

Dancing the River of Grief
Contrition and Compassion in Barry Lopez's River Notes
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I first read *River Notes* during the November darkness of my second year at university. My mother had taken her own life the fall before and my grief took on an inarticulate flavor, one where I found solace in a wordless relationship with the trees and dancing Autumn leaves at Nichols Arboretum, but could not speak of it to the people closest to me. The Huron River knew me, and I it, as I spent hours watching black walnut leaves swirl down its banks into darkness.

Two seasons later, I was hired to work in Labrador. My pack had room for only one book and I took *River Notes*, into which I inscribed Robert Penn Warren's poem 'The Place' over the dedication page. The words "for Sandy" emerged as two rocks anchored in the face of this stream of Penn Warren's words:

This
Is the hour of the unbounded loneliness. This
Is the hour of the self's uncertainty
Of self. This is the hour when
Prayer might be a possibility, if it
Were.

Why this book? Why merge Penn Warren's poem with Lopez's vision? Why was I drawn to them in my darkest hours? Both writers take on the impossible task of giving voice to the wordlessness of grief. Both speak to the encounter of coming to natural places alone searching for language, wisdom, and a way to make sense of an internal pain. Both describe the encounter of the self sacrificing self in the face of nature only to

find no wisdom given by the natural world. Instead, the reader discovers in the trail blazed by these two writers, a path from the wordlessness of grief, to the development of an intimacy, through the reclaiming of voice, ritual, and love. These are works of hope.

Nature provides nothing magical in Lopez's *River Notes*; the characters experience personal transformation based on their own acts of selflessness and love. In locating the agency of change in the individual, Lopez offers all people the opportunity to engage in the healing which comes through being open to the cycles of the world, being open to true intimacy and to learning how to live with the notion that from death comes life, both equally essential. Lopez's river is life, with all of its sufferings and all of its joys. His characters meet the river to learn the dance of dying and living and embrace the flowing nature of a life beyond the confines of the individual. Lopez's river is time, place, story and wordlessness. It is the dance of creation.

While all of the stories in *River Notes* deal either directly or tangentially with these themes, they appear most pointedly in the first person pieces: *Introduction*, *The Search for the Heron*, *The Bend*, *The Shallows*, *Upriver*, and *Drought*. I focus my discussion on these pieces.

River Notes begins quietly, with the narrator's admission of exhaustion. Exhaustion at waiting for the moment when nature, most specifically in this case, the ocean, will reveal some sacred wisdom. The narrator speaks in the voice of the penitent sinner, of learning the beach with such intimacy that when small creatures rearrange the sand, "I must learn this surface over again through the palms of my hands, I do."ⁱ The narrator describes a series of events in which he learns to walk again, dreams he is a salmon, attempts to learn from grains of sand, wind, waves and finally birds. The narrator

describes the act of giving himself away in the hopes that through that act of cleansing he will somehow come to know something better of himself. He says:

I could then examine myself as though I were an empty abalone shell, held up in my own hands, held up to the wind to see what sort of noise I would make. I knew the sound – the sound of fish dreaming, twilight in a still pool downstream of rocks in a mountain river.ⁱⁱ

Lopez's connection to spiritual practice underscores this piece. Humans come to the natural world broken, pained, searching. If they trade hubris for humility, give up the "study of nature" for the posture of bearing witness to wonder, they will be granted salvation. In their salvation they are given the tools to know how to go about living in the world.

In the *Introduction*, which serves as an overture to the book, the narrator gives birds the power of salvation as they offer a route by which the narrator could come to live. He does not ask for birds to forgive him, but his deepest sins are revealed in the context of birds. Initially he writes of them:

I hold in my heart an absolute sorrow for birds, a sorrow so deep that at the first light of day when I shiver like reeds clattering in a fall wind I do not know whether it is from the cold or from this sorrow, whether I am even capable of feeling such kindness. I believe yes, I am. (xi)

Later, he describes a moment of prayer with arms up stretched, head down, a portrait of penance. In that posture, in that moment of humility, a flurry of birds land on his outstretched arms, tearing at him, weighing him down to the ground:

