



“Finding the Hearth”

by Barry Lopez

from *Hearth: A Global Conversation on Community, Identity, and Place*

edited by Annick Smith and Susan O'Connor

It was summer, and years ago. I'd been staying in a small Nunamiut Eskimo village in the central Brooks Range in Alaska, Anaktuvuk Pass with my friend Bob Stephenson. We'd left this small settlement of 110 behind and were walking north through the Anaktuvuk River valley, camping as we went, headed toward that river's confluence with the Colville River. We were trying to find active wolf dens, a part of Bob's summer work as a field biologist. The weather had been good. Clear skies, temperatures in the fifties. Our search was concentrated on an open tundra plain west of the river, especially along a series of creeks where we might be able to locate paw prints on the banks and sandbars. These creeks carried late-season snowmelt down to the river from valleys in mountains farther west of us.

At this time of year there was no night that we needed to plan our days around; we ate and slept according to another rhythm, the rhythm of our own energy. In this valley, far north of the tree line, planed smooth thousands of years ago by a glacier the size of Delaware, we enjoyed panoramic views, like those from a ship's bridge in midocean. The air was so clear I was able to study the slow drift of caribou grazing on a mountainside six miles away with my spotting scope. Astonishing, but it was easy to verify the distance on a topographic map we were carrying.

When we decided to rest, to drop our packs, make a meal, and perhaps sleep a bit, we built a fire of dry arctic willow twigs. We didn't need the warmth, and it would have been quicker and more convenient to cook on our portable, single-burner stoves; but we built a fire every time, without discussing it. A patch of bare ground, shavings from the willows for tinder, a wooden match cupped against the breeze, encouraging the first flames with human breath. Carefully feeding the burn to grow it.

Small and assertive, the fire centered us every time, defining a space temporarily ours in an enormous and indifferent expanse of country. The flicker of the fire's flames within the boundary of a stone perimeter urged us toward quiet thoughts of the day's events. It reeled us in out of a vast silence, the absence of any sound in the air over the tundra, a silence inflected by the murmur of a fire, slowly devouring bits of wood.

One night, after we'd eaten and settled in back-to-back behind our spotting scopes, Bob told me a story. A few years before, he'd been traveling with three Nunamiut men in country to the south and east of where we were then, in the drainage of the Anaktiktoak River. They'd halted for the day, had built a small fire, and put an aluminum kettle on for tea. It was a chilly evening. The four of them were standing around the fire hunched in their parkas, not saying much, waiting for the water to boil, when Bob noticed a man named Simon Paneak moving his walking staff back and forth in a gesturing way, as though signaling for someone to come closer to the warmth of the fire. When Bob shifted his eyes, he saw that Simon was welcoming a porcupine.

Whenever we sat next to the fire scanning the tundra plain, always alert for wolf howls, the aluminum kettle nestled down in the embers, we felt the security of our friendship, of the



work we were doing together, and the embrace of the vast landscape beyond the ambit of the fire, a fire not much larger than the battered kettle.

The absence of darkness during our journey sometimes reminded me of a phrase I had learned in high school. Roman soldiers, halting for the night to make camp, referred to the shadowy area between the ground lit by their fires and the outer dark as *inter canem et lupum*, the space between the dog and the wolf. It was the sort of locution that stuck in my mind as a boy, a suggestive and succinct thought. The outer dark. Where we were on the tundra, no such situation would arise before the coming of fall. Here, though, we were certain that there were wolves out there, aware of us. The five of us then—traveling, resting, and hunting in the same, sunlit world.

The geography that surrounded Bob and me on those July days was so immense we felt less than incidental when standing up in it. It was the fire each evening that gave us definition and meaning. Here was the mark of our arrival and departure. Here was our reassurance, and a faint reminder of what Prometheus had stolen from Zeus to make human life less anxious, less beleaguered, more independent. A tiny memorial, then, to our very old and particular hominid ways.

Wolves don't make fire. They do not have the need.

With that fire at my back, it seemed I was able to see farther into the outer world. And whenever I poured hot water for tea, I was always careful to hold the mug away so steam wouldn't fog the eyepiece of the spotting scope, disturbing for some moments the camaraderie I felt with the resident animals I watched in those days—a fox, a ground squirrel, ducks rising from a tundra pond. Tundra grizzly.

The Nunamiut people we were staying with at Anaktuvuk Pass had lived and hunted in these mountains and valleys for centuries. We knew because we came upon the remains of their old fires once in a while, evidence of how they had once paused in a certain place to regain control of the vastness through which they moved.

*

What one thinks of the word *hearth* depends on both the range of whatever a contemporary human mind might imagine and on the informing experience of one's own life. Many people who grow up in dense urban environments today have virtually no experience of hearths in the historical sense—the stones that contain or carry a fire and form a physical space that defines the locus of a domestic life, a setting in which food is prepared and eaten, a quarter from which warmth emanates, and around which conversation occurs. This universally appreciated spot is, for us in the cultural West, the domain of Hestia, Zeus's sister and the goddess ritually honored by Hellenistic Greeks at the beginning and end of every meal. Every Greek home had its hearth, every Greek town its ceremonial hearth, a shrine tended by virgins. In Roman mythology they were the vestal virgins, the women who served Vesta, Hestia's Roman counterpart.

