

SIX BEARS

In Memory of Rick Bartow

A talk delivered at the Sowell Conference, April 21, 2016

I want to start by dedicating this talk to the memory of Rick Bartow, who passed from this Earth on April 2, 2016. As many of you know, Rick was a very close friend to Barry Lopez and a pretty close neighbor of his in Oregon. He is perhaps best known by the general public for



Rick Bartow in his studio

his cedar sculptures, such as “We Were Always Here,” displayed on the grounds of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

In addition, however, Rick was a prolific painter, and I wanted to show you some of his recent work featuring

bears. For the past twenty years, Rick

Bartow has been represented by the Froelick Gallery in Portland, Oregon. Froelick Gallery has organized a new retrospective exhibition, “Things You Know But Cannot Explain,” on tour through 2019. Lopez paid handsome tribute to Rick Bartow in the 2013 essay “Landscapes of the Shamans,” in which he asserts:

To my mind, contemporary Native American art calls out to artists to explore the nonhuman further, to work the boundary between animals and humans, and to promote discussion of which ethics now apply here, in this liminal landscape of the shaman. Among the many inspiring contemporary Native American artists conceptualizing in this area, I think right away of the Wiyot painter and carver Rick Bartow (40).

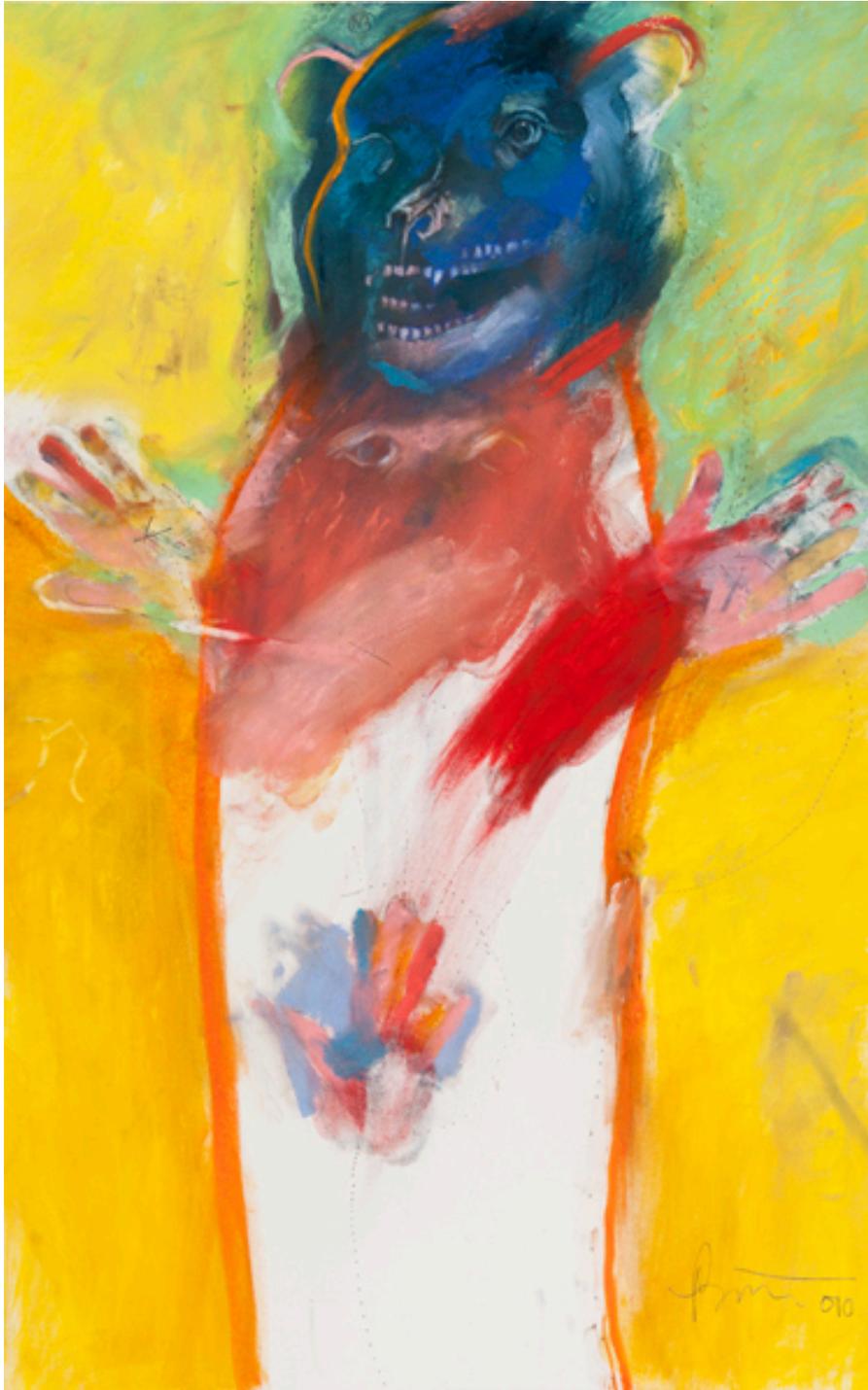
These are the ideas I want to explore today, working the boundary between animals and humans, and promoting discussion of what kind of ethics now apply along that boundary. As Bartow's paintings show, the boundary is permeable. The porous dividing line between animals and humans appears again and again in these recent paintings of bears.



