

Christian Martin

*On Resistance: An Interview
with Barry Lopez*

IT is difficult to pin Barry Lopez down.

By this, I don't mean his writing style or genre form, though the ways in which Lopez works with fiction and nonfiction, travelogue and memoir, nature and spirituality writing, make choosing the appropriate shelf for his many books a distinct challenge.

What I mean is that Lopez is a man in motion. As this interview was being readied for publication, the Oregon-based author was preparing to leave for a series of public readings in Paris, then traveling to Poland for a personal visit to Auschwitz before going to French Polynesia to attend to some translation work. All of this comes on the heels of a recent trip to Bali, where Lopez worked alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu at a summit entitled *Quest for Global Healing*, an international gathering of dignitaries, activists, artists, and writers focused on the problems of religious tension, global poverty, access to clean drinking water, and other pressing issues. What drives Lopez is his belief that our political situation is so dire that writers must put themselves and their work in front of the body politic.

Somehow amid this engagement with the outside world, Lopez finds time to work on his next literary project, "*Homeground: Language for an American Landscape*," an ambitious work on language, geography, and folklore that he is coediting with Debra Gwartney (to be published by Trinity University Press in October 2006), as well as on a scholarly essay for a major art exhibition exploring the relationship of the American West to the development of modernism. "*The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950*" opens in Houston in

the fall of 2006, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art will exhibit the show in the spring of 2007.

Lopez is also actively involved in several projects with Texas Tech University, including the development of the James E. Sowell Family Collection in Literature, Community, and the Natural World; the Formby Lectures in Social Justice; a new undergraduate degree—the BA in natural history and humanities



Photo Credit: David Litschewager

ties for the Honors College—created in collaboration with E. O. Wilson; and curriculum development and university-wide initiatives in “ethics, Southwestern cultural geography, and the conservation of water.”

Needless to say, when the opportunity to interview Lopez arose, I jumped to it. For all of his kinetic movement and diverse interests, Lopez was an incredibly grounding presence. He patiently answered my many questions related to his latest collection of short stories, *Resistance*, with thoughtfulness and clarity. Lopez’s unassuming demeanor—blue jeans, cowboy boots, neat gray beard—

belied the forcefulness of his curiosity, intellect, and articulation. We sat in a quiet room in a coffee shop in the Fairhaven district of Bellingham, Washington, a college town midway between Seattle and Vancouver, BC, until it closed. With our conversation still in midstride, we wandered across the street to the local independent bookstore, refilled our coffee mugs, and kept talking right up until the hour of his reading engagement.

Christian Martin (CM): *With reference to Resistance, your new book of stories, to what does the title refer? What are your characters resisting?*

Conformity. Conformity to a way of life that, in the view of the characters, would ultimately destroy their souls and compromise justice. Resistance to the stultifying effect of consumerism, being oblivious to the cruelty that regimented social organization forces on people, to political pressure. They’re resisting everything that threatens the imagination. The characters want to

participate in rather than be the passive recipients of whatever's in store for them. They want to have some effect on where the ship of human life goes.

The theme of resistance, of course, is very old in the arts, perhaps clichéd; but many people still believe the most important thing for an artist is to resist. If a certain order is in place, and you never question that order, then there's very little for your imagination to do. If your imagination is not alive, part of your interior atrophies. You wake up later in your life and remain angry for years, because you didn't act.

All these characters would say that at some point in their lives they were failures. Then they encountered something that galvanized a life of resistance. In the book, their testaments—the stories—end with a hint of what it is they did to draw the government's attention. After that change, we assume they built their lives around an active resistance, the kinds of things that Owen Daniels talks about in the first story.

CM: Do you feel that your own work is an act of resistance?

Yes, like the lives of other writers, painters, photographers, dancers, and composers I know. You have to do two things here, I think. One is to serve what people call an "artistic vision." If you're honest with yourself, this devotion can be socially very expensive. A lot of marriages are lost, a lot of children are forgotten because people remain focused on their work. The other thing is, you've got to figure out how to be socially responsible as an artist and a writer. In the world we live in now, an artistic vision that doesn't reflect on human fate is self-indulgent.

