



## Crossing Open Ground

*Barry López*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# Crossing Open Ground

*Barry López*

## Crossing Open Ground Barry López

The author travels through the American Southwest and Alaska, discussing endangered wildlife and forgotten cultures.

## Crossing Open Ground Details

Date : Published May 14th 1989 by Vintage (first published 1988)

ISBN : 9780679721833

Author : Barry López

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Environment, Nature, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Travel, Science, Natural History

 [Download Crossing Open Ground ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Crossing Open Ground ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Crossing Open Ground Barry López**

---

## From Reader Review Crossing Open Ground for online ebook

### Lauren says

*"One learns the landscape not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it."*

#### *Caribou crossing - Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*

I didn't really doubt it, but I was happy that Lopez's lyrical writing and mood continued into his essays, having only read his creative short fiction to date. There were many strong essays, but the one that stuck with me the most may have been "Landscape and Narrative", quoted here. Lopez shares stories from his travels and expeditions with scientists in the Arctic, archaeologists in the southwest, and shares memories of people who helped shape the person he is today.

The words in some of these essays have stayed with me over the days since I read it... and this may precipitate a purchase of my own copy, to come back to again and again.

---

### Cheryl says

The first day I moved to San Francisco, I went to Ocean Beach for an afternoon walk on a bright and sunny day, and I fell in love immediately. I loved that the name of the beach was simply, Ocean Beach and I loved the waves and the colors and scents and sounds and how close I lived to the ocean (about 2 miles). I don't remember how long I walked before I reached a crowd of people around a beached whale that had washed ashore and been stranded. I remember thinking, like Annie Dillard, "this is a great place to live, there's a lot to think about." I was stunned at the size of it and the smell was too much for me, so I spent less time that I wished I had looking at it. It was partially roped off and there was no one trying to touch it or bother it; they were waiting to bury it. I didn't know why they couldn't save it, and I was saddened. I have spent a lot of time along the shoreline since then and have never seen such a sight again. It was before smart phones with cameras, and I am glad and sad at the same time. I think it would have been an important lesson to look at from time to time, about the fragility of life, the capriciousness of tides, how "bad" exists with "good", death in Eden, and how small my life is compared to a whale.

Barry Lopez, a living god of nature writing, stunned me with the story of forty-one stranded sperm whales on the coast of Oregon in "A Presentation of Whales." Imagine my experience above multiplied x 41. It boggles the mind, it has to. All that life lost. It advanced scientific knowledge a hundred-fold they said; they said again, there was no way to save the whales even if local boats had been willing to try and they weren't. The difference was that the whales were still alive, some were, and there was the dilemma of whether to euthanize or even how to since science knew so little of the sperm whale, they didn't know how. He wrote a detailed, succinct journalistic piece about it but remarked, "As far as I know, no novelist, no historian, no moral philosopher, no scholar of Melville, no rabbi, no painter, no theologian, had been on the beach." The account that could have been made of this surreal, holy moment, by a poet perhaps, watching these gargantuan creatures blink their eyes, track all movement, breath every 15 minutes, flapping their fins and vibrating the earth, making clicking noises, as they died. I wonder if I could have stood it; it is the

quintessential Dillard “gap” where the holy light streams down, if you can bear it. One scientist *“put his face near the blowhole of one of the whales: a cylinder of clean, warm, humid air almost a foot in diameter blew back his hair.”*

*“Imagine a forty-five-year-old male fifty feet long, a slim, shiny black animal cutting the surface of green ocean water at twenty knots. At fifty tons it is the largest carnivore on earth. Imagine a four-hundred-pound heart the size of a chest of drawers driving five gallons of blood at a stroke through its aorta; a meal of forty salmon moving slowly down twelve-hundred feet of intestine...the sperm whale’s brain is larger than the brain of any other creature that ever lived...With skin as sensitive as the inside of your wrist.”* Yes, imagine this magnificent creature alive, watching you. They weren’t able to determine exactly how the stranding happened, but they were near a river that might have been leaking toxins (it was the 1980’s) or there was extremely loud machinery in the water that might have interfered with their echolocation and even sanity. The essay also highlights the best and worst of human nature, and again underscores the point I recently reread in Wallace Stegner’s *All the Little Live Things*, “where you find the greatest good, you will find the greatest evil, because Evil loves Paradise as much as Good.”

