INTRODUCTION

BY BARRY LOPEZ

SOME YEARS AGO I WALKED INTO THE OFFICE OF A MAN named Jim Kari, at the time the director of the Native Language Center at the University of Alaska, and was brought up short by a striking contrast posted on his wall. Arranged side by side above his desk were a pair of identical United States Geological Survey maps showing the topography of a section of south-central Alaska's Susitna Valley. The map on the left bristled with more than a hundred colored pushpins, each bearing a tiny paper flag with a Deni'ina place-name on it, the Athabaskan language spoken by the indigenous people still living there. Fewer than a dozen names appeared in English on the right, neatly printed on the quadrangle as an official part of the map.

Mr. Kari's point, that a region hardly known to its relatively new landlords is, in fact, minutely and extensively known to its long-term residents, dramatizes a truism about belonging, about intimacy with a place. The deeper point made on me by Mr. Kari's maps that morning is that the English words on them were arbitrarily chosen, little more than points of orientation. The Deni'ina words, which Mr. Kari had gathered during his years of hiking the Susitna River drainage and interviewing resident people, had grown up over many centuries, out of the natural convergence of human culture with a particular place.

Mr. Kari's declaration, about arbitrary imposition and real authority, given a much larger frame of reference,

amounts to an observation about modern loss and belonging which many of us can identify with. Some of us in the United States can trace our family lines back many generations to, say, the Green Mountains of western Vermont, the urban hills of the San Francisco peninsula, or the sandhills of western Nebraska; to small towns along the Mississippi River or a red-earth farm in Alabama. Many of us have come from ranching, farming, or logging families, and might have listened with a measure of envy while a grandparent spoke of these places of origin, using a language so suited to the place being described it fit against it like another kind of air. A language capable of conveying the most evanescent of the place's characteristics.

Today, the majority of us raise our families, go to school, find employment, and locate much of our inspiration in urban areas. The land beyond our towns, for many, has become a generalized landscape of hills and valleys, of beaches, rivers, and monotonous deserts. Almost against our wills the countrysides of our parents' and grandparents' generations—the Salinas Valley we might have once pictured reading John Steinbeck, images of Sarah Orne Jewett's Maine or the barefoot country of Eudora Welty's stories, of Willa Cather's Nebraska and New Mexico—almost without our knowing it, the particulars of these landscapes have slipped away from us. Asked, we might still conjure them, but we probably could no longer still name the elements that make them vivid in our memories.

It has 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, 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 are 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 place we've chosen to live is 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 in economics. 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.

AS A BOY GROWING UP IN THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY OF southern California, I found solace in the way big winds blew through groves of eucalyptus trees in this—back then—agricultural region. The animated rustling that enlivened those trees. I found inspiration in the stark barrenness of the Mojave Desert, in the way storm surf

exploded on the coastal beaches, and in the splendor of Hoover (at the time, Boulder) Dam. Later, an adolescent in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan in the late 1950s, I became familiar with a landscape altogether different from this one. I was sent to camp that first summer on Long Island's South Fork. Before this, I thought only rivers forked. My family bought a second home "at the shore," in Bay Head, New Jersey—it wasn't called "the coast" here. We made family trips to New Hampshire, where there was such a thing as a monadnock; and out on Staten Island, I learned, they called some of the sloughs and creeks kills. I remember speculating then with my younger brother about the formerly enigmatic Peekskill, New York, whether it wasn't named for the kill on which Mr. Peek had his farm.

My prep school friends on 83rd Street in Manhattan described the Pine Barrens of New Jersey contemptuously as a cultural and geographic extension of Appalachia, accurate on neither count; and they described the Finger Lakes of western New York as a romantic locale, a place you might want to honeymoon. The image of a "finger" lake preoccupied me for a while as a twelve-year-old. Were there five of them in parallel? Did something like a palm connect them all?

My roommate in college felt the same compulsion I did to travel and to see the physical world. On any given weekend we might drive as much as a thousand miles to get to the Straits of Mackinac in northern Michigan, or see the woody draws and prehistoric ceremonial mounds of eastern Iowa, the bayous and playrees of Mississippi, and the bluegrass hills of central Kentucky. Was there a season, we'd wonder, when they were bluest?

Driving the country wasn't the obsession for us; it was seeing how these varied landscapes followed up on one another, from one side of the continent to the other. Through my late teens and early twenties especially, but

down to the present, too, I'd drive whatever distance was needed to actually come up on, for example, the Painted Hills of eastern Oregon. Or to watch light shimmer on windswept sawgrass prairies in central Florida. Everywhere I went, state promotional materials touted their home ground as "the land of contrasts." Some had more contrast than others, of course, and in a few, like North Dakota, the contrast was subtle. The country as a whole, however, had contrast enough—in its lava fields, alpine tundra, canyons, and barrier islands—to defeat a lifetime of looking. Further, many of these landforms, depending on where you went or whom you asked, were called—the very same landforms—by different and occasionally quite local names. In that lifetime, you might never get it all straight.