Under them slowly, under heavy eider ducks, beneath the weight of their flapping pleading, I began to go down. I could feel such anguish as must lie unuttered in the hearts of far-ranging birds, the weight of visions draped over their delicate bones. (xi)

As the sinner, now on his knees, driven by the weight of the birds pressing on him, he confesses his sins: he took life, he mocked life, and he failed at honoring death because he did not know how to understand his feelings. This image – the failure to honor death and find beauty in it – serves as the central image of the book as the characters all learn through their encounters with the natural world, to make sense of their continued living in the face of those who have died. Lopez, grieving his own mother's death during the period when *River Notes* was written, gives brief personal insight into the roots of this book when he writes:

The afternoon of the day my mother died I lay on my bed wondering if I would get her small teakwood trunk with the beautiful brass fittings and its silver padlock. I coveted it in cold contradiction to my show of grief. Feeling someone watching I rolled over and through the windows saw sparrows starting at me all explode like buckshot after our eyes met and were gone.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Lopez's philosophy the natural world hold the same emotions as those felt by humans. Birds grieve, orchids feel joy, oceans and men can all feel the desire to weep for what is lost. The narrator's loss at losing is his mother finds parallel force and depth in the sorrow of the ocean. He writes:

I know the last days will be here, where the sun runs into the ocean, and that I will see in a movement of sea birds and hear in the sound of water beating against the earth what I now only imagine, that the ocean has a sadness beyond even the sadness of birds, that in the running into it of rivers is the weeping of the earth for what is lost.^{iv}

The arc of narrative in *River Notes* begins with this encounter with the natural world: the moment when the human believes that a transgression has been observed by the nonhuman which has resulted in loss. Stories center on the narrator's belief that the way to healing may come through the path of reconciliation with the natural world as if

through the investigation of nature a secret knowledge will be revealed. Lopez's natural world does not engage in relationship based in words. Instead, characters are judged worthy through their humility and the strength of actions. Characters come to know the necessity of offering up themselves to the wordlessness of nature as the first step to finding themselves again. In wordlessness they hope to come to know the language of grief and move from aloneness to storied relationship again.

Lopez offers a first step away from the sensation of aloneness is through resonance with the emotional landscape of the natural world. The narrator of the *Introduction* believes that the natural world feels the same depth of grief for loss that he feels. In the expression of his resonance, his aloneness is assuaged as he shares a similar feeling with the ocean. Lopez posits that non-human resonance offers a greater possibility for redemption than what might be found in the human world by providing a wordless vision, and the possibility of the creation of a new story. He writes:

It is to the thought of the river's banks that I most frequently return, their wordless emergence at a headwaters, the control they urge on the direction of the river, mile after mile, and their disappearance here on the beach as the river enters the ocean. It occurs to me that at the very end the river is suddenly abandoned, that just before it's finished the edges disappear completely, that in this moment a whole life is revealed.^v

Lopez ends the *Introduction* with the narrator beginning to live again. Instead of looking to the natural world to offer up the answers to arrive *Deus Ex Natura*, he imbibes the spirit of living in relation with all other beings and carries it within himself. The path out of the wordlessness and shame of grief over the past is through the continuous recreation of relationship forged through compassion. The narrator moves from the ocean's grief to the start of the river which is central to the book's imagery, describing the journey as one

into the landscape of compassion and intimacy, “When you are suddenly overwhelmed with a compassion that staggers you and you begin to run along the bank...you will know a loss of guile and that the journey has begun.”^{vi}

This pattern repeats throughout *River Notes*. Grieving narrators confess their transgressions, sacrifice themselves to the natural world in the hopes of learning and finally becoming transformed through the process to understanding that their very aloneness has been mitigated by their own act of reaching out to the natural world, not a sudden change in nature’s response to them. Lopez locates the agency of healing in the human reaching to the natural world, not in the healing hand of nature reaching expressly to humans. This change in perspective makes this relationship possible. It is one of Lopez’s most hopeful contributions: believing that intimacy is available to any who are willing to quiet themselves, open, listen, connect. His description of the reward for this openness is not a sudden comprehension of “nature’s mysteries” but instead a deeper understanding and acceptance of self in relation with the community of all being expressed as a compassionate way of being.