There’s more in this collection of essays. Much more. Lopez writes powerfully. Critics say, **“he makes the reader at home with himself and the world. Anyone who has ever felt lost should read this book.”** Another says, **“Lopez looks at flocks of geese...and the tracks of Arctic fox in the snow, and then he tells us about ourselves.”**

More. “Gone Back into the Earth” tells of a trip down the Colorado River through Grand Canyon, and is the perfect example of a trip that changed him. I always want to ask people, what surprised you about a trip they just returned from, what felt like home, what challenged you, what changed you? Some look at me strangely, and try to answer, but I love the idea that any foray into the world has the power to change you if you are open to it. *“Occasionally we glimpse the South Rim, four or five thousand feet above. From the rims the canyon seems oceanic; at the surface of the river the feeling is intimate. To someone up there with binoculars we seem utterly remote down here. It is this known dimension of distance and time and the perplexing question posed by the canyon itself- What is consequential? (in one’s life, in the life of human beings, in the life of a planet)- that reverberate constantly, and make the human inclination to judge (another person, another kind of thought) seem so eerie... Two kinds of time pass here: sitting at the edge of a sun-warmed pool watching blue dragonflies and black tadpoles. And the rapids: down the glassy-smooth tongue into a yawning trench, climb a ten-foot wall of standing water and fall into boiling, ferocious hydraulics...”*

***“I feel that my fingers have brushed one of life’s deep, coursing threads...Speak, even notice it, and it would disappear.”***

*“I had come to the canyon with expectations. I wanted to see snowy egrets flying against the black schist at dusk; I saw blue-winged teal against the green waters at dawn. I had wanted to hear thunder rolling in the thousand-foot depths; I heard the guttural caw of four ravens...what any of us had come to see or do fell away. We found ourselves at each turn with what we had not imagined.”*

*“A thought that stayed with me was that I had entered a private place in the earth. I had seen exposed nearly its oldest part. I had lost my sense of urgency, rekindled a sense of what people were, clambering to gain access to high waterfalls and a sense of our endless struggle as a species to understand time and to estimate the consequences of our acts.”*

*“I do not know, really, how we will survive without places like the Inner Gorge of the Grand Canyon to visit. Once in a lifetime, even, is enough. To feel the stripping down, an ebb of the press of conventional time, a radical change of proportion, an unspoken respect for others that elicits keen emotional pleasure, a quick intimate pounding of the heart.”*

*“The living of life, any life, involves great and private pain, much of which we share with no one. In such places as the Inner Gorge the pain trails away from us. It is not so quiet there or so removed that you can hear yourself think, that you would even wish to; that comes later. You can hear your heart beat. That comes first.”*

More and more. “Landscape and Narrative” speaks of how storytelling connects us as humans and also how it leads us to being more fully ourselves. *“I think of two landscapes- one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape is the one we see-not only the line and color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology... If you walk up, say, a dry arroyo in the Sonoran Desert you will feel a mounding and rolling of sand and silt beneath your foot that is distinctive. You will anticipate the crumbling of the sedimentary earth in the arroyo bank as your hand reaches out, and in that tangible evidence you will sense the history of water in the region. Perhaps a black-throated sparrow lands in a paloverde bush... the smell of the creosote bush....all elements of the land, and what I mean by “the landscape.” The second landscape I think of is an interior one, a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape. Relationships in the exterior landscape include those that are named and discernible, such as the nitrogen cycle, or a vertical sequence of Ordovician limestone, and others that are uncodified or ineffable, such as winter light falling on a particular kind of granite, or the effect of humidity on the frequency of a blackpoll warbler’s burst of song....the shape and character of these relationships in a person’s thinking, I believe, are deeply influenced by where on this earth one goes, what one touches, the patterns one observes in nature- the intricate history of one’s life in the land, even a life in the city, where wind, the chirp of birds, the line of a falling leaf, are known. These thoughts are arranged, further, according to the thread of one’s moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; **the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes.**”*