Teaching is closely associated with a writer's or an artist's fulfillment of these obligations, I think. A student senses three things with a teacher at the front of a room, teaching someone else's book: the writer being taught, the teacher, and the classroom engagement. Ideally, that engagement—which brings all of this together—grows out of the teacher's love of the student, a concern that the student become well educated and well prepared, so he or she can then carry out the adult responsibilities that maintain a "civilized society."

I think it's brutally hard to teach well in the world that confronts us today. Every time somebody comes up to me at a book signing and says they're a high school teacher—just volunteers that—I make an inscription in the book "in gratitude." Just for being in the trenches, where there's no money or support. So often a teacher's working in an institution rather than a place of learning.

You're fighting off corporations that want some kind of entree for the sale of entertainment systems masquerading as "teaching" systems, for their athletic clothes, and their food. Big business would be happy, you have to think, if kids just learned how to take tests, got an equivalency rating, and went to work for an organization that produced the things kids are trained to consume. I think a lot of young people feel disaffected today because they believe the adult world values them finally only as consumers, only for their willingness to take the demeaning job at McDonald's. Many kids today are rebelling against the dismissal of their visions.

CM: *The last time I heard you read, you told an anecdote about being in a bookstore with your young stepdaughter—*

Oh, Mollie and the books on Cuba?

CM: *She was fretting over which books to choose, and you said "take them all."*

Resistance is dedicated to Mollie and her sisters because of my admiration for their politics and determination. They're trying to figure out how to live lives of resistance. "Life of resistance" suggests, I suppose, outlaw behavior. There's a kind of romantic aura around the idea. But I just happened to glance here at this book of yours, [James] Cowan's *Desert Father*, about St. Anthony—and *that's* a life of resistance. By the fourth century AD, the Christian church had become an institution, it had started to stiffen, to be about control and social organization, not spiritual life.

In every reform movement I'm familiar with in Roman Catholic Christianity, you find people stop going to the big church and start meeting in someone's home. Scaling the organization back to a smaller unit, where people's desire to live by the set of principles that the historical Jesus exemplified occurs in a community context, not an institutional context. Christ's life was a life of resistance. That general idea has been with us forever, to be cautious about officious strangers who recruit and monitor us. To be wary.

CM: *A skepticism of regimes and institutions certainly threads through the stories in Resistance.*

In "Traveling with Bo Ling" Harvey Flemming, returning from Vietnam, says to his father—he doesn't want to insult him, his father fought in the Second

World War and so he can't attack him in a way he otherwise might—he says, “Dad, what *is* the lesson of war?” And his father says, “To be vigilant.” That's part of the undercountry of the book, what emerges from all the stories. To be vigilant. To be aware that life is chaotic, and that totalitarianism, far from being the visible enemy, is almost always visiting us with an attractive plan to diminish that chaos.

You know the story of Christ in the desert for forty days? Have you read *Quarantine*, Jim Crace's novel? It's about those days Christ spent in the desert, but Crace keeps Christ in the background somewhere. He concentrates instead on other people praying in the desert during those forty days of quarantine. If you bring a reductive mind to that story, you'll use the expression “the Devil” to characterize the attractiveness of a certain temptation to a starving man. The problem with evil, however, is that it rarely presents itself in so readable a form as “the Devil.” Evil is so attractive that you almost always accommodate yourself to it. It's not until you're deeply entwined that you realize what you've gotten yourself into. It's not until you try to get *out* of the trouble you've gotten into. That's why a life of resistance is a life of wariness about everything that's attractive.

We ask ourselves, “How could the German people not have known what was going on, long before the Panzer divisions moved into Poland in September of 1939? How could they not have known about Bergen-Belsen?” Well, a system to administer evil without interference is usually firmly entrenched before anyone notices—you don't get the opportunity to see it coming. As Mussolini intuited, if you just make the trains run on time, people will be happy. So, if you're simply getting on with life—paying your taxes, changing diapers, wondering how you're going to make the car payment next month—you're not really paying attention to what having the trains run on time might mean.

We pride ourselves in this country on having the greatest democracy in the world, but it's still an experiment. And—*snap!*— just like that—we could be living under a totalitarian regime. We're primed for it to happen. The enemy we must defeat at all costs—terrorism—has been evoked, and government is asking for the suspension of laws and rights that have long ensured a democratic existence for us. So in this situation resistance becomes a set of questions. What is the nature of this enemy? What exactly is the threat? Could you explain why the suspension of these laws is necessary?