The second piece, *The Search for the Heron* speaks in the same voice as the *Introduction*. The narrator seeks connection with the heron, a bird he describes as inscrutable, silent, brooding, reticent, a warrior,^{vii} writing:

I watch from a distance. With respect. I think of standing beside you when you have died of your own brooding over the water – as shaken as I would be at the collapse of a cathedral, wincing deep inside as at the screech of an overloaded cart.^{viii}

The narrator’s relationship with the bird becomes one of human relationship with story.

In the absence of story, of language, of confirmation, the human invents a story of its

own. Lopez, writing in later works such as “Landscape and Narrative” in *Crossing Open Ground* speaks to the power of story to mitigate the internal emotional inscape and the external landscape.

A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape. The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all the elements of story – syntax, mood, figures of speech- in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual’s interior. Inherent in story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call “ the land.”^{ix}

Lopez’s narrator of *The Search for the Heron* provides the reader with the structural relationship of the movement from wordlessness to language moving from silence to simile. The narrator, frustrated with the encounter with the heron’s silence, first describes the heron with a range of adjectives. When that has no effect in bringing out a response from the heron, the storied human threatens, “If you will not speak I will have to consider making you up.”^x This is the human desire to name. In this section, the path of naming comes through simile. In the process of engaging in naming, Lopez draws his narrator closer into the natural world, but not the world of descriptive observation, the world of connection and relation.

Your sigh, I am told is like the sound of rain driven against tower bells. You smell like wild ginger...The water hesitates to offend you. You stare down with that great yellow eye, I am told, like some prehistoric rattlesnake: that dangerous, that blinding in your strike, that hate-ridden. (4)

This pathway holds true to the suggestion Lopez makes in “Landscape and Narrative” that, “One learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it.”^{xi}

The narrator moves from the exterior descriptions of the heron to an exploration of its inscape through the vehicle of dreams. Located in the interior space, the narrator discovers the resonant experience of shared grief. Here is the home of the heron's wordlessness:

One dream alone reveals your grief. The trees said you dreamed most often of the wind. You dreamed that you lived somewhere with the wind, with the wind rippling your feathers; and that children were born of this, that they are the movement of water in all the rivers.^{xii}

Grief flows and becomes rivers. Children are born of it. Death and life dance. To bring that point closer to the reader, Lopez describes the dream of the heron as a dance in the center of the heron's community, his grief becoming the very seed of creation. The dream begins in a silence and stillness and moves into a dream of creation, merging mist and light, building in speed and intensity until in its climax, the heron's voice emerges "from deep within your belly came the roar of a cataract, like the howling of wolves – that long moment of your mournful voice."^{xiii}

In this piece Lopez moves the heron from the wildness of the place of grief without language to one who gives birth out of that pain and in voicing that pain, creates new life. The grief-stricken narrator of the *Introduction* who finds only a resonance and kinship with the sorrow of birds and the grief of the oceans, now takes the first step on the way back to connection to the community through the finding of voice. Heron's story, he expresses voice emerging from silence and the restorative power of dance.

I believe we will dance together some day. Before then will I have to have been a trout, bear scars from your stabbing misses and so have some deeper knowledge? Then will we dance?^{xiv}

This narrator hungers to penetrate the heron's silence, and in digging out that information learns the story of the heron's grief: the deaths of daughter and wife. Again drawing the reader's attention to the wordlessness of grief, Lopez writes, "You were young, you had also lost a wife, and you went down to the river and tore out your feathers and wept. The soundlessness of it was what you could not get over."^{xv} Feeling a kinship with the heron, the narrator presses the maple trees for more of the heron's story. When they refuse, the narrator transgresses again, beating the trees with a demand to know more. At the climax he yells, "It is only a bird,"^{xvi} and then recognizes the power of his transgression.