*“Among the Navajo, the land is thought to exhibit sacred order...each individual undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the exterior landscape. To succeed in this means to achieve a balanced state of mental health...Among the various sung ceremonies of this people-Enemyway, Coyoteway, Uglyway- there is one called Beautyway. It is, in part, a spiritual invocation of the order of the exterior universe, that irreducible, holy complexity that manifests itself as all things changing through time (a Navajo definition of beauty).”*

---

## Tess says

Barry Lopez has a new fan here. Beautiful, thought-provoking nature writing.

The essay about the beached whales in "A Presentation of Whales" brought me to tears.

I particularly loved "Landscape and Narrative". There are so many excellent passages in this section, but here's just one:

*"This feeling, an inexplicable renewal of enthusiasm after storytelling, is familiar to many people. It does not seem to matter greatly what the subject is, as long as the context is intimate and the story is told for its own sake, not forced to serve merely as the vehicle for an idea. The tone of the story need not be solemn. The darker aspects of life need not be ignored. But I think intimacy is indispensable - a feeling that derives from the listener's trust and a storyteller's certain knowledge of his subject and regard for his audience. This intimacy deepens if the storyteller tempers his authority with humility, or when terms of idiomatic expression, or at least the physical setting for the story, are shared."*

\*\*\*

"Gone Back into the Earth" about his trip water rafting the Colorado through the Grand Canyon with Paul Winter has left an indelible picture in my mind and I'd love to listen to the music Paul Winter recorded during that trip.

"A Reflection on White Geese" is beautifully descriptive, but also tackles the problem of disappearing wetlands as humans drain and build upon them. This essay was written back in October 1982. The draining of wetlands has gone on unabated since then and I mourn their loss.

---

### **Adam says**

As an collection of journalistic pieces and essays, Crossing Open Ground is slightly less consistent in its overwhelming awe than Lopez' other works. His earlier, more explicitly journalistic pieces seem less impressive than the later works, which tend to be the ones that spend more time drawing connections and pondering. There are several of the latter kind of work in this collection, and they are all gems among the accumulated sediment of modern thinking about the human place in nature. Essays like "Landscape and Narrative" and "The Passing Wisdom of Birds" stand out; "Children in the Woods," "Searching for Ancestors," and "Yukon-Charley" are nearly as crucial. Barry Lopez has two incredible gifts as an intellectual writing about his particularly important topic. His abilities as a prose stylist, informed by wide and deep reading and aided by an apparent habit of thoughtful revision, convey his message in deeply resonant language. His message, his peculiar perspective, is of course what makes the resonance stick. His viewpoint is deeply radical without being ideological or narrow. It embraces the dignity of so much of human lives while acknowledging the tragedy of so much of modern industrial life. He's the best. Between himself, Derrick Jensen, and David Abram, you're probably set on getting a great modern perspective on environmental issues.

---

### **Paul says**

Lopez has shown me an entire universe in a stone, a creation as large as the earth in a grain of sand. Some phenomena are too complex for me to understand through direct observation; but I can understand them through analogy. This is what Lopez has done for me in Crossing Open Ground. I met Lopez a few years ago, and in the process of our brief interaction, we both brought something of great worth to that place. We both walked away with a greater capacity to observe and understand.

---

### **Michael says**

Outstanding set of 14 essays that help the reader experience special places and people in the Northwest, Arctic, and desert Southwest and the meaning of the individual's place in nature. Lopez renders a rich feast of first-person experience balanced with effective coverage of the historical and cultural context and enlightening reflections on the spiritual and ecological implications of his topics. This is achieved with a remarkable economy and precision in his prose. Of course I want more of each story, which is why I am often pained by short stories, poetry, and essays; but the pleasure of these short pieces resonate in the same way a still pond ripples after a pebble is tossed in. I can look forward to "Arctic Dreams" for a longer visit in his mind. No simple tree-hugger or nirvana preacher, he gently nudges the reader toward a commitment to respecting and participating in the wonders of life on Earth and consideration of adapting approaches used by indigenous cultures.