CM: *Well, why would that mother who is busy changing diapers and just wants the train to be on time, or the businessman who works sixty hours a week and is happy if the satellite TV and the SUV and cellphone are all working—why would those who think everything seems comfortable enough recognize vigilance, caution, and resistance as important?*

Maybe they're not important. Ours is an age of narcolepsy, I think. The cost of paying attention is just too high for most of us. What's really necessary is that the *community* be vigilant. It's *impossible* for every human being to take on that responsibility. It's cruel to even ask. The genius of community is that it allows any of us to be in the breakdown lane periodically and still feel that everything will be covered. In every traditional village I've been in, when there's tension, say, between husband and wife, the kids are free to live with an uncle or aunt or grandparent for a while. Nobody looks at it as failure on the part of the parents. They look on it as just another rough stretch of water in the ocean of the community. Nobody bears any stigma.

You can't come up to a person shouting, "Pay attention! You have to be responsible." It's presumptuous and arrogant. We can't live like that. We must create time for everybody to consider what their actions will be and try to take some of the collective burden off of other people's shoulders.

I believe what the characters in *Resistance* are conveying is that theirs are not only lives of resistance but that they've discovered these lives through the love of other people. This boy, Gary Sinclair in "Mortise and Tenon," who had a life of sexual trauma as a child and became a carpenter—it takes a long time for him to understand that he's never gotten far enough outside himself to be in love with somebody. He just can't manage it yet. He masks love off with the conceit that he's a great guy, a great neighbor—until a child walks into his bedroom and kisses him, and then the whole facade just shatters. After he grapples with this, he remembers that a woman living in Hokkaido had once shown a genuine interest in him, and he decides to go to her. He tells us it's kind of ridiculous to expect that things will work out—but he goes. He realizes he knows a lot more now than he did before, and we learn, in those few formal lines at the end of the story, that it probably worked out well. That choice brought him into the full expression of his life. But where would he have been without that woman? Where would he have been without the friend in Bangalore who employed him?

Where would Harvey Flemming be if it weren't for Bo Ling saying, "Be in love with me. Look right here, in the Dresden of my face"?

CM: *These meaningful relationships are what make the characters' resistance possible?*

Yes. It's important, I think, to notice that none of these people who develop lives of resistance in this book is a Lone Ranger. They come into their own through community. They're all in touch with each other through these back-door e-mails. They may be generating good work—Lisa Meyer in "Río de la Plata" may be making monuments around issues of dignity and integrity, but she's only doing that because she's broken through some wall in herself. It starts when her mother says she's dying of Parkinson's disease. She tells her daughter now is the time for you to read this book [Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*]. She tells her to get that analytical mind of hers out of the way, and "when you think you understand what's going on [in the book] here, talk to your father about what it means to love." So, if it wasn't for the mother's love for the daughter . . .

Those are important issues in terms of *Resistance* for me—a community of people trying to discover a sort of anthem and sing it, no matter what is going on. I like these people. As I was writing about them and discovering them, I liked them more and more.

CM: *One character I was really drawn to was Minty in "Laguna de Bay in A-Sharp."*

With Jefferson deShay—yeah, Minty's great, you know, with his missing fingers, his war scars, his sense of acceptance. He's just a kid, but he teaches deShay. It's a very sweet relationship between these two. I think Minty represented the possibility of a loving relationship for deShay, but, two men, he didn't know how to make that work. I like the idea that this guy is probably fifty when he begins to study the saxophone. He wants to give back to an audience the feelings Minty introduced him to. Then we learn at the end of the story that deShay becomes a doctor, treating cancer patients in the Philippines. Finally he sits down and digs through the letters of Corazon Aquino, what she was writing George Shultz about in the first Bush administration. And he finds duplicity.

The characters aren't Michael Moore types, in the sense that they take up a frontline position. I don't know if they're even really activists. Look at Owen Daniels in "Apocalypse." Something is going on in his native country, a right-wing government is taking over. Something clicks in his head when his wife says she has a magazine assignment and is going to look at cemeteries in France. He goes along. He wants to learn what sort of art grew out of *le Maquis*, the French underground. I think these people are looking to do their part, they're not looking to save the world. They're saying, "If I do this well, my resistance will be *our* resistance."