Only in the shame that follows that moment does the narrator begin to comprehend the idea that devouring another's story is not the same as approaching with respect, intimacy, a shared grief. The narrator apologizes and attempts acts of penance, speaking with the wind, the water, bleeding, sleeping on old heron feathers and inhabiting an abandoned nest. Finally, the narrator has a dream where he at last speaks to the heron. As with the *Introduction*, the narrator's lesson is that of learning to live with compassion. To do that, Lopez suggests that the path to compassion involves the embrace and movement past fear. He records the dream of the heron as:

You spoke about the beginning of the world, that there was going to be no fear in the world, that everything that was afraid would live poorly.
The snake said coldly, weaving, yes, there would be fear, that fear would make everything strong, and lashed out, opening a wound in your shoulder. As fast, you pinned his head to the ground and said – the calmness in your voice – fear might come, and it could make people strong, but it would be worth nothing without compassion. And you released the snake.^{xvii}

The narrator wakes from the dream and, like the narrator of the *Introduction*, can begin again with a clearer path. He, too, moves away from the environment where he has been

focused, in this case jumping into a cold winter river. He expresses the holy feeling of connection which is possible, hopeful, and redemptive, writing, “An unpronounceable forgiveness swept over me. I knew how much had to be given away, how little could ever be asked.”^{xviii} In the final moment of the story, the narrator, naked and silent, sees the heron appear at the bend in the river below. This image offers hope for connection. Life.

The next first person story, *The Bend* begins with the penitent narrator revealing his story. Like that of the narrator of *The Search for the Heron*, the story is told from the position of one who has been transformed, a coming-to-knowing story. The purpose of this structure allows Lopez to engage in the oral tradition through the print medium. The narrator offers the reader a story with which to resonate – one of transformation which allows the reader to believe transformation is possible for him/herself, too. Like the previous narrator, this speaker was a transgressor because he wanted to copy the way of being of other beings, hoping to unearth their secret for his own use. He writes, “It did not start out this way; I began with the worst sort of ignorance, the grossest inquiries.”^{xix} His story reveals that he hoped to study the graceful bend in the river with the hopes of personally exploiting its secrets.

I began to think (as on a staircase descending to an unexamined basement) about the turn in the river. If I could understand this smoothly done change in direction I could imitate it, I reasoned, just as a man puts what he reads in a story to use, substituting one point for another as he needs.^{xx}

The narrator becomes obsessed with measurement and objectified study as a means for unearthing the secret. He writes, “I became convinced that in this wealth of detail a fixed reason for the river’s graceful turn would inevitably be revealed.”^{xxi} It does not. The narrator sinks into a deep depression and in time “moss grew eventually on the books,”

until they became “like boulders in the river.”^{xxii} As the narrator loses his arrogance to depression, he discovers that the natural world, the bend, has quietly crept into his own home. In reflection, the narrator describes recognizing that in the path of living in relation with the bend and the world around him, he can come to understand the more fluid boundary of self and other. As bears willingly carry him to the river, he crosses the boundary from the loneliness of the individual to the acceptance of his role in the larger framework of a community:

I have lost, as I have said, some sense of myself. I no longer require as much. And though I am hopeful of recovery, an adjustment as smooth as the way the river lies against the earth at this point, this is no longer the issue with me. I am more interested in this: from above, to a hawk, the bend must appear only natural and I for the moment inseparably a part, like a salmon or a flower. I cannot say well enough how this single perception has dismantled my loneliness.^{xxiii}

Through this path, Lopez moves the reader from the wordlessness of feeling in the *Introduction*, to the evocative power of silence and the reclaiming of storied voice in the *Search for the Heron*, to a way of gaining entrance into the community of all beings. The narrator still locates the relationship largely in himself, not describing what he contributes to the community, only what being a member of that community does for him.

