanize and comfort and where you yourself will be encouraged galvanized and comforted by the response. Do it for yourself. Do it for your family. Do it for all those images you carry in your head and in your heart of what your community is.

Barry Lopez

When I was 16 in 1961, I saw the great English actor Paul Scofield in the role of Sir Thomas Moore, performing in Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons* when it opened on Broadway. Moore as you may remember, served Henry the Eighth as Lord Chancellor, but refused to sign the act of supremacy for which Henry ordered him to be beheaded. In that play, Moore confronts Henry at one point in an attempt to get the king to understand the rashness of his actions of what he is about to plunge England into. At one point, Moore says to Henry, "I beg you in the bowels of Christ." When Scofield delivered that line, it pinned me in my seat. Many times in the years following that evening, I wondered to myself, when in a person's life would it ever become necessary to stand up in public and utter a line like that. Thank you for having me in your home tonight. Please take care of each other.

Rebecca Hoogs, Podcast Host

It was an honor to host Barry Lopez in 2010, and to bring him back to the podcast today. Thank you to the Seattle Arts & Lectures staff, board and community—and thanks to all of you for listening. This show would not be possible without you. Our show is produced by Jack Straw Cultural Center with theme music by Daniel Spils. To hear more, subscribe from wherever you get your podcasts. And while you're there, rate and review us five stars so that more people can enjoy *SAL/on air*.