It had come to me as a fourteen-year-old reading *Moby-Dick*, a moral drama set in an intensely physical place, that this seemingly unfettered, nearly unmeasureable American landscape I had become acquainted with (Colorado's fourteeners, Appalachia's Carolina bays, Manhattan's tidal races, a complex landscape, robust with suggestions of freedom, power, and purity) it came to me that this particular landscape had distinctively stamped the long line of American literature, starting with Cooper and Hawthorne and coming up through Twain, Cather, and Steinbeck, through Stegner, Mary Oliver, and Peter Matthiessen, through Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. In fact, it is striking the degree to which the work of so many American writers is informed by sentences of wonder, meditation, and confoundment, of intimacy, alienation, and homage, inspired by the features—plowed land, deep woods, mountain streams—of American landscapes. In *Inheritance of Night*, William Styron writes: "You look out once more at the late summer landscape and the low sorrowful beauty of the tideland streams, turgid and involute and secret and winding through marshes full of small,

darting, frightened noises and glistening and dead silent at noon except for a whistle, far off, and a distant rumble on the rails."

Whatever their styles and emphases, many American poets and novelists have recognized that something emotive abides in the land, and that it can be recognized and evoked even if it cannot be thoroughly plumbed. It is inaccessible to the analytic researcher, invisible to the ironist. To hear the unembodied call of a place, that numinous voice, one has to wait for it to speak through the harmony of its features—the soughing of the wind across it, its upward reach against a clear night sky, its fragrance after a rain. One must wait for the moment when the thing—the hill, the tarn, the lunette, the kiss tank, the caliche flat, the bajada—ceases to be a thing and becomes something that knows we are there.

IN MY EARLY TWENTIES I CAME UPON ERWIN RAISZ'S hand-drawn maps of the continental United States, done while he was teaching at Harvard in the 1930s and 40s, a kind of cartography that bordered on fine art. His creations are distinguished by a level of detail that is almost bewildering, by an absence of roads, and by a variety of typefaces (including his own hand-printed letters) that tend to disappear into the maps' shaded contours, enhancing the sense that you're looking at a document in which the authority of the place, the physical eminence of it, overwhelms all else. The one I have in hand now, drawn in 1941, was issued in a revised edition in 1965, a few years before I purchased it. It's called *Landforms of the Northwestern States* and includes Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and the mountains of western Montana. It measures about three feet by two. Its white paper is soiled from handling and worn through at its creases from refolding. These flaws, however, only intensify for me a sense that Raisz's depiction is of a fabled land, a place that, like a palimpsest,

lies invisible beneath all the commercial roadmaps I've used over the years.

It would take hours, and something akin to insatiable curiosity, for someone to pore over each of the map's revealing nib strokes. (Some of its features—the drainage of the Wounded Doe River in Idaho, or Mission Bottom, situated below the Eola Hills in western Oregon—are best brought to life with a magnifying glass and, overall, the task of full comprehension is nearly impossible without some sort of imposed grid, to keep one from getting lost in the pen-and-ink work.) The map suggests a novel, though it has neither narrator nor time line. Start your examination anywhere and you are soon impressed by how neatly all the pieces come together, the almost eerie continuity of it all. Raisz's approach to landscape here is of a fit with J. B. Jackson's writing about America's vernacular landscape. Raisz illustrated and Jackson, a cultural geographer in New Mexico, wrote with affection for the unpretentious.

Raisz employs two sorts of language on his Northwest map, colloquial and formal. In an unnamed valley east of Poker Jim Ridge in central Oregon, he uses the generalized descriptive "rolling sagebrush land, low relief." In eastern Washington, he labels an immensity of thousands of square miles "Channeled Scablands," a technical term geographers use to describe a singular landform, one created over several centuries at the end of the last ice age, when a glacial lake the size of Lake Huron repeatedly formed in Montana only to burst its western ice dams and roar again across southeastern Washington, creating a scoured landscape and deepening a gorge in the Cascade Mountains through which the Columbia still flows to the Pacific.

Raisz's language pulls one as deeply into his maps as his graphics, which seem such a mysterious form of storytelling. There is no end to the allure of the names he placed on this particular map—the Horse Heaven Hills,

Disgrace Creek, Craters of the Moon. Each is a unique place though, not a generic entity. Looking to other Raisz maps, I would wonder what a "scalded flat" might be, or a "pimple mound." And what about a "pencil bluff," an "eyebrow hill"? Some of these expressions I couldn't find in any book I consulted, though people somewhere probably used these words every day to designate a feature that oriented them in space, like "hole," "basin," "fork," or "meadow." This was a fundamental language. Something or other had a hole in it, or it split apart like the tines of a fork, or it looked like somebody's eyebrow. Like Jim Kari's Deni'ina map, the language on Raisz's maps radiates a sense of belonging.

Raisz's maps lack the high resolution, scale, color, and specificity of modern U.S. Geological Survey quadrangles, but they are intimate and neighborly where the latter are cool and analytic. They are in harmony with the unprecedented views humans first experienced in the initial decades of the Age of Flight, when pilots navigated by looking at the ground below, when they became the first of us to take in entire creek drainages at a glance, when, like Beryl Markham and St-Exupéry, they were dazzled by the scope of what they could see, by the detail in it, not yet obscured by speed, greater altitude, and fouled air.