Rick Bartow, *Bear with Two Crosses*.

“Bear with Two Crosses”

This image gives a face of a bear, but the face strongly resembles that of a human being. The face emerges from the white space of the body, which also resembles a human shape. The background seems to be a night sky with smears of stars, but the two crosses on either side of the figure suggest a human sign.



“Bear Chant” is a delightfully colorful work of pastel and graphite from 2010. Again we see a bright head of a bear, with a detailed face, and again there are strong elements of the human. The hands and blank body, for sure, and also that hand lying in the unspecified groin area. Within the chest of the figure, we see another face. Is it a bear’s face? So it seems. But why is it the color of human flesh, like the hands?

Rick Bartow, *Bear Chant*, 2010 pastel, graphite on paper.

“Bear Heart” uses acrylic paint to give a sense of transparency, as if we could see inside the body of the figure. To me the face, as distorted as it may be, looks like a black bear, and the clear body resembles a human woman’s body. The heart is perfectly located



for a human being, and the lines suggest a woman’s breasts.



Rick Bartow, *Bear Mother*, 2013 acrylic on canvas.

“Bear Mother” is also in acrylic, and again we find Bartow working the boundary between animals and humans. Here the body is more defined, with colorful legs, arms, hands, and womb. There is a hammer across the right arm, maybe a tribute to tools and technology, but maybe also a sign that humans are not the only animals who make and use tools. The expression on the face is perhaps undefinable, but for me it seems quite mild, even peaceful. The body is

complex in its brushwork, and there's a lot in it I can't really say much about, including the X in the center of the chest.

"Myth/Origin" is another pastel and graphite work from 2012. I show this because you



Rick Bartow, *Myth/Origin*, 2013 pastel, graphite on paper (collection of Smith College).

may see a bear in it, or you may not. You may see two bears, or you may not. The figures blend together, don't they? They cross boundaries and make our divisions into fictions.

By my count, that makes six bears, maybe more. Here are six more bears. Well, here are six texts by Barry Lopez in which bears figure prominently. I've listed them in reverse chronological order, running from the recent essay "The Invitation" all the way back to *Arctic Dreams*. The figure of the bear appears so often, and in such complex ways, that it would reward much further research and reflection than I can give today. I may be able to say a word or two about all six texts, but mainly I want to focus on the first two in the list, "The Invitation"

and the short story “The Bear in the Road.” My goal is simply to follow the lead from “Landscapes of the Shamans”: “to explore the nonhuman further, to work the boundary between animals and humans, and to promote discussion of which ethics now apply here, in this liminal landscape of the shaman.”