In *The Shallows*, the structural center of the book, Lopez gives the reader the opportunity to learn how to develop an intimacy, and reciprocal relationship with a place. Of all of the pieces in *River Notes*, this most poignantly reflects Lopez’s philosophy of place. Place ties the individual to community, creates intimacy, story and faith. Lopez clearly believes that it is possible for all humans to learn this path. Investing in his geography of hope, Lopez comes out of the text to the reader, writing in second person to invite the reader to walk with him through the stages of coming-to-know a place and

coming-to-know self through the process of developing that wordless intimacy. While the characters from the earlier pieces describe their process of coming-to-knowing from the place of looking backwards from revelation, in this piece, Lopez takes the reader by the hand to share the path, beginning the passage with:

The overall impression here, as one surveys the river spread out over the gravel bars, is of a suspension of light, as though light were reverberating on a membrane. And a loss of depth.^{xxiv}

Is that loss of depth vision or something deeper? Moving the reader closer to the observation of the river with the observation of stone through water, he broaches the subject of blurring the boundary between observation and resonance. Bringing the reader in close to a stone which appears to be “submerged in glycerin” with the strength of a magnifying light, he reveals “that insight into the stone is possible, that all distraction can be peeled away or masked off.”^{xxv}

These small, subtle descriptions are Lopez’s way of teaching the reader how to move from wordless visual encounter, to emotional resonance with the natural world. The narrator moves from the visual to the auditory, connecting the water to natural water sounds to human music with “the sloshing gurgle through labyrinthine gravels, are the more distinct notes of its fugue.”^{xxvi} Next, the tactile as we are encouraged to feel, to “take the surface of the river between your thumb and forefinger. These textures are exquisite, unexpected.”

Like the narrators of the earlier pieces, this narrator admits to past transgressions with the natural company he now keeps, admitting to having thrown stones. Unlike past narrators, he does not dwell on the transgression. Instead he moves the reader towards

learning the names of plants, and seeing ways to read the path of robins, snails and yew trees. Offering up the notion of learning a landscape as a route to intimacy, Lopez describes:

Behind the larger stones – let’s walk up this way – hung up in their crevices is another kind of detritus entirely, a layer of understanding that becomes visible only under certain circumstances, often after a thunderstorm, for example, when the air has a sudden three-dimensional quality and it appears it might be slip open neatly and examined from the inside.^{xxvii}

Developing a relationship with a place is about learning to how to create intimacy. This respect, shorn of human hubris, is born of wonder from resonant experiences with the internal landscapes of non-human kin. Lopez exhorts his reader to engage in the slowness of time to develop deeper relations by offering, “there are still other revelations beyond these. You can imagine what might be learned in a place like this if one took the time.”

^{xxviii}While valuing the power of naming and story, Lopez also recognizes that many aspects of the intimate relationship with nature have no words, and do not need to be named, cautioning, “You can take the naming as far as you want. Some of the most enjoyable things – the way the water folds itself around that rock and drops away – have no names.”^{xxix}

The narrator brings the reader down to the gravel bar, to lie in the earth and to contemplate the stars, thus moving the reader from observation to embrace. As he describes the reader beginning to stir, he captures the feeling of separation brought on by the movement away from intimacy:

You are beginning to shiver, but it’s nothing to be alarmed over. The stones warmed you; you sensed you were nestled in the earth. When you stood up fear pooled in an exposed feeling around your back. This is what to leave the earth

means. To stand up, which you see bears do on occasion. At the very heart of this act is the meaning of personal terror.^{xxx}

Lopez's terror is disconnection. To be of a place, with a place, is to be connected to the world. Poignantly, at the conclusion of the piece, Lopez recognizes the potential danger of the desire to spend too much time searching for intimacy and internal depth. He warns:

Along the very edge of these gravel bars are some of the earth's seams. A person with great courage and balance could slip between the water and the rock, the wet and the dry, and perhaps never come back. But I think it must take as much courage to stay.^{xxxi}

The Falls begins with a narrator telling the reader that the course of the river has been largely unknown because human government workers have failed in their work of revealing its headwaters. Lopez posits knowledge in the hands of those who have engaged in slow relationships over time, suggesting that the reason the government workers have failed is because they have not consulted the meditating ravens and "it is from *them* that the river actually flows, for at night they break down and weep; the universal anguish of creatures, their wailing in desolation, the wrenching anger of betrayals – this seizes them and passes out of them and in that weeping the river takes its shape."^{xxxii} Like the heron from *The Search for the Heron*, rivers are born from anguish, grief and compassion or "any act of kindness"^{xxxiii} as the geography of Lopez's world encourages compassion as a part of the act of creation and recreation.