CM: *The first story has a sentence that reads, "We will disrupt through witness, remembrance, and the courtship of the imagination." And later, "We regard ourselves as servants of memory." What specifically is the relationship between remembering old stories, playing the role of the witness, and resistance?*

The witness is someone who will not change her or his testimony for the convenience of the state or for the convenience of those who wish to profit from history. If you and I and your friends and mine all witness something, you or I won't have the whole story, but if we speak as a community, we'll have most of it. The witness I mean here is a person who can't be seduced away from his commitments, who won't say "for the sake of a greater good, I'll remember what happened in a more convenient way."

Where forgetting is concerned, literature seems to me an act of defiance. It works against our tendency to forget. The cliché we have is that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. This means we *do* understand what kind of lives we might be able to live, and we *do* remember the atrocities—the slaughter of Armenians in 1915, say—and we want that never to happen again.

CM: *Who is we?*

We the body politic in a democracy, or we being those, generally, who are ethically or morally opposed to genocide or other murderous arrangements we don't want to be a part of. We forget, you know, who we want to be. What literature does is remind us of that, of what it is we mean. I think what these characters are saying is that through their lives and in the way they conduct their lives, they're trying to address forgetting. They'll create art or music or works of history or books so that others can recall, in their own lives of chaos

and turmoil, what it is they really want to do in life—because it is so easy to forget.

The line that follows the second sentence you quote is, “We won’t be the servants of your progress.” What is “progress” where integrity or moral life is concerned? It’s only with a scientific imagination that you can posit improvement, because new information makes old information irrelevant. But we can’t improve El Greco or the Bach cello suites. We can’t improve Shakespeare. You don’t have “progress” in the arts. Change of fashion, change of taste, yes. But new poems and books don’t make an earlier literature obsolete. That’s why Owen Daniels, the narrator of the first story, says it’s misleading to talk about progress. We’d rather serve something else, he says—human memory. That’s part of the dark underbelly of the Enlightenment, thinking we can make all things better. Owen warns somewhere in that story that part of the peculiar folklore of our culture is to believe “the future is better.”

CM: These characters aren’t political activists or agitators out on the front lines, their work isn’t overtly vocal or visible, and none of them even live in the United States. Why is the American government so interested in them? What threat do they represent?

It’s the threat any artist poses whose work triggers civic action. Lisa Meyer creates that monument at Homestead to recall the memory of those killed in the Pinkerton police action. And then we understand that after her recovery from depression she builds more monuments. Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial became a flash point for many people. It captured their emotions about that war. The genius in that work is that both those who came home feeling unconflicted about their participation and those who came home hating what they did could break down in tears when they visited it. But Maya Lin is an artist here first, I believe, not an activist.

I think young people can be too easily schooled in the belief that if they’re not out on the front lines, at the barricades, their lives are not relevant. Not true, of course. The people in *Resistance*, in fact, were all more or less invisible until the government went after them.

Jefferson deShay tells us he was an admirer of Corazon Aquino. The book he wrote about her, exposing the duplicity of the U.S. government, provoked other people to demand answers. It’s like Paul O’Neill. He’s not an activist—but now that we can read what he experienced as secretary of the Treasury, activists

are able to hit the streets with that report behind them. I think the people in this book are themselves a step removed from activism, but their work triggers activism.

CM: *Do you see your own work as being on the front lines?*

No. I've written things people have used like testimony or a statement of principles in various political contexts, but no, I'm not in the streets. Alan Magee—whose monoprints are in *Resistance*—and I began a long discussion during the Gulf War about the social responsibility of the writer and artist. The central question for us was, "If we're not activists, then how can we live up to our social responsibilities? What can we do?" Those monoprints are part of Alan's answer, and *Resistance* is part of mine.

Alan and I talked to each other about this once in a formal setting. The edited interview is part of a book called *Alan Magee: Paintings, Sculpture, Graphics* (New York: Forum Gallery, 2004). What are our responsibilities to young writers and painters? How can we support them? What are we supposed to be doing in our work so it's not solely about *our* passions but about the fate of our people? The community of people and narrators in *Resistance* actually resembles the community I live in—a group of artists and writers who stay in touch but who are not really activists. It's a community where you continue to champion and to bear witness to acts of integrity, you oppose the way pop culture buries the history of humanity, and you rebel against the movement to commodify everything.

