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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 workshoping 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 workshoped, 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.