The hearth Bob and I established each day on the tundra comes, of course, from a different tradition than the hearths of Hestia and Vesta, but the values they symbolize overlap—the freedom of thought afforded by the presence of like minds, shelter from the storm, unguarded socializing, even the opportunity to welcome strangers, to express one's capacity to be generous. Against these sustaining values, however, must always be considered the divisive aspects of



tribalism, its wariness of the outer world, its resentment or hostility toward other ways of knowing, its impulse to banish its own if they do not conform.

Some of the contributors to this volume offer us eloquent evocations of what it might feel like to perceive, maintain, and cherish a personal hearth. Others, perhaps more acutely aware of what lies behind the bombed, strafed, and bulldozed hearths of the Middle East, wonder what might symbolically replace the traditional hearth, especially in modern urban settings where the notion of a hearth seems quaint. The question that underlies virtually all these essays, then, is: What is the hearth of the Anthropocene? What, now, is the symbol of our allegiance and our concern for one another's fate? Or, is a concern for the fate of others, especially the fate of the stranger, now naïve? Has it become impractical and dangerous?

Perhaps it's fear that urges me to recall those days years ago in the Anaktuvuk River valley with my friend, who has since passed away. Perhaps this is a past I have grown nostalgic about, a poignant or even romantic situation with little relevance to the modern predicament. I can't easily imagine what might replace the actual fire in a modern reification of a hearth, although the essays in this volume suggest there are ways. What concerns me even more, though, is the loss of those values the fire precipitates and reinforces. The comfort that can arise from shared history, from shared ancestors, a comfort so deep it can be understood in complete silence, as it was in that situation around the fire where Simon Paneak welcomed the stranger. Where will the opportunity for intimacy come from now? What will replace this answer to the human longing to be known? How will the affirmation by others of one's own necessity in the world be validated? What will be the opportunities for profound courtesy and for ceremony, of which there is such a dearth in the modern world?

We can lose the communal fire and survive, but survival without the values of the hearth—a complex of associations cited throughout these pages—seems a brutish prospect, a retreat into intolerance.

*

Most of my experience of hearths outside my own culture has been with friends or acquaintances gathered around a fire to partake of food, to pursue long conversations, to experience together the unplumbable mystery of the world beyond the firelight, and to sleep close on cold or weather-beaten nights. Traveling with seminomadic people and camping in tents, I became acquainted with the notion of “portable hearths,” though my mostly benign experience here does not compare well with the experiences that several writers in this volume have had with that could be called impermanent, symbolic, invented, or even abandoned hearths. I've no experience, either, of the pulverized hearths of Palestinians living in the West Bank, of Syrian hearths desecralized by warfare, or the temporary hearths of refugee camps in the Horn of Africa. I've been fortunate to have been able to travel widely, to have shared meals at the hearths of many different types of homes, permanent and temporary; but for most of my adult life I've returned to the same domicile in the woods of Oregon to rekindle, literally and figuratively, my hearth. When I do, I feel secure once again in the turbulent world of my time. And I wonder, often, what it means today to not have a hearth.



The editors of this volume offer us, in addition to a range of thought about an idea, “hearth,” a prompt to consider—at a specific time, a time of environmental emergencies, of a sixth biological extinction, of economic violence, and of social disintegration, all on a scale unprecedented in our history—what it might mean to lose one’s spiritual footing in the time ahead. Heroic tales from numerous cultures in both hemispheres, stories with an eerie timelessness, consistently tout the wisdom of maintaining a hearth. In them, the maintenance of a hearth, real or symbolic, is not merely a strategy for survival. It is the foundational condition from which human courage arises, from which wisdom emanates, and where a belief in the idea that all storms pass, no matter how disruptive or terrifying they might seem, is anchored. To not be done in by “the enemy,” however one might define that, one traditionally councils with one’s allies at a hearth, shares sustenance, and then departs fortified.

Or so the tales say.

*

Prompted by essays in this anthology, particularly by Boey Kim Cheng’s “Reflections of a Returnee,” Ameena Hussein’s “A Staircase with a View.” And Kavery Nambisan’s “The Rent Not Paid,” my thoughts have too often, I suppose, gone off in the direction of those who might dismiss as antiquated or inconvenient the values of the hearth.

The *Hearth* essays expand our conception of heart, but many of them also make obvious the position of those for whom the idea of a hearth does not resonate. If the reader considers what it might mean to survive in the world without even a figurative hearth, they will understand better, I think, what their life stands for—politically, socially, and economically. They will locate that refined and particular sense of justice that compels people to take a stand. Each true hearth, it seems to me, produces people who live in opposition to those who have lost a sense of empathy with others, those for whom the sacred is a nuisance, an impediment to cultural progress, those who value the personal success over human companionship.

*

I look back on those days in the Brooks Range with my good friend, at the simplicity of our lives, at the purity of my emotions as a young man, and know how very far I still have to go to answer the question this collection poses: What is the modern pivot for these values of love, comity, and the courage needed to face the outer dark that I have touted?

I know that during those days along the Anaktuvuk River I experienced an enthusiasm for life, felt the pleasure of a friendship and shared meals, and held a belief that we would find what we were looking for in that nearly unbounded geography, and I know that all of this was elevated to palpability for me by the small fires of dry arctic willow twigs we constructed each day and lit.