In the river borne of grief and kindness come fish, the color blue, and deeper still "an image of the earth hurtling through space with through ripped from its surface"^{xxxiv} All of this "is wound among the tears of bending pain and moments of complete vulnerability in each of us to form, finally, visible water."^{xxxv} Here again, Lopez presents

the external landscape as one fed with the emotions of the interior. Lopez's world is carved out of the very soul of living, the pain of suffering mingled with waters of great beauty, all flow together.

As with his previous narrators, this one suggests that the pathway to understanding the world is both accessible to all and requiring only "patience to perceive. They come into view as easily as a book is hooked with a finger and pulled from a shelf."^{xxxvi} Again, like the other narrators, this one tells the story of his coming-to-knowing of his relationship with the Falls. At first he intended to examine things slowly but expresses the self-knowledge of having failed when he had "gone running with gleeful intuition toward what seemed an answer"^{xxxvii}. As with the others, he searches for a moment of revelation "in the hope – beguiling but aching real – of a larger vision."^{xxxviii} But only through moving quietly, concentrating on the trees and plants, the shapes of pebbles and the sound of the breeze, does he receive the fruits of his desire: intimacy.

Lopez describes the narrator finding a house with a woman in it, shifting the focus from intimacy with the wild, the falls, to intimacy with the woman. This is the first love story of the book and the first character who has learned love by first learning an intimacy with the natural world. The narrator describes their bed on which "light was always falling and on which she and I would lie, trusting, and fall asleep in the afternoon."^{xxxix} The word "trusting" sits at the apex of the sentence, centering the reader on the power of its import. From trust the character moves to dance, the essential energy of a creating and re-creating world. Only the heron in his dream has danced thus far in the text. Here, the narrator describes the relationship between dance and intimacy:

We would dance. We would remove our shoes and with only that slight chirp of skin against the oak floor we would dance to an imagined music until we were brought around by the movement of the wind through the house and in our ecstasy another rhythm...In moments of vulnerability such as this we would not speak and hardly move.^{xi}

Lopez is again the guide, showing us the path to intimacy, to respect, celebration, the dance of life. Lopez's narrator engages not only in the act of dance, but also in the creative act of storying. Lopez cocoons dance, story, passion and intimacy in the tight space of this passage:

We danced, most often. And in the evening I would tell stories. The way we desired each other became dance and stories, and the passion took us deeply, left us embracing and protective.^{xli}

This narrator has learned the dream of the heron: the dance of life, dancing through the heavy heart of sadness, the power of intimacy and the cycle of continued living. At the end of the piece, the narrator shares with the reader the great knowledge that from anguish and pain also comes the birth of rivers: life continues to flow onwards. He writes:

I know that I still spend time in the upper part of the river and that those relationships I hold to be true, such as that between anguish and the birth of rivers, endure.^{xlii}

Here is hope. The narrator of Lopez's introduction does not know how to mitigate his grief, he only seeks resonance in the land. This narrator has learned that from grief comes creation and new life. From wordless intimacy with a river, this narrator has danced into the safe space of intimacy with a woman. While it is not a permanent condition, he recognizes the potential, that one can be reborn, be open to love, live without fear.

In the final piece, *The Drought*, Lopez brings the text full circle. Now the river with which the narrators have developed deep emotional relationships is in fact the one dying. Lopez's opening narrator who watched his mother die, must now watch the healer of his own pain, the river, die. Again, he is the educator, teaching the reader how to go through the stages of death.

