

## Barry Lopez

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an excerpt of

### *On the Border*

ONE evening in the austral winter of 1992 I asked the captain of the ship I was traveling on if I could step overboard and take a walk. The *Nathaniel B. Palmer*, a 308-foot icebreaking research vessel, was docked that night in a large ice floe in the Weddell Sea in Antarctica, wedged bow-first in an ice slip it had created for itself on the floe's perimeter.

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My adult journeys as a writer, if they can be said to have had a rationale, have usually been efforts to move away from civilization's conservative social centers, to leave everyday life behind. My intention has not been always to arrive at the far edges of the world, but often that's what's happened. In the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory in Australia, or in the Namib Desert on the southwest coast of Africa, or up north on Ellesmere Island in the Canadian High Arctic is where I've felt the most heightened sense of relief and clarity about human culture, the deepest sense of empathy with other humans. Or so it seems, recalling moments in these places when everything idle or petty in my thoughts appeared to drain away.

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It has long been my thought—a conceit, probably—that we live now in a special time, one in which the scale of commonplace accidents—a leak in an industrial pipe (Bhopal), a ship running aground (*Exxon Valdez*), a viral outbreak in Africa (HIV)—routinely reaches the level of disaster. Few of the cultural and scientific sentries we assign to our figurative walls can see such things coming, apparently. And the rest of us seem largely indifferent to frightening news from the forward observation posts.

I do not think of myself as a forward observer, working in a dangerous time. I have no romantic infatuation with heroism. But, having been drawn to the outer edges, I've recently been trying to understand why.