The maps, then, I began studying as a child, the country I started driving through as a young man—a maze of winding, unpaved roads in the Smoky Mountains, the redrock canyon country of the Colorado Plateau, the farmlands of the San Joaquin Valley, with their windbreaks of lombardy poplars—and, finally, the local speech that might be overheard in rural cafés or elicited by a traveler seeking directions: all this combined to prompt questions about what, in the end, one could really know about the larger home land. What was the difference between a clove and a hollow to West Virginians? How many types of flats were there in the West—creosote flats, gumbo

flats, antelope flats, tidal flats? Would trying to sidle through terrain vague (the narrow space between two city buildings) tell you something about the stark nature of a city, in the same way squeezing through a slot canyon in Utah would be revealing about the Colorado Plateau? And what *was* a ronde (as in Grande Ronde, Oregon), a yazoo (Yazoo, Mississippi), a vega (Las Vegas, Nevada)?

One windy day after a week of rain I was driving east across the Llano Estacado in panhandle Texas with a local man. He said, "Look yonder at them white caps in the bar ditch," and I caught a sense of the open ocean on the Staked Plain of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado. When I traveled to eastern Washington late one summer to see for the first time the unbroken expanse of wheat growing on low, rolling land there, a stretch of loess hills local people call the Palouse, it seemed an erotic landscape to me. What would a child's erotic landscape be?

DURING A LONG PERIOD OF FIELD RESEARCH THAT brought me into regular contact with wild animals on their remote home grounds, and after decades of living in a place where wild animals from deer mice and dusky shrews to Roosevelt elk and black bear are common, I've wondered what they see that we miss. Or what we so frequently miss because we are impatient and cursory. The human eye is sensitive to a narrow range of electromagnetic energy; and we're predisposed to divide the whole of a landscape into objects of a certain size and limit—a gulch, a woodlot, a pond. Much that would be arresting to an animal's eye is not apparent to us. How is the land we see divided and composed according to the way we see? What draws our attention?

It's hard to see deeply into a landscape that, at first glance, appears to be without distinction—the mixed woods monotony of a New England hillside, for example. After a patient and close look, however, one might never-

intentionally, to make what is separate from us a part of where we are. We put a geometry to the land—backcountry, front range, high desert—and pick out patterns in it: pool and riffle, swale and rise, basin and range. We make it remote (north forty), vivid (bird-foot delta), and humorous (detroit riprap).

It is a language that keeps us from slipping off into abstract space.

THE POCKINGS MOUNTAIN SHEEP LEAVE BEHIND WHEN they nose snow aside to get at buried grass are called feeding craters. When a rainbow trout strikes a mayfly on the placid surface of a creek, the departing ripples mark a fish strike. These things are too ephemeral to be taken for landforms or waterforms. For the scorched earth that forest fires leave behind, however, we have a word: brûlé. When a meandering river cuts through a point bar and leaves behind a meander scar, and the scar fills with water, we call it an oxbow lake. We try to slow and steady the temporal and spatial scales of the Earth's dynamic surface, to have it conform more closely with our own scale of living and understanding.

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 along with "like a," these words now stand in for glade, tank, and escarpment. Most of us today are more aware of brown lands than wetlands, the former an expanding urban habitat, the latter a 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 cowfaced slopes with them into retirement. And the jackass miners of the Mojave are no longer around to tell us how an adit differs from an aven. At a time when the country's landscapes are increasingly

treated as commodities, subjected 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't be good.

ONCE, ON THE UPPER BORO RIVER IN BOTSWANA, traveling in dugout canoes with local tribesmen, I went ashore with ten or twelve others to rest in the shade of acacia trees during the heat of the day. The men conversed quietly in 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 Aranda people in Australia, whose language I also like to hear, the run of it, mellifluous, like birdsong.

We have a shapely language, American English. A polyglot speech, grown up from a score of European, African, and Asian immigrant tongues, and complexly veined with hundreds of expressions native to the places we now occupy—Uto-Aztecan, Eyak-Athabaskan, Iroquoian, Muskogean, Caddoan, and Salishan. We have named the things we've picked out on the land, 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, hawked daily as anodynes by opportunists, whose many schemes for wealth hinge on our loss of memory, the anxiety of our alienation, our hunger after substance.

IN THE PAGES THAT FOLLOW, A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS has set down definitions for landscape terms and terms for the forms that water takes, each according to his or her own sense of what's right, what's important to know. The definitions have been reviewed for accuracy by professional geographers, but the writers' intent was not to be exhaustive, let alone definitive. In concert with each other, they wanted to suggest the breadth and depth of a

language many of us still seek to use purposefully every day. Their intent was to celebrate and inform, and to point us toward the great body of work which they perused in their research and which, along with a life experience of their own, they brought into play to craft what they had to say.

It was my privilege, and that of Debra Gwartney, the managing editor, to have worked to bring their conception to these pages.

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HOME GROUND