

NON-FICTION

To sing, to say

A lyric ethics for coming into country

Mark Tredinnick

I AM A poet and an essayist, a teacher of writing and a father of five children, who visit like rare birds these days, and I live with my partner and two spaniels and a cat along the Wingecarribee River (one of its many much debated spellings) on Gundungurra land, country never ceded, 125 kilometres south-west of what is now mostly called Sydney, which sits on the stolen ground of the Gadigal. I am, as far as I know, a non-Indigenous Australian man, a fifth-generation descendant of Cornish and German immigrants. They settled land that was not theirs to settle, though that's not what they were told; I live on land to which nothing but love gives me any kind of title, and I own none of it. Who can afford to own it anyway these days, even if one felt one had the right?

I write and talk constantly about place and places. My doctoral work considered the nature of nature writing; my book *The Blue Plateau*, which my publishers have recently let fall out of print in Australia (though it is still in print in the US), is an instance of that genre, a landscape memoir of the dissected sandstone plateau country around Katoomba. Across the five collections of poetry I've published to date – *Fire Diary*, *Bluewren Cantos*, *A Gathered Distance*, *Walking Underwater*, *A Beginner's Guide* – there is barely a poem in which a fire has not wanted to start, a bird to fly, or a river to run. Land is an article of my lyric faith.

But every place I write has been violently misappropriated from people who knew more about all those places, and all that country can teach,

than I will ever catch the edge of; the agony and blood and very selfhood of First Peoples are written, with more wisdom and beauty and patience and proportion than I'll fathom, into the places I love and to which I have apprenticed myself. What right, then, do I have to write these places? Or any? What rites might I practise – what should I do with my life, with my royalties, with my metaphors, with my sentences, with the stories of the lives of the First Peoples of these places – to earn a right to practise the obligation I feel to study and celebrate landscapes I love and to conserve in words what is yet wild and wise within them and eloquent to its First People – maybe even to a latecomer like me?

This is the dilemma, the morally vital and practically irresolvable issue, the late writer Barry Lopez spent his life in the thick of; and it is the question Gregory Day, Australian essayist and novelist, thinks about in almost geological depth in his new book *Words Are Eagles: Selected Writings on the Nature and Language of Place*. This essay is my attempt to find a morally defensible path through this dilemma, with reference to Day's new book and a posthumous collection of Barry Lopez's essays, *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World*. It's also my chance to honour Lopez, whose life and work touched mine deeply.

IN STONEMAN'S BOOKROOM, Castlemaine, I come across Paolo Cognetti's novel *The Lovers*. It's the first I've heard of it, but the book, published in Italian in 2021 as *La felicità del lupo*, is set in a high alpine village, Fontana Fredda, above Milan. Translated into Ondaatje-esque lyric English by Stash Luczkiw, the book is an 'international bestseller' according to its cover – an international bestseller that had escaped my notice.

The cover draws me in first: an azure lake in high, fir-clad mountains and the promise of love. But what compels me to buy the book is the epigraph, which turns out to be the best thing in a very fine book: 'As I traveled, I came to believe that people's desires and aspirations were as much a part of the land as the wind, solitary animals, and the bright fields of stone and tundra. And, too, that the land itself existed quite apart from these.' Words that seem to be holding down the screen of light that is a day in the high tundra, and shining like gems beneath a clear stream. Words saying a new thing you seem to recall thinking all your life – but never so limpidly or urgently. Words from two sentences in Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*.

We lost Barry Lopez on Christmas Day 2020. He was seventy-five, but it seemed too soon. I know people whose lives have been upended, whose understanding of the nature of the land – of the whole more-than-merely-human world in which we participate – and of the ethics and aesthetics of the human relationship with it has been transformed, whose sense of how a human life might be lived with more dignity and grace has been reshaped by reading Lopez – his *Arctic Dreams*, in particular. I am one.

The use in a contemporary Italian novel of Lopez's sentences – about the integrity of land and an understanding of human desire as a performance by the land of one aspect of itself – speaks to the order of his influence. He is, among people I meet and teach in Australia, not nearly so well known as he should be. By contrast, he is spoken of with tenderness and respect among writers and environmental activists in many parts of the world. His friend Margaret Atwood wrote a moving obituary for him. At a Zoom event hosted by the Point Reyes Bookstore in San Francisco to launch *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World* in May 2022, Robert Macfarlane and Jane Hirshfield spoke. For them Lopez was a friend, an inspiration and an elder.

No one saw the world like him: he saw it gravely and yet with humility and awe and a child's delight; he witnessed as a psychoanalyst, a sculptor, a pilgrim and a seer all at once. His writing helped you see it more strangely, too. In her foreword to the book, Rebecca Solnit writes, 'I have my own paths now, but Barry helped me find them.'