“The Invitation” is a short essay about experiencing landscapes while traveling in the company of indigenous people. In some ways we might think of the essay as a summation of lessons learned in Lopez’s lifetime of traveling through such places with native people. But I think it is also more than that. Lopez ponders what these experiences have taught him, but some of the insights strike me as really quite new in his thinking. First of all, however, we get an example:

If my companions and I ... encountered a grizzly bear feeding on a caribou carcass, I would tend to focus almost exclusively on the bear. My companions would focus on the part of the world of which, at that moment, the bear was only a fragment. The bear here might be compared with a bonfire, a kind of incandescence that throws light on everything around it. My companions would glance off into the outer reaches of that light, then look back to the fire, back and forth. They would repeatedly situate the smaller thing within the larger thing, back and forth. As they noticed trace odors in the air, or listened for birdsong or the sound of brittle brush rattling, they in effect extended the moment of encounter with the bear backward and forward in time. Their framework for the phenomenon, one that I might later shorten just to ‘meeting the bear’, was more voluminous than mine; and where my temporal boundaries for the event would normally consist of little more than the moments of the encounter itself, theirs included the time before we arrived, as well as the time after we left. For me, the bear was a noun, the subject of a sentence; for them it was a verb, the gerund ‘bearing’. (13-14)

As in Rick Bartow’s paintings, we are working across boundaries. In this case, the most obvious boundary is temporal. The narrator focuses on the “now,” the present moment of the experience. The Native companions move across such boundaries, back and forth, from the moment to the

before and after, from the actions and sensations of the bear feeding on a caribou carcass to trace odors, birdsongs, sounds of brush rattling. The experience becomes more capacious than a single moment because the limits are expanded. Likewise, the bear becomes more than a singular noun, more than a single animal. It becomes a series of actions, a flowing of verbs. Figuratively, the bear is also a bonfire, luminous, an incandescence. That metaphor suggests the wonder of seeing a grizzly bear in the wild, in action, undisturbed by human presence. It also suggests the blinding heat of the moment.

As Lopez reflects more deeply on his years traveling cross-country with indigenous people, he formulates three lessons. First, any event is always “*unfolding*,” in that sense of experiencing the bear as a process or verb. Second, the event unfolds both in time and in space, going beyond the arbitrary limits of physical geography in the present moment. In terms of the grizzly bear, Lopez summarizes his tendencies as “cataloging in my mind as ‘encounter with a tundra grizzly,’” giving a specific set of words and meanings to the event. By contrast, the Native companions experience the event “as a sudden immersion in the current of a river . . . swimming in it, feeling its pull, noting the temperature of the water, the back eddies, and where the side streams in contrast. My approach . . . was mostly to take note of objects in the scene—the bear, the caribou, the tundra vegetation. A series of dots, which I would try to make sense of by connecting them all with a single line. My friends had situated themselves within a dynamic event.” The quality of immersion means that there may be many possible connections between a tundra grizzly and the entire physical geography of the place; even naming the grizzly is already problematic, like naming a river current you are suddenly swimming in.

Third, Lopez learns to pay attention to what his body knows, rather than rush to what his mind can formulate in language. The prolonged physical intimacy with a place involves details

that the body gathers over time and space, through complex, concrete experiences that may evade direct, precise definition in words. By exercising patience, we give ourselves the opportunity to experience events in an intimate complexity. And by refreshing our sense of physical intimacy with a place, by feeling ourselves within the place and its “unplumbable complexity of patterns,” we learn that we are not alone in the world, and that the world is full of meanings: “The effort to know a place deeply is, ultimately, an expression of the human desire to belong, to fit somewhere.” This means that the place exercises a healthy influence on us through our physical intimacy with it.

Rather than summarize these lessons of close, patient, attentive observation with all the senses, I suggest that we listen to the end of the essay:

A grizzly bear stripping fruit from blackberry vines in a thicket is more than a bear stripping fruit from blackberry vines in a thicket. It is a point of entry into a world most of us have turned our backs on in an effort to go somewhere else, believing we’ll be better off just *thinking* about a grizzly bear stripping fruit from blackberry vines in a thicket.

The moment is an invitation, and the bear’s invitation to participate is offered, without prejudice, to anyone passing by.