The narrator describes hearing the river's dying notes. He begins to fast to show support for the river, writing, "These were only gestures, of course, but even as a boy I knew a gesture might mean life or death and I believed the universe was similarly triggered."^{xliii} He practices a respectful vigil, offering up prayers, camaraderie, and love by "stretching my fingers gently into the darkness toward the inchoate source of the river's strangulation."^{xliv}

Lopez guides the reader through understanding of the death of an elder. Giving the narrator a role, he offers the living the tools to becoming a partner to death. Again, it is dance:

There was a power to dying, and it should be done with grace...In moments of great depression, of an unfathomable compassion in myself, I would make the agonized and tentative movements of a dance, like a long-legged bird.^{xlv}

As the river dies, the narrator aids a salmon who comes to him in a dream, and later, as the river is no more than a whisper, he dances the dance of the heron. Lopez locates this scene as central to the story – the dance of the heron in the *Search for the Heron*, later in the *Falls* and here again in the *Drought*. Dance symbolizes the process, the belief that the ritual, the act, is the genuine act of compassion. It is something to do in the face of grief,

a gesture to the living while dying. Again, Lopez is our teacher for a world that will always have death. We can always do something. We can bear witness. We can dance.

With no more strength than there is in a bundle of sticks I tried to dance, to dance the dance of the long-legged birds who lived in the shallows. I danced it because I could not think of anything more beautiful. ^{xlvi}

The heron, the silent keeper of wisdom, comes to the narrator at the end and honors him for trying to dance. His is honored not for his study of the river, or for having learned nature's lessons, but expressing selfless love, true compassion. Lopez offers his message for the need for this kind of loving sacrifice in the voice of the Blue Heron:

Before we could ask for rain there had to be someone to do something completely selfless, with no hope of success. You went after that fish, and then at the end you were trying to dance. A person cannot be afraid of being foolish. For everything, every gesture, is sacred. ^{xlvii}

Lopez's philosophy, his salvation, his roadmap to hope begins with the possibility of a single selfless gesture. Here is his way of mitigating death by connecting it to the dance of life. In the end, the narrator who once wanted to know the dance of the Heron now learns it because he is worthy of knowing it; he has given of himself and he has been given knowledge of how to heal and be healed. We could ask for no more and in Lopez's hands it seems possible. As Lopez ends with the rebirth of the river, he writes "Everyone has to learn how to die, that song, that dance, alone and in time." ^{xlviii} but from it also comes the birth of a river that is tied to time and place, "To stick your hands into the river is to feel the cords that bind the earth together in one piece." ^{xlix} Healed.

My copy of River Notes ends with Robert Penn Warren's poem finishing the book. These too, resonate with Lopez's vision of the possibility of salvation through compassion. Penn Warren writes:

You think of the possibility of lying on stone,
Among fern frond, and waiting
For the shadow to find you.
The stars would not be astonished
To catch a glimpse of the form through the interstices.
Of leaves now black as enameled tin.
Nothing astound the stars.
They have long lived. And you
Are not the first
To come to such a place
Seeking the most difficult knowledge.

We are all the first people who have come asking those questions and in the end with Lopez as our guide, we find our way back to the community of all beings, with a way of living in the world, loving the power that comes out of grief and believing that it will all flow through.

ⁱ Lopez, Barry. (1979) *River Notes: The Dance of Herons*. New York: Avon Books, p x.

ⁱⁱ *River Notes*, x.

ⁱⁱⁱ *River Notes*, xi

^{iv} *River Notes*, xii

^v *River Notes*, xii.

^{vi} *River Notes*, xiii.

^{vii} *River Notes*, 3.

^{viii} *River Notes*, 3.

^{ix} Lopez, Barry. (1988) *Crossing Open Ground*, New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, p. 68.

^x *River Notes*, 4.

^{xi} *Crossing Open Ground*, 65.

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- xii *River Notes*, 5.
- xiii *River Notes*, 5.
- xiv *River Notes*, 6.
- xv *River Notes*, 6.
- xvi *River Notes*, 6.
- xvii *River Notes*, 8.
- xviii *River Notes*, 8.
- xix *River Notes*, 23.
- xx *River Notes*, 24.
- xxi *River Notes*, 25.
- xxii *River Notes*, 25.
- xxiii *River Notes*, 26.
- xxiv *River Notes*, 37.
- xxv *River Notes*, 37.
- xxvi *River Notes*, 37.
- xxvii *River Notes*, 39.
- xxviii *River Notes*, 39.
- xxix *River Notes*, 40.
- xxx *River Notes*, 40.
- xxxi *River Notes*, 40.
- xxxii *River Notes*, 71.
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