IN HIS 1986 book *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, Lopez writes: 'The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life.'

How poetry works – its oracular way, its indirection – is how land works, he saw. Land as a teacher, as an embodiment not only of its own integrity but of human aspirations and virtues like hope and beauty; land as an educator of the senses; land as a measure against which to prove and compare one's own and others' lives, as a theatre for the divine comedy of all human life; land as an elder, as a god, as a library: these are ideas, none of them strange to Indigenous cultures, but uncommon to Western epistemologies, in which I have taken lessons from Barry Lopez's books and from conversations with him over the years of our long, spasmodic, friendship. Lopez writes in 'Love in a Time of

Terror' 'that the great political questions of our time – about violent prejudice, global climate change, venal greed, fear of the Other – could be addressed in illuminating ways by considering models in the natural world'. Could we learn behaviours more viable than competition and tribalism from, for example, the symbiotic behaviour that is the foundation of every ecosystem?

In 'An Invitation', an essay published in *Granta* in 2015, Lopez also speaks, as he often has, of the chronic loneliness attending contemporary life that derives from the condescension of the overculture, as he puts it, toward nature. 'Existential loneliness and a sense that one's life is inconsequential, both of which are hallmarks of modern civilizations, seem to me to derive in part from our abandoning a belief in the therapeutic dimensions of a relationship with place.' Few of us these postindustrial days, living inside the overculture and its suburban norms and anthropocentric tropes, locate our sense of meaning, identity or belonging in place, in nature; the patterns in which we find ourselves implicated are, on the whole, social and digital; the stories we tell ourselves of who we are don't often include rivers and mountains and forests and fields. Nature has ceased to be meaningful or sacred or worthy of much awe or respect. Most of us have lost what George Seddon once called 'place literacy'. Given thousands of years of human evolution in local places, in the midst of the interdependence of animals and rivers and weather and plants, this sudden post-Enlightenment exile might leave many of us stranded and existentially lonely, as Lopez puts it. By restoring literacy in place, by renewing deep acquaintance with the world beyond the merely human – through one's own body and through reading literature in which nature is again more than background to human narratives – *that*, I passionately believe with Lopez, is the way to healing: through country.

Another key lesson I took from Lopez: lyric language – in poetry but also the cadenced kind of prose Lopez practised with such love – is required to do justice to the inner life, as it were, of nature and of our human encounters with it. Places do not transpire in stories; they operate like music, they play in lyric frequencies, all their several pieces performing their intersecting parts across time and space, and all of it amounting to one distinctive *here*. And it will take deep listening, the way we listen to jazz or chamber music, to catch those frequencies; it will take forms of writing attentive to metaphor and cadence, to rhythm and the prosody of syntax, if we are to catch the sound topographies of country, to engage with land, and to get the places said.

There is still, of course, the question of anyone's moral right to make such a listening; there remains the possibility that one's composition might silence that which an Indigenous person might make. But in a lyric approach to making and to criticism there is less danger that a work made downstream of heroic narrative and pastorals could be, or be construed as, a stealing of story. To participate in what makes a place a place, to drop into its frequencies, is not to steal a narrative or claim a lesson learned there as one's own.

Lopez has learned, as he writes in 'The Invitation', to *pay attention* for longer and to a wider area and span of data than a European like himself is inclined to open up to. *Be patient* – with the moment and with the place and with yourself. Spend longer; listen better; resist the need to speak and explain. And don't let the mind's 'tendency to foreclose', as Seamus Heaney puts it, shut down your awareness of what your body apprehends.

Lopez is careful and he is respectful and he is precise about what he says here. These are human capacities, he emphasises. Most of us have lost them. Indigenous people have perhaps kept at them longer and lodged them deep in continuous cultural practices. Not every Indigenous individual will practise these disciplines of attention – of 'intimacy', he calls it – better than your average settler; every culture includes the distracted and the lazy. But in his experience, Indigenous people are 'more attentive, more patient, less willing to say what they know, to collapse mystery into language'.

All this is well said and wise. And likely to cause offence to some readers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. For these are times, as Lopez knew, when it has become difficult to make such cross-cultural assertions, especially when the observation is made of the colonised by a beneficiary of the colonial project. Still, if postcolonial society is to stop trashing places and lives, if all of us – Indigenous and non-Indigenous victims of capitalist misconstructions of life and country – are to recover sustaining ways of being together in the land, we are going to have to practise place again; we are going to have to go to country; we are going to have to consider what Indigenous experience, denied or disparaged for 200 years, has to teach. But how does a non-Indigenous writer go to land, nearly always land taken in violence, and learn from it and from Indigenous inhabitants of that country, and then write what they have encountered without perpetuating the dispossession?