At the end of the essay we pass another boundary. It is not simply that we can observe grizzly bears better, understand them better in their natural context, or feel more healthy pleasure in experiencing the place. ***It is that we can return to an experience that is more like the experience the grizzly bear is having.*** The point is that the limit between human experience and animal experience is not fixed in the stars. We may live mostly in our minds, shaping our experience through our articulate thinking, but we can also turn around and enter the thicket of experience. That is the grizzly bear’s invitation. And as Rick Bartow puts it, these are things we know but cannot explain.

The ideas of “The Invitation” appear in earlier essays and stories by Barry Lopez, but I don’t think I’ve ever found them so deeply and clearly adumbrated as they are in this recent essay. Many of you have heard me talk about the essay “Landscape and Narrative” and the story “Lessons from the Wolverine,” for example, and some of the ideas in those pieces come out in “The Invitation.” Moreover, many of you will immediately be thinking of the chapter “Tornarssuk” in *Arctic Dreams* and the essay “Learning to See” in *Crossing Open Ground* and reprinted in *Vintage Lopez*. All of these works are concerned with the sense of physical intimacy with a place, the possibilities of encountering animals in ways that open us up to the landscape, and the idea that such experiences can create an intimate reciprocity between ourselves and the landscape. This reciprocity of knowing and being known is another way of working the boundary between animals and humans.

In “Learning to See” and “Tornarssuk,” this sense of place raises ethical questions. The polar bear that a team of field researchers encounter in the pack ice of the Chukchi Sea hisses at the men in irritation at being followed, but the bear in fact issues a warning to Lopez as a writer. The encounter is a gift, and Lopez figures the bear as in effect grabbing him by the shirtfront and saying, “Think about this. Think about what these cameras in your hands are doing.” As Lopez says, the gift continues for many years, for at the time of writing “Learning to See,” at least fifteen years later, he was still thinking about it. The essay traces several aspects of the gift and Lopez’s considered response to it. My inadequate summary is that much of the experience has to do with how best to pay attention and to make the accurately remembered details of an experience into a meaningful order through storytelling.

Many of you will recall that the chapter “Tornarssuk” opens with this same story of the adolescent polar bear in the Chukchi Sea, but it ends with the researchers stopping their pursuit

of the bear, allowing him to go about his business. And for this “young and successful hunter, at home in his home,” the business is to find the seals. You may also recall the final scene of the chapter, which takes place on the sea ice of Lancaster Sound in May. Two polar bear biologists dart a female in order to measure and radio collar her. Lopez approaches her closely and then, uncomfortable with the way the animal is being handled, backs away to sit on a slab of broken sea ice:

As I sat there my companions rolled the unconscious bear over on her back and I saw a trace of pink in the white fur between her legs. The lips of her vulva were swollen. Her genitalia were in size and shape like a woman’s. I looked away. I felt I had invaded her privacy.

For the remainder of the day I could not rid myself of this image of vulnerability.

Here the boundary between bear and human seems necessary to protect the bear’s integrity and privacy. Not every invitation means, “Step right in!” The invitation may be to a deeper sense of wonder, a renewed respect for the individual and the species, the intimacy that gives rise to care and love. These are ethical concerns of a writer who travels with indigenous hunters and field biologists, and the writings make them our ethical concerns as well.

I’ll briefly add to the list of gifts and invitations. Both the short story “Pulling Wire” and the essay “The Near Woods” tell of an encounter with a bear, and both work the boundary. In “Pulling Wire,” there is a surprising sense of solidarity and reciprocity between the protagonist, his dog, and a black bear. The bear delivers a significant gift at the very end of the story, somewhat comic in the way it clanks on the man’s truck bed. But the deeper gift is the way all three characters gaze from a logging clearing at dusk, “into the deepening bowl of the cooling night, until the man could not see the bear anymore. When they stood to leave, they were sure the animal was gone.”