CM: *In my classroom, when we discuss current events—the "war on terror" or the war on the environment or the war on the poor—my students frequently ask the same line of questioning: "So, what am I supposed to do? I'm not the kind of person who wants to march down the street or sit in trees or get arrested. I recycle, I vote, but it doesn't seem like anything I do helps. What good can I do?" Do young people ask you these kinds of questions? I'm fishing around for the best answers to provide them.*

All I can say is, we've done a horrible job of covering for these people while they're trying to get an education. Students have every right to go to the adult community and say, "I can't fix this. I need seasoning and tools, and you need to hold the fort while I do that. When I know what I mean and can say what I mean, and can stand solid, it'll be my turn to take care of you. But for now,

you have to hold the line. You can't come to us at age sixteen or twenty and say, 'Sorry we screwed it up, now it's time for you to clean it up.'" No. I always tell kids they have no obligation to go out there and put themselves in the policeman's face. They're not going to prevail, and worse, they'll pay a terrible price for it.

I think more than I've ever thought before now about young people. That's another question Alan and I had. Suppose people read your books and you're offered the chance to go to a university and speak. What should you say? In the past, I was so focused on my own work I hardly ever accepted invitations. Now I say "yes" much more often. The reason I do is because if young people accord you a certain amount of credibility after reading you in class, you need to go stand with their teachers, who are hauling a heavy load. Help students understand we don't have a society in which only a couple of people know what's going on and they write books. We have a society in which the whole adult *community* knows what's going on, and some are writing and some are teaching and some are running the business that employs your dad.

We're trying to work together here, I want to say to them, and your job is to drain everything you can out of this classroom. You're not here to learn how to become an employee. You're here to learn how to become a *citizen*, to become a mother or a father, to develop a way of life. You've got to pay tuition, get a job—yeah, all that. But while you figure out how to deal with those things, we owe you some cover. We're in dire need of your informed citizenship and your future good parenting. We need to ensure you get this and that you have the time necessary to understand this.

CM: *We aren't covering for them very well.*

It really gnaws at me, what's happening to education in the United States. I know we shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but this country's system of secondary education unraveled during the Reagan years, and it's never recovered. Not incidentally, his partner in England, Margaret Thatcher, oversaw the virtual collapse of the British secondary school system.

Now in both the United States and England, we have a great many very poorly educated people employed in situations where their lack of understanding of history, for example, is wreaking havoc. Iraq is a prime example. One story after another from history instructs us, whether we're Republicans or Democrats. People have been *through* this before. The English, the French, the

Germans, they've all been through this, and they're saying, "No, not a good idea." It'd be a good idea to listen to them. Instead, we end up with somebody who attended Yale but never got an education.

CM: *Speaking of that person . . . One thing I've always appreciated about your writing is its elegance. Especially in your fiction, the writing is pared down, almost haiku-like. Your prose is always very intentional. In contrast to your precise usage of language are the, shall we say, "creative" ways that the current administration uses language, manipulating words to fit its particular agendas. You know, "Clean Skies Initiative," which gives us more air pollution, "Healthy Forests Initiative," which allows for old-growth logging, "Homeland Security," "Compassionate Conservatism," and on and on. How does reading the newspaper and witnessing this abuse of language affect someone who holds language in such high regard?*

Well, it makes me angry. And sad. My response is to try to write beautifully. All I can do is say, "Here's the alternative."

These people you refer to use language as a technology to achieve an end. Using language involves you in a moral act. If your approach to language is practical rather than moral, you become complicit, in my view, in something immoral. Many "results-oriented" people in politics and business use language—"let's say this and then see what the response is"—the way they would use a lawn mower or an after-shave. Truth, the moral ideal, doesn't come into play here. They arrange and rearrange "statements of fact" in pursuit of a desired effect. You can't call them liars. To lie you have to hold a moral position about the use of language.

I was in the library a few years ago, looking for a book that would give me definitions for American landscape terms, words like *flatiron* and *cowbelly* and *Detroit riprap*, that sort of stuff. There isn't one. English-language dictionaries for landscape terms are based on British compendia, and the definitions for terms like *cienaga* or *hollow* are all written by people with a scientific orientation. This is, for me, a crucial area of linguistic richness to preserve—for political, practical, and legal as well as aesthetic reasons. So I developed a book called *Home Ground: A Literary Guide to Landscape Terms*. I invited about 40 American authors to compose definitions for about 850 landscape terms. Bill McKibben, Gretel Ehrlich, Charles Frazier, Barbara Kingsolver, Jon Krakauer, Samantha Chang, Arthur Sze, Patricia Hampl, all these really

wonderful people. So, we're right in the middle of that project now, a massive amount of material, really, for Debra Gwartney, the managing editor, to supervise.

