

# An Intimate Geography

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BARRY LOPEZ

**I**t was night, but not the color of sky you might expect. The sun was up in the north, a few fingers above the horizon, and the air itself was bluer than it had been that afternoon, when the light was yellower. A friend and I were sitting atop a knoll in the Brooks Range in northern Alaska on a June “evening.” We had our spotting scopes trained on a herd of several hundred barren-ground caribou browsing three miles away in the broad, treeless, U-shaped valley of the Anaktuvuk River. The herd drifted in silence across an immensity of space.

Sitting there, some hundreds of feet above the valley floor, we joked that the air was so transparent you could see all the way to the river’s confluence with the Colville River, 90 miles down the valley. The dustless atmosphere scattered so little light, we facetiously agreed, it was only the curvature of the Earth that kept us from being able to see clear to Franz Josef Land, in the Russian Arctic. I braced the fingers of my left hand against a cobble embedded in the tundra, to shift my weight and steady my gaze. The orange lichen on the rock blazed in my eye like a cutting torch before I turned back to the spotting scope, and the distant caribou.

Years later, at the opposite end of the planet, I was aboard a German eco-tourist ship, the 403-foot *Hanseatic*, crossing the Drake Passage from the Falkland Islands to South Georgia. The vessel was yawing through 40-foot seas, pitching and rolling in a Beaufort Force 11 storm, one category shy of a hurricane. Dressed in storm gear and gripping a leeward rail outside on one of the upper decks, I was shoulder to shoulder with a colleague, Will Steger, the polar explorer of my generation. The surface of the gray sea before us

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☞ Barry Lopez is the author of *Arctic Dreams*, for which he received the National Book Award; *Of Wolves and Men*, a National Book Award finalist; and eight works of fiction, including *Light Action in the Caribbean*, *Field Notes*, and *Resistance*. He is coeditor with Debra Gwartzney of *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*.

had no point of stillness, no transparency. Veils of storm-ripped water ballooned in the air, and the voices of a flock of albatrosses, teetering in incomprehensible flight, pierced the wind's roar, rising and collapsing in the ship's superstructure. In the shadowless morning light, beyond the grasp of my rubberized gloves on the rail, beyond the snap of our parka hoods crumpling in the wind, the surface of the ocean was another earthly immensity, this one more contained and a little louder than the one in the Brooks Range.

In April 1988, I was traveling across China in the company of nine other writers from the United States, among them Maxine Hong Kingston and Harrison Salisbury, the legendary *New York Times* reporter. The day before we'd all met in Chongqing for a few hours of presentation and exchange with a group of Chinese writers; today we were to descend the stretch of the Yangtze River that cuts through the Wushan Mountains, the site of the famed Three Gorges, upriver from Yichang.

At that time, years before the completion of the Three Gorges Dam, the Yangtze still moved swiftly through the bottom of this steep-walled canyon, falling, as it did, 519 feet between Chongqing and Yichang. Despite the occasional set of rapids here, the water teemed with commerce—shirtless men paddled slender, pirogue-like boats up, down, and across the Yangtze; larger passenger vessels such as ours plowed through; and we passed loaded lighters and packets laboring against the current. The air was sewn with the smell of fresh vegetables, spoiling fish, and human waste. The scene, a kind of Third World cliché, was unengaging—until I caught sight, unexpectedly, of great runs of vertical space on the right bank, variegated fields rising perhaps 900 feet, straight up into a blue sky. The terraced slopes were as steep as playground slides, a skein of garden plots and traversing rice paddies, dotted with sheds and houses. These images might be visible between sections of bare cliff for no more than 30 seconds as the ship passed, but the emphatic convergence of cultural and physical geography was spectacular. The boldness of these farming ventures made my heart race, and in that mute, imposing gorge I discovered a different type of seductive immensity. I wanted more time to ferret out all the revealing detail in these densely patterned clefts. But the ship bore on. I inhaled strongly the damp perfume of human life around me, and gazed instead at the bolus of light shattering endlessly on the turbid water of the bow wave.