In “The Near Woods,” on the other hand, a bear comes into the yard and destroys a storage shed. This bear delivers a warning gift, like the polar bear in the Chukchi Sea. These near woods, where the narrator lives, form an often crowded, noisy meeting ground between humans and wild animals. The near woods define a place between towns or settlements and the deep woods. The near woods are marked by roads, trucks, passenger jets, and logging clearings. If the bear is representing the landscape in letting the narrator know that he is known, the sense of reciprocity comes without solidarity, at least for now. There is even some violence, and likely there is fear. So in “The Near Woods” the porous boundary raises visceral questions. But then that is also a form of reciprocity. Like the grizzly bear feeding on a caribou carcass, the questions are part of an unfolding event, a story that is still being told.

This sense of an unfolding story brings me to “The Bear in the Road,” in the collection *Resistance*. The nine stories in *Resistance* present a community of intellectuals and artists who are not political activists but who bear witness to acts of integrity, memory, and value. All nine narrators face the power and control of the United States government, and all of them decide to leave their present situation in order to resist the government’s intrusions on their work. The book is accompanied by nine of Alan Magee’s haunting monotype prints of faces. The images and stories present us with people who collectively resist threats of social and political conformity. The image that leads “The Bear in the Road” is “The Animals,” and the image that follows it is “Spirit.” It bears noting that the two are remarkably similar, a point that “The Bear in the Road” makes as well.

The narrator of “The Bear in the Road” is Edward Larmirande, a member of the Métis Nation Council and a lawyer educated in eastern universities. At the time of the story, Edward is twenty-nine years old, having returned some three years earlier to live in Havre, Montana, near

the Canadian border. He narrates the story from at least six years later, just as he prepares to leave Winnipeg, Manitoba. As an attorney, he represents the treaty rights of Native American tribes from the Fort Belknap, Rocky Boy, and Fort Peck reservations in northeastern Montana. He is building a life with his wife Jill in his home place. But Edward Larmirande is not at home. He is pursued by a grizzly bear.

Edward's closest friend is Virgil Night Crow, an Assinoboine elder who in effect is Edward's grandfather and spiritual guide. Over the course of the story, Virgil sets Edward on a vision quest, the first time when Edward is fifteen years old. That first attempt ends in failure, and at first it is not clear why. In the first episode of the story, for instance, the adult Edward is riding a buckskin horse across the land, looking for a lone black bear cub that he and Virgil had seen the day before. As Edward describes the way he experiences the landscape, and he seems remarkably attuned to the place:

Whenever I studied the country around Virgil's like this, searching hard for something or hopeful of some opening, I'd feel the mind's language, the naming and analyzing of detail, slipping away from me. I'd feel again the wordless kinship I'd known with Virgil in my boyhood. It was an elusive and elevated physical sense of being present in the world. It chagrined me now, later in life, that I did not act on it then, that I was content to remain an observer despite the repeated invitation this sensation offered.

This passage registers Edward's recognition of the kind of invitation Barry Lopez describes in his essay "The Invitation," but he is only partly able to enter the experiences he seeks. By the time he rides back to Virgil's home, he has lost the elevated physical sense and is beset by "thoughts of another life pressing in on me." He doesn't find any trace of the bear cub, and in fact the whole landscape seems to him to be "emptied out."

The second attempt at a vision quest comes as a result of three encounters with grizzly bears. The first is the most detailed and gives the short story its title. Driving home from Virgil's place one night, twenty-six-year-old Edward runs off the road to avoid hitting a bear. He exits the truck with a rifle, and the bear is only "two hundred feet away, still standing the same place on the two-lane macadam, a shadow in the lesser darkness with his shoulders against the sky. No one in fifty years, I guessed, had seen a plains grizzly in northeastern Montana. The bear did not move but faded, it and the night becoming one darkness." Two years later, another grizzly bear tears the front screen door off Edward's place. Then, camping with Jill the next fall, Edward finds grizzly tracks all around their tent. Virgil tells Edward that the bear is "trying to get your attention, I guess," and that Edward should "pay attention." Virgil's answer is to take Edward back to the place of his first vision quest.