This is not territory that literature can afford to avoid. Nothing will be mended that colonialism broke and capitalism continues to sunder, if

humanity's relationship with all that is not merely human, and with itself, is not attended to and recast in ways that nature and Indigenous practices can teach. Whose permission does one need and how does one get it? And what are the qualities of the language a writer, a postcolonial white writer, say, might use to do justice to the Indigenous knowledge shared with them?

LIKE LOPEZ, GREGORY Day dedicated himself to learning what places teach, what we owe them and how we might live better in them and do justice to other lives lost there at our expense. Day would perhaps hear too many 'grace notes' in Lopez, as he hears them in Robert Macfarlane. Lopez is more shamanistic, more at ease with sentiment, more intimate. Day, though a songwriter, writes prose more like talking than singing.

But the musicality of language, language as lyric listening, may be part of an answer to the question that Day puts in the central essay in *Words Are Eagles*, 'Otway Taenarum': 'So, how, what, to write, to sing, to say?' Day means, specifically, what and how to sing or say: of land and one's possible connection to it; about a place as a mind one might come to share in the tongue of the occupiers and dispossessors. How to witness country and cry its peril and do something about it when that land and its peoples are traumatised by the language in which you hope to bear that witness and see some justice done? The right question may be about the aesthetic adequacy of our languaging to the place – have we composed a place in words that does justice to that land and its selfhood, and all the loss inscribed in it? Is our writing of a piece with country? Could it almost be a species of that place?

The answer, as Gregory Day has discovered, although this is not the way he puts it, is a lyric approach to life and language and place. To say, in other words, is in part to sing. What will do justice to all that a place is and has been and some of the transcendent meaning it gestures at is a seeing–saying that is an innately musical listening; a languaging that reaches beyond narrative; a discourse sufficiently figurative to allow in a little of what is intuited inside and around the nameable, but is a little beyond the grasp of diction, definition and even plot.

For Day, the nub of the problem is whether a writer, in writing place, ought to 'speak, or sing, for the people who had been dispossessed'. I admire the tenderness and care of his moral discernment, his sense of responsibility, his determination not to perpetuate wrongs – by now stealing land a second

time imaginatively, as it were, or by speaking for it, rather than standing aside and leaving space for the silent voices of the First Peoples of the land to speak.

But to speak of land is not, in itself, to speak for the dispossessed. To see land as one sees it, to respond in letters to how you met it and how it met and changed you, is not to speak for the experience of others, nor in itself to silence them. Say you felt it permissible – as surely it must be for anyone who comes with honour and humility – to respond to country, any telling you make must include some consideration of those who sacralised and shaped the landscape, and it must acknowledge their violent dispossession, all of which must surely be part of the incorrigible plurality of the place. Not to speak of the dispossessed and the dispossession misconstrues the country and perpetuates the lie of *terra nullius*.

A CODE OF values that might help a non-Indigenous writer, any writer, enter into places and stories not in some sense ‘their own’ would surely include these: go with humility, with dignity, respectfulness, vulnerability and contrition, with an understanding that there is some permission to be asked, or some dignified reciprocation to be performed. Find, if you can, a local Indigenous guide. This is how I’d say Barry Lopez has worked. Gregory Day decided all that time ago not to write Indigenous stories; to write, instead, out of his own long being there, out of his cultural inheritance.

Schooled by a Protestant tradition, I have trusted the capacity – indeed, the obligation – each of us has to approach the land as Luther believed we must all approach God: alone, oneself entirely, unpriested. There is a way, I think, of accessing – through disciplines of attention and through humility and wide reading and conversation – your own being, your deep humanity, the self you are, deeper than all the categories the world would put you in; there is a way of dying to your self and coming back plural. And so there is a way of imagining other lives and times and ways; of feeling them. Every time I read someone else’s poem or novel, or hear a song, and feel my own life told, I know this to be true. We are not ‘constructed’ by culture, or constrained by it, though it influences us; we are not defined by the norms into which we are born; we are not bound by our times and fashions. Of course, the endeavour to transcend self will always fall short, as all human endeavours do, as all love does, as all forgiveness and spiritual aspiration; it will be imperfect. But one can go a long way, if one puts in the effort, toward bracketing off, as the

phenomenologists put it, those aspects of identity, culture and the objective world by which one is defined.

And I have now and then tried to imagine in that way what an experience profoundly unlike my own, and yet in certain ways not, might feel like – to which thought and dream and reading and conversation and personal suffering might help me access. But I have not gone farther than felt right; I have imagined dispossession and I have imagined attention to country, kinship with place, deep belonging, loss.