**L**ike other persistent travelers, I have often seen the surface of the earth from high-flying aircraft, but those expanses have never had the emotional impact of the enormous silence I experienced that night in the Anaktuvuk River Valley or the more circumscribed view I had later of the chaotic Southern Ocean. What's missing in views from an aircraft is the sensual immediacy of a place. The sound and the smell of it, the press of tempered air on the skin that accompanies what one sees. It's the full reach of the landscape that's not apparent, what you could call the authority of the land. The

impression of distance in the valley of the Anaktuvuk that night was intensified by seeing the brilliance of a few lichen-covered rocks close to my hand, by being able to make a connection, in the same instant, between the near and the far. Also, the ground-level view, unlike the view from a plane, has both a foreground and a middle ground—my yellow gloves on the rail of the *Hanseatic*, and the albatrosses flying between the ship and the horizon.

I don't mean to say that you can't establish an intimate connection with the earth from an airplane. Many years ago, when I was doing research for a book about the Arctic, I flew regularly with a bush pilot named Duncan Grant. He traveled routinely and widely in a Twin Otter across Canada's Queen Elizabeth Archipelago, north of the North American mainland, ferrying scientists and their gear to and from remote summer campsites. Most bush pilots in that country tended to fly in a straight line from point A to point B, cruising at an unvarying altitude of 3,000 feet. Duncan flew zigzag courses, like an Arctic fox searching for something to eat, at an altitude of about 300 feet. As his passenger, you never quite lost touch with the earth. He would habitually follow leads in the summer pack ice, hoping for a glimpse of narwhals. He'd throttle the aircraft back nearly to a stalling point so he could pass a flock of snow geese more slowly.

I learned from Duncan, who maintained close contact with the variable and active surface of the planet whenever he flew, what Saint-Exupéry, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and other writer-pilots meant by the phrase "the romance of flight." It was not freedom from the earth they sought as much as a release from the tyranny of distance. And what they discovered, what was genuinely new in their explorations, was a different kind of intimacy with earthly places, both the ones they were already familiar with and those they were seeing for the first time.

Books like Saint-Exupéry's *Wind, Sand and Stars* and Beryl Markham's *West with the Night* held my attention because of the pilots' allegiance to the physical earth, including their paths through the atmosphere. Their perceptions illuminated for me more of the complex relationships to place that are the hallmark of human feelings about geography. They particularized and enlivened the dull abstractions—the purple plain, the shining river, the amber waves of grain.

**W**hen I think of my own attempts to maintain intimacy with the earth, the first thing that comes to mind is not my barely successful struggle once to wade a torrential river in Oregon's Cascade Range, or an attempt to regain my equilibrium in the blast-furnace heat of Dubai's streets, or a sudden, disorienting encounter with a herd of oryx in 1987 in the Namib Desert. I think instead of the cave at Altamira.

In the spring of 1991, the director of the museum at Altamira offered me a private tour of this gallery of Paleolithic art in Cantabrian Spain. Accompanied by a guide and with no limit on my time, I was able to move

through its various sections at my own speed, grateful for the guide's patience with my slowness. I observed each tableau, studiously altering my perspective before them, feeling all the while the damp closeness of the walls and the darkness crowding in. I speculated, like any visitor, about the meaning of what was before me, but these intellectual efforts were the least important thing going on. Surrounded by this vivid, riveting evidence of human imaginations at work, and with the humid silence exaggerating the paintings' starkness, I felt a tenuous identity with the creators. In some sense, these people were my Cro-Magnon ancestors. Holocene history—the domestication of wheat, the codification of law under Hammurabi, the emergence of the Chinese dynasties—none of that entered my mind. All I could see was this glistening testament that Magdalenian hunters had left behind and myself standing before it, the staring, slow-breathing, distant relative.

When I exited the cave on a promontory and looked out across a Mondrian patchwork of kitchen gardens, corralled stock, and simple, two-story houses at the edge of the town of Santillana del Mar, I felt a surge of empathy toward generalized humanity, as if the paintings and the cultivation of the earth were expressions of survival made by human beings separated by only a few generations.

Intimacy with the earth apparently awakens in us, at some wordless level, a primal knowledge of the nature of our attachments to physical landscapes. Based on my own inquiries, my impression is that we experience this connection regularly as a diffuse, ineffable pleasure, as an end to a specific kind of longing. I recall diving on a nameless seamount in Dixon Entrance, near the southern tip of Prince of Wales Island in British Columbia's coastal waters. I was with a team of ecologists surveying benthic communities in the area. Diving is an intensified form of human exploration, and for many divers the recovery of a sense of amorous contact with the earth is almost immediate. A limit on the supply of air you can take along lets you know that your time underwater will be relatively short. The resistance of the water tells you you won't be going very far. And the projecting frame of your mask suggests, like a monk's cowl, that much will likely go by you unnoticed. Gravity, however, is not a restraint on your desire to examine things. You can swim up and down the face of 100-foot cliff walls, and if you have good neutral buoyancy skills, you can suspend yourself a few inches from the bottom and scrutinize a single, tiny creature, minute after minute, as it feeds.