Edward's return to the place of his vision quest, at the confluence of Willow Creek and Porcupine Creeks, is marked by conflict. While he struggles to understand the bear's pursuit, Edward feels "no burning need to rearrange my life to accommodate the bear. What I wanted was an explanation, a direction to head." Explanation is exactly the wrong direction. As Edward rides his horse toward the two creeks, he sees a herd of a hundred pronghorn antelope grazing. A hundred pronghorns. But he seems to find nothing remarkable in the abundance of animals or their lack of alarm at his presence. Likewise, a badger shows no alarm when he stumbles upon her new den. Fifty feet away, a coyote is standing in the brush. Both animals fix him with a stare, and the coyote raises "hairs in the runnel of [Edward's] spine." But even though the animals make Edward "more alert and hopeful," he is unable to enter fully into the landscape and the experience. Over the course of two days and nights, Edward realizes that he is on the boundary between two landscapes:

On one side was this high plains country I lay in, resilient and uncapturable. In all the years I'd ridden through it, across its hills and dry watercourses, first as a boy and then as a man, it had seemed on the verge of an offering, a pronouncement. If I would but give in to it, it would speak. On the other side were what I might call the impulses of reason, the temptation to figure out every problem—personal, social, financial—the seduction behind the belief that one could engineer a solution.

The reader can recognize where Edward Larmirande is lying, what border he is working. But Edward allows himself to feel slighted, rankled, and resentful. His mind moves to what he calls “the Great Burden, the weird combination of oppression and challenge which grows out of knowing the incompetence of the powerful.” That is, he retreats from his body into his mind, he leaves the place of vision in northeastern Montana and retreats to thoughts of work waiting to be done all over the world.

Edward's retreat into the mind leads him to stop his vision quest after the second night, but it is not a complete failure. The thoughts he has during that second night run to his friends from college and law school, to the work they do over the whole world, and to a persistent faith that pursues them. “Many of us can't see beyond the boundaries of our own difficulties,” he thinks, “We're like a tribe of naked people caught suddenly in a freezing climate, men and women gathered in some sheltered hollow who have located a fire, and now spend their time in forays over a barren land scrounging for wood.” Edward keeps the faith, if barely, despite the view he has of the barren land. “What holds me,” he says, “is the faith of others. What has troubled me is the exhaustion that overtakes me, the way I want no longer to be responsible.”

Virgil meets Edward and his questions with a tone “as close as he ever came to exasperation.” For Virgil, the landscape is not barren, and the animals like plains grizzlies are not that rare. “You get to believing they're hunted out or starved out, or maybe they've run off, but as long as people are telling stories about them, as long as people keep them in their minds,

they'll stay around. You have to keep telling the stories, though, calling up the memory of them. They come back in your dreams at night. They come along when you're off somewhere, walking by yourself. They're asking you why. That's their question. Why." When Edward seems even less perceptive than before, Virgil states it one more time: "The bear is coming to you because you say you want to help, and it's you he's asking why. He's speaking for all of them out there, every animal. Why are you trying to kill me?"

As frustrated as we readers may become with Edward and his legalistic, rational mind, he is surely like most of us in protesting, "It's not me." Like Edward, we are all implicated in the bear's question. For all of us, animals and humans, the bear is asking the question. Nor is this simply a question of conflict between humans and animals. Virgil speaks again, trying to clarify the place Edward has been visiting. "That little place up there, the divide between the creeks, seems empty of spirit to you, but it isn't. You're afraid. One day I hope you go back. Maybe something will be waiting for you." Edward protests that he's doing the best he can, and Virgil replies, "The bear's holding the door open A very patient animal."

How it happens, we never really know, but Edward Larmirande tells us at the end of the short story that he does return to the place of vision six years later, and he stays in the same camp on the same divide between the creeks. Finally, he tells us, "the voices that had so long debated the future within me grew silent, and I stepped through the door."

Like other stories in *Resistance*, "The Bear in the Road" ends with a mixture of resolution and suspension. From the note at the end of the story we know that Edward Larmirande goes on to live in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and that he authors a book titled *The Numinous Experience and the Suicide of Meriwether Lewis*. But how he learns to hear the bear's question and how he learns to answer it are stories we are not told.