Like Day, I have judged it improper, immodest, arrogant, to ‘take’ and retell Indigenous stories, except in cautious outline and metaphor. All the land I seek to know is not my land in any sense except for how it wants to lay claim to me. My possession is only imaginative, spiritual; that is all I would ever want. If my artistic response to the only land I know as home feels in any way improper or disrespectful, I apologise and ask how I might make it better next time.

To approach land as Lopez attempts, and as I have, is the old way of being and of writing; it is the long run. Place has been sacralised in all human traditions – Celtic, Catholic, Sufi, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindi... To go to land is a human need and obligation. Not to attend to land in language is no longer an option, I would say. Look, after all, how well it’s worked out for the earth that the dominant cultures of the West, literature included, have for three centuries now ignored those human traditions of reverence for land, disdained and exploited the earth. It perpetuates the rape of the earth and of first cultures, all of which sustain diversity, to leave land out of our tellings. The truth is, too, as Day writes, that the history of the human world is one long, recursive, traumatic cycle of possession and dispossession, and that story is playing out somewhere on earth at any given time, in one of its violent stages. The dispossessed and the possessors are neighbours now. There are ways to put the dispossession right, and they include literature, and they begin with kindness and generosity and diversity of seeing.

IN SEPTEMBER 2019, a generous review of Barry Lopez’s great final work *Horizon* in *The New York Review of Books* made me pick up the phone and call him. It had been a while. He was pleased to talk, and he spoke with his usual grace and care and friendliness. He also let me know he was still dealing with the colon cancer that beset him a decade before, and that he had

had a minor stroke during the year. I decided I needed to get over to Oregon to see him soon in case it was the last chance I had. I had a new book out, *A Gathered Distance*, and I was able to patch together a reading tour of a number of states and a poetry retreat in Quebec, a suite of other gigs; but they were pieces of a jigsaw, whose centrepiece was a few days with Barry at Finn Rock.

And so, in early March 2020, I found myself walking the banks of the McKenzie River with him; my partner, Jodie, walked ahead with Debra, Barry's second wife. Barry had aged tremendously in the ten years since I'd seen him, and he was fragile, but he walked steadily in the sunshine with me and talked of the salmon and about the conservation work he was involved in, and he was worried about how dry the undergrowth was in this river valley where he had never seen fire come, and he pointed out a rusting cable in the ferns. Covid was on the rise, and he was worried about it; Trump was still in power, and he was not convinced his country had the wisdom to vote him out; he was having a hard time imagining a livable future for our children beyond the next thirty years. But he had new work on his desk, a couple of the essays that would be published posthumously, I think, and his next big work in mind. And he was very worried about fire.

On our first morning, after breakfast in his kitchen, he remembered a Russian choir who had sung the 'Gaudemus Igitur' (So, let us rejoice) at an event in Adelaide, I recall, when he had been a guest one year of the writers' festival, and how they'd sung that song in a mood both melancholic and hopeful. That's the best we can do for each other, he said to us. Be as glad as we can for the gift of all this while it lasts.

Early on Sunday morning, the day we left, I sat on the deck among the douglas fir and wrote this poem, a double sijo, which I left him as a way of saying thank you.

The whole world composes itself here. Cedars husband first light
 Along the thin trail I take to the creek. Log trucks pass along
 The road, beside the river, which makes the quiet fast again.

The slow sun takes its time, like a mourner, overbrimming hills
 To the east. Morning lights the distance before it moves in close.
 Moss slakes the firs with what the wrens decant: *while this lasts, rejoice.*

On the last day in Eugene, we drove Barry to the bus station; he was heading up to Portland to meet Debra. Both of them were shortlisted for the same literary prize. When I told him about the next work I planned to write, he grew animated. He held my hands and looked at me sternly and eagerly at once. That is the work you must do, he said. We left him sitting on a bench in the bus station downtown. His cowboy boots were polished and his jeans neat. He looked at both of us as we made to go. Take care of each other, he said.

Taking that kind of care has been his life's work, on the page and on the land and with those he met. His was a fierce embrace of life and of an imperilled world and of us all in it. A shining, burning instance of *how, what, to sing, to say*.

Mark Tredinnick OAM is an award-winning poet and essayist and teacher of writing. He is the author of eighteen books of poetry and prose, and his writing has won the Montreal and Cardiff Poetry Prizes, the Blake and Newcastle Poetry Prizes, the ACU and Ron Pretty Poetry Prizes, two Premiers' Literature Awards and the Calibre Essay Prize. *The Blue Plateau*, his landscape memoir, was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Prize, and in 2020 he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for services to literature and education.