That day, diving at Dixon Entrance, I felt like an astronaut on an extravehicular excursion. The seamount, which rose to within 60 feet of the surface, was only about 200 yards in diameter, and it fell away into abyssal darkness on every side. While our mother ship, the NOAA vessel *Alpha Helix*, floated overhead in station-keeping mode, the six of us split up to inspect the complicated contours of this isolated formation. Predictably in these cold, nutrient-rich waters, the mount was thickly covered with sponges, hydroco-

rals, anemones, tubeworms, basket stars, and brilliantly colored nudibranchs. Crustaceans appeared in nearly every crevice, and one of us saw an octopus. Small fish darted about, larger fish lumbered past. The scene was generally familiar from other cold-water dives I'd made in the Pacific Northwest, until I passed within a few feet of a hole about the size of my fist. The blunt head of an eel protruded from it—an ancient, bald, almost terrifying face. A wolf eel, I realized, and I pulled back sharply. Later, I encountered another wolf eel, this one about three feet long, undulating across the expanse of the seamount in its eerie, limbless way. It triggered the same primal alarm in my mammalian cerebellum, but the rocky field of color over which it moved, pale greens and dark browns dappled with the shadows of surface waves and accentuated by bright spots of chartreuse, apricot, carmine, and lavender, gave the eel a kind of innocence and vulnerability with which I identified, suspended there in the open ocean.

I have been very fortunate to experience so much of the physical world directly, and to have had time to linger and observe, to ask questions, and to listen while someone explained some subtle characteristic of a local landscape. I have felt pulled toward geography and its interpreters since early childhood, though not always toward the unpopulated places I've been describing. On a visit to Kabul, in the fall of 2007, my host offered me the services of a Pashtun driver (dressed in traditional clothes) and a battered car, which gave me a lower profile. Over two days the driver and I made our way through virtually every quarter of that blasted, crowded, dust-choked, and heroic landscape. I had told my host that I wanted to see what was actually going on in the streets of his city. What were people really doing here?

I watched men in open-air foundries take infinite care hand-peening pieces of scrap metal into parts for cars. I watched a man sell a single pomegranate from a tiny tray of the fruit, the entirety of his wares. I watched herdsmen move goats through reeking heaps of urban rubbish and recalled a dinner conversation from a few days earlier with one of Afghanistan's ministers, a man anxious about plans for his country's economic development. It is from observing the interplay of minute details with the larger, overall picture, sensing the tension between the revelatory particular and the general condition, that the stories we most trust about life begin to take shape. For me, those stories have frequently been about human drama in actual places—Melville's Pacific, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Saigyo's Honshu, Gordimer's Johannesburg.

Geography, some scholars believe, has subtly but directly influenced the development of our cultures, our languages, our diets, our social organization, and to some degree even our politics. Whenever I travel in remote or in still largely tribal places, I'm often conscious of watching for something modern man might have misplaced on his way from Altamira to Rome and Tenochtitlán—specifically, the idea that geography was central to his destiny.

## THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

Once, I can easily imagine, we each had a fundamental sense of well-being that grew directly out of intimacy, our back-and-forth, with the profundity embedded in our physical places.

From time to time I've been asked which landscape I favor most. Would it be the Tanami Desert in Australia's Northern Territory, where I stayed for a few weeks with Warlpiri people? The terraced hills of Bali, the intracoastal waterway of southern Chile? I always respond in the same way, saying no, it would be my home in western Oregon, where I have lived since the summer of 1970. It's with this place that I have had the longest conversation.

The house is situated on a bench above the north bank of the McKenzie River, in mixed old-growth forest. The valley here is too steep for farming, so human settlement has been light. Industrial logging has taken a toll, sweeping the mountain slopes clear of trees in many places. But Chinook salmon still spawn in front of the house, and just glancing out the windows, I've seen bobcat, mink, and black bear. Elk and mountain lion are nearby in the woods, as are coyote, beaver, river otter, and black-tailed deer. From the river, I regularly hear osprey and belted kingfisher call; and from the trees, ravens, pileated woodpeckers, and a host of other birds—warblers, tanagers, and thrushes among them.