## Kevin says

this guy has soil.

("soul" autocorrected to "soil" and that seems appropriate)

---

## jeremy says

the great barry lopez composes prose as rich and sustaining as the landscapes he so effortlessly considers. *crossing open ground* collects fourteen essays, written during the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s, that were printed previously in a wide array of publications including harper's, outside, wilderness, orion nature quarterly, and notre dame magazine. as one of our eminent nature writers, lopez travels throughout the west to explore the great abundance and diversity of some of our nation's most pristine settings. lopez's writing seamlessly blends science, philosophy, and history in a first-person narrative that is as beautifully crafted as it is insightful and inspiring.

the essays contained within *crossing open ground* vary greatly in theme and subject, though lopez's abiding humility before the brilliance of the natural world is evident throughout. among the collection's strongest pieces are "a presentation of whales" (about the mass beaching of 41 sperm whales on the oregon coast in 1979), "the passing wisdom of birds" (recalling the senseless mass destruction cortés wrought upon the resplendent avian populations of tenochtitlan in 1520), "grown men" (a touching tribute to three mentor-like friends), "searching for ancestors" (about the vanished anasazi), "landscape and narrative" (regarding the intersection of storytelling and nature), and "a reflection on white geese" (about the large number of visiting bird populations on tule lake in northern california). without a single extraneous essay, *crossing open ground* aptly exemplifies lopez's literary proficiency and leaves the reader with a lasting sense of awe, wonder, and respect for the natural world.

*as the anasazi had a complicated culture, so have we. we are takers of notes, measurers of stone, examiners of fragments in the dust. we search for order in chaos wherever we go. we worry over what is lost. in our best moments we remember to ask ourselves what it is we are doing, whom we are benefiting by these acts. one of the great dreams of man must be to find some place between the extremes of nature and civilization where it is possible to live without regret.*

~

*beyond this- that the interior landscape is a metaphorical representation of the exterior landscape, that the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony, and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives- beyond this there are only failures of imagination: reductionism in science; fundamentalism in religion; fascism in politics.*

*our national literatures should be important to us insofar as they sustain us with illumination and heal us. they can always do that so long as they are written with respect for both the source and the reader, and with an understanding of why the human heart and the land have been brought together so regularly in human history.*

~

*one learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it- like that between the sparrow and the twig. the difference between the relationships and the elements is the same as that between written history and a catalog of events.*

---

## **Devin says**

Lopez finds strength with intertwining his short stories towards a central idea - humans can find beauty and solace in nature when they coincide with it, treating with respect and as an equal, if not greater than the self. However, when humans interfere with nature, treating it with disrespect, harming animals and the landscape for monetary gain, they cause a pain that echoes throughout all the earth, along with our own ancestry.

In many cases, Lopez is consistently reminded just how small he is, as a human, comparative to the immense beauty that is the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon, standing next to 20-ton sperm whales beached along the Oregon coast, to hordes of congregating snow geese, beyond incredible in their numbers.

It is also interesting to have Lopez's criticism of the Reagan administration in real time, citing the deplorable nature of his "environmental record."

Each essay had its individual strength with its own personal or narrative objective, but these works all worked together towards creating a simple message - get outside, explore and respect nature, feel small in comparison next to it, and find peace within this solace.

---

## **missy jean says**

Looved it. My copy (from the library) has this hand-inscribed note written on the front cover, by who-knows-who: "Read this and you know ME! With love to Uncle James and Aunt Olive." At the end of reading this collection of nature essays, I felt like I knew myself better, and that guy who wrote the note, and everyone else who lives on this planet. Lopez is an amazing writer who really captures the expanse of the earth and what it means about who we are and what we can do.

I am obsessed with the essay "Landscape and Narrative." All you writers, PLEASE try to get your hands on this essay and read it!! It touches on subjects like truth vs. authenticity in writing, the link between settings and characters' internal states, and the fundamental heart of storytelling. SO good.