There may be a clue in the book Edward Larmirande writes. I'm sure many of you know about the mystery of Meriwether Lewis's death in a Tennessee tavern in 1809. He may have been murdered, or he may have killed himself. He was traveling to Washington, to try to recoup financial losses he had incurred as Governor of the Upper Louisiana Territory. He was a brilliant, intensely difficult, and often depressed man. He was also, as the Journals of Lewis and Clark show, a gifted explorer and naturalist. With the steady and laconic William Clark as his co-commander of the Corps of Discovery, Lewis explored the high plains of northeastern Montana for several weeks during the 28-month expedition of May 1804 to September 1806. The expedition was military, imperialistic, commercial, and friendly but paternalistic toward Native American groups met along the way to the Pacific Ocean. The Corps of Discovery could easily become the fictionalized Department of Inland Security that pursues the artists and intellectuals in Lopez's *Resistance*.

I suspect that Lewis was like his patron Thomas Jefferson, a person who put his faith in reason and science, in the engineering of solutions. The Journals show that he was keen to use the latest scientific instruments on the expedition, and his maps and observations reveal a very sharp eye for details of landscape, vegetation, and wildlife. Sometimes Lewis is capable of appreciating the beauty of the country he travels through, describing it in learned Enlightenment aesthetic terms of the sublime and the beautiful. At the same time, however, Lewis always seems alone.

Lewis was walking alone on June 14, 1805, some 12 miles ahead of the main party, near the confluence of the Medicine River and Missouri River. He came upon a herd of at least a thousand buffalo and decided to kill one and leave it for his return from exploring the Medicine River. "I selected a fat buffalo," he writes, and shot him very well, through the lungs. While I

was gazing attentively on the poor animal discharging blood in streams from his mouth and nostrils, expecting him to fall every instant, and having entirely forgotten to reload my rifle, a large white, or rather brown bear, had perceived and crept on me within 20 steps before I discovered him.” At first Lewis thought to shoot the grizzly, but he realized he was not loaded, so he began to retreat at a brisk walk, hoping to cross the open plain and reach a tree some 300 yards away. The bear suddenly pitched at him, as he writes, “open mouthed and at full speed.” Lewis ran to the bank of the river and jumped into the water, at about waist deep, and faced about to the bear, pointing his espartoon (a kind of spear/gun rest) at the animal. The bear was 20 feet away from him. But, says Lewis, “The moment I put myself in this attitude of defense he suddenly wheeled about as if frightened, declined the combat on such unequal grounds, and retreated with quite as great precipitation as he had just before pursued me. As soon as I saw him run off in that manner I returned to the shore and charged my gun, which I had still retained in my hand throughout this curious adventure. I saw him run through the level open plain about three miles till he disappeared in the woods on Medicine River. . . . The cause of his alarm still remains with me mysterious and unaccountable.”

Within an hour, Lewis came upon a large, aggressive wolverine and was then charged by three bull buffalo running full speed at him. “It now seemed to me that all the beasts of the neighborhood had made a league to destroy me,” he writes. As he returned past the buffalo he had killed, he decided not to stop there that night, for the place “really from the succession of curious adventures wore the impression on my mind of enchantment. At some times for a moment I thought it might be a dream, but the prickly pears which pierced my feet very severely once in a while, particularly after it grew dark, convinced me that I was really awake and that it was necessary to make the best of my way to camp.”

The grizzly bear, the wolverine, and the three bull buffalo are asking Lewis the question, “Why? Why are you trying to kill us?” And Lewis doesn’t seem capable of hearing them, much less answering them.

Some 200 years later, in the same country, the same neighborhood, Edward Larmirande hears the bear’s invitation. Maybe the invitation might sound something like this:

Pay attention.

Practice patience.

Listen to sounds and silences.

Immerse yourself inside the flowing world.

Stay inside your body, and when you need to, come back inside it.

Be intimate with a place, and find its stories.

Let the stories unfold in their own time and in their own space.

Keep the faith. Your own, and that of others.

All images courtesy of Froelick Gallery, Portland, Oregon

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