Douglas firs, cedars, hemlocks, and big-leaf maples so tightly surround the house they take away the horizon. Sometimes when their crowns sway in the wind, I have the sense that I'm living at the bottom of a kelp forest. The expanse of this montane forest, like the expanse of the Pacific, is something I feel, and against this I array the details of life here: the late-night caterwaul of a gray fox, so like the wail of a terrified child; claw marks on the broken boards of an outbuilding, dismantled by a black bear; a rubber boa, pale as the stem of a mushroom, curled up by the kitchen steps one morning; the glint from an obsidian spear point, a broken section of which I unearthed one evening with a trowel while laying a brick walk in the forest.

Over the years, I have seen, heard, tasted, palpated, and smelled many remarkable things around the place. I do not recall a single day of attentiveness outdoors when something unknown, something new, hasn't flared up before me. I'm kept from the conceit that there is anything singular in this, though, by the streams of tourist traffic that speed past the house daily, winter and summer, en route to recreation areas in the mountains or to launch points on the river. To most, my landscape must seem innocuous, ordinary.

Still, I'm happy in this undemonstrative, rural place. In my conversations with it, I know, once more, who I am. It inundates me continually with mystery, because its nature is too complex to be fully known. If I want the comfort of intimacy with it, of integration and acceptance, my only choice is to learn from it by participating. I imagine my choice here is very like that of the Magdalenian painters in their time, one of stepping into the physical world as fully as circumstances permit. Of not opting for the expediency of detachment.



**A**s global climate begins to guide our political thinking, as the earth's stocks of pelagic fish plummet, as dry-land aquifers are drained, we can speculate that by largely ignoring the impact geography has on our lives we have been shortsighted. As humans in Africa and Asia migrate today from their derelict lands in search of ground more hospitable—or simply in search of gainful employment—we can even say we've erred, fatefully, in not considering geographical awareness more carefully in the development of our country's domestic and international policy.

**T**he Jack Hills in Western Australia lie about 400 miles north-northeast of Perth. There, in the 1980s, scientists found a lode of zircon crystals that at the time represented the oldest known bits of the earth's crust. One of these extremely hard and durable crystals was dated at 4.27 billion years, about 250 million years after the formation of the planet. After reading in *Nature* about the discovery, I felt compelled to see the region. I didn't want to spirit away any specimens. I just wanted, if I could, to become for a moment a part of the flow of time there.

Using a hand-drawn map given to me by one of the geologists involved, and later relying on a flyover offered by the manager of a sheep station that included a portion of the Jack Hills, I made my way by four-wheel drive from the regional airport at Meekatharra to the sheep station's headquarters and, the next morning, to the site of the find.

I parked in a copse of eucalyptus trees at the foot of the wash in which the crystals had first been discovered, and walked slowly uphill, studying the ground closely. While distant events in the Archean Eon came to mind, flocks of small, bright, green and yellow budgerigars zoomed past. Galahs and crested cockatiels called from distant trees. I sat for a while at the edge of a dry watercourse and, from time to time, studied sections of the broken, hilly country with a pair of binoculars. Nothing moved. I saw no sheep, no feral cats or goats (the latter, the station manager told me, were his greatest nemesis), only the arid contours of a brittle land with little soil, one that carried few footprints distinct enough for me to read.

By early afternoon I was satisfied that I'd located the precise spot where the crystals had first been noticed. The geological exposure was unequivocal. I lingered there for an hour, viewing all I saw in light of the crystals glittering in the rock formation at my feet.

On my way back to the truck I stopped to focus my binoculars far ahead on a small flock of gray and pink cockatoos with white crowns—galahs. The late afternoon light inflamed their pink chests and I could more easily distinguish them between red-eyed females and brown-eyed males. The heated air buzzed with their raucous calls, erupting from the upper limbs of the eucalypts under which I'd parked. From the upper end of the wash, my line of sight carried over the crowns of these trees out into a plain beyond, a sun-drenched expanse of savannah under a massive, pale blue sky. It was



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too far off, out there, to catch and identify any bird's voice, but perhaps, just then, other birds unknown to me were announcing themselves in that welter of space. ❖