Other favorite essays: A Reflection on White Geese, Gone Back into the Earth, Yukon-Charley, A Presentation of Whales, Children in the Woods, and The Passing Wisdom of Birds.

---

## **Van says**

I was on the bus and it occurred to me there was a passage about landscape, storytelling and lying that struck me and though I forget the exact quote and won't go back to find it, I am provoked to think about how it is so easy to trust nature and the landscape, that truth and language are not so much an issue or required; that there is no real question posed about being. We do not fear an unfaithfulness in nature's utterances. And further finding myself on the bus reading this, it occurred to me too how safe such an allegiance (to the driver)is. I do not typically think to worry about the reckless acts of others - save for the rare snicker from the back over

my attire or sun-burnt pate. But once the contemporary human begins to orate directly upon us, faith and our footing fail us. We are dragged along upon someone else's tilting, winding path, only hoping not to find ourselves upon a precipice gazing down in a singular lack of togetherness with the ground. We find ourselves in a kind of free-fall without any hope of landing softly; there are only cacti and vultures waiting for the ultimate failure of lingual competence between antagonists. The landscape on the other hand is a truly sound protagonist; there is no doubting it, for it has no intention but acts as it will, as it must and we can be comforted all along as we are nearly swept off the earth at the same time by natural disaster or the failing of aging organs...

I have faith that one day I will be taken back into this grand scheme. Therein my true faith resides. Not in human nature, that is, as we have misunderstood it. We choose as we progress, and therefore even reason fails us in this way: being choice at all it goes against nature!

Mr. Lopez has privileged us with a close view of his direct and very personal contact with a landscape I feel I could love were I fortunate enough to be an outdoors person. Such is story telling. A privileged impossibility.

---

### **Kate says**

"Barry Lopez, winner of the 1986 American Book Award for *Arctic Dreams*, weaves the same invigorating spell in *Crossing Open Ground*. Through his crystalline vision, Lopez urges us toward a new attitude, a re-enchantment with the world that is vital to our sense of place, our well-being ...our very survival."

~~back cover

A lovely set of essays, some lyrical and magical, others more practical and down to earth. But every one worth reading, especially *Grown Men*, and *The Passing Wisdom of Birds*, and *The Lives of Seals*.

---

### **Nathan says**

Lopez is a fine writer with an astute eye and ear for the world around us-- and how we often both relate and fail to see it. "Landscape and Narrative," an often anthologized essay, stands out as a particularly insightful look into the story of landscape.

---

### **Sueew2 says**

A book I return to again and again. His reflection on white geese is for anyone who has ever or dreams of, rising early in the morning to simply get out into the natural world...so important in this hurried modern world.

---

### **Kerri Anne says**

So many quality, game-changing books missing from high school and collegiate literature courses. This is one of those books, and is really a collection of nonfiction essays written over a decade (late '70s to late

'80s), still as relevant today, and especially with regard to today's political landscape (trying its best to eradicate our natural landscape), and the precarious state of our wild places.

Rather than tell you how much I enjoyed this book, and how essential it (and books like it) could and should be for our national integrity and environmental policy, I'm going to leave you with two of my favorite passages and hope you'll read the rest:

"The insistence of government and industry, that wilderness values be rendered solely in economic terms, has led to an insidious presumption, that the recreational potential of wild land, not its biological integrity, should be the principal criterion of its worth."

"An argument for wilderness that reaches beyond the valid concerns of multiple-use—recreation, flood control, providing a source of pure water—is that wild lands preserve complex biological relationships that we are only dimly, or sometimes not at all, aware of. Wilderness represents a gene pool, vital for the resiliency of plants and animals. An argument for wilderness that goes deeper still is that we have an ethical obligation to provide animals with a place where they are free from the impingement of civilization. And, further, a historical responsibility to preserve the kind of landscapes from which modern man emerged."

[Five stars for passionate essays of worth and eye-opening importance, and for being, sadly, all too timeless.]

---