I want to produce this book because I'm driven to do it, because of a love of landscape and language, but it's also an act of resistance, if you will, to slow the collapse of this kind of popular descriptive language into solely technical nomenclature. We have a board of academic advisors, so it'll measure up as a reference book, and a lot of line illustration. The writers are from all over the country, so a term like *kiss tank* will be handled by a Texas writer and *pahoehoe* by a Hawaiian writer. I'll write an essay to open the book.

Another shape my "activism" has taken since the Florida election debacle is to become directly involved in higher education. Texas Tech in Lubbock asked E. O. Wilson and me in 2000 to design an undergraduate major for them that would combine the sciences and humanities, starting in the freshman year. And we did. At about the same time, the university established the James E. Sowell Family Collection in Literature, Community, and the Natural World. They bought my papers, David Quammen's papers, McKibben's papers, Kittredge's papers, Pattiann Rogers' papers, and they're working to secure the archives of other writers. Once I became interested, Tech let me work with them to bring retrospective shows in—of Alan Magee's work, for example—and to establish the Formby Lectures in Social Justice, which brings four people a year to the campus to speak on political, environmental, racial, and economic justice. The university press will then publish the talks in an annual volume.

Some other work I've been doing involves the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Orion Society, and a group of businessmen concerned about the direction the country is headed in.

Those kinds of things, then, that's where my energy is going. I go back and forth about not being at the typewriter, but these are very rough times.

CM: *This idea keeps coming to mind during our conversation: I'm putting a garden in at a house I just bought, and so I'm reading all these books about dirt and mulch and such. In one of them, the author wrote, "Don't feed the plant, feed the soil."*

Yeah. That's very good.

CM: *You've said that Bush isn't the problem, but that he's just made the deeper problems visible.*

Yes.

CM: *So it's the political soil that's poisoned. And the same with education.*

We're talking Wendell Berry here now.

CM: *Yes. As soon as the word soil pops up, Berry comes to mind.*

He's the grandfather. He's got terrific moral authority for my generation.

CM: *When will he finally be awarded the Nobel?*

You know, that's a good question.

CM: *Resistance seems to me to be focused on storytelling, if one can perceive a museum curator or painter or translator as a kind of storyteller. Why do storytellers figure largely in a resistance? What sort of stories do you think our culture needs to hear today?*

If you go back to, say, Cro-Magnon time, the one consistent cultural thread around which human society is aligned is storytelling, storytelling as an aspect of performance. Artistic expression—language, dance, those things that we now call the arts—makes the abstract interior that human beings share visible. That's the display society uses to remind itself of what it means, how it wants to exist in the world. So storytelling, for me, is the oldest art; and it incorporates the impulse to remember, to be sure we do not forget. So I believe story is the form in which we have for the longest time become reacquainted with the reasons for resistance.

Look at Elizabeth Wangfu in "The Walls at Yogpar" in *Resistance*. In the beginning she's a character who lives almost entirely in her head. When she starts to examine her politics, she falls in love with a man who takes her on a journey into the desert. She begins to see there the outline of what her resistance is all about. She listens to his stories. She recalls a story she once read that now haunts her.

I think men and women need to hear stories that are useful to them when they are trying to make sense of themselves. When you're young, you

read a certain story and you want to hand it to your peers and say, “This says it for me.” And sometimes your peers read it and say, “Well, it’s not for me.” But that’s why there’s more than one book in the library. This set of stories, or that novel, helps this or that person. In *Resistance*, Owen Daniels says it will be the purpose of this group of people to write stories that will help others who are sitting on the fence to recognize and then step into their resistance. We read the stories of what brought them to act on their feelings of resistance toward consumerism, human diminishment, and tyranny, and we assume because they did, the government came after them. I’m hoping that these are useful stories, stories that help.

CM: *What are some specific qualities that you think our culture most needs today?*

We’re afraid to be in love. We’re afraid to be in love with each other, afraid to be in love with the earth, in love with God. Where is the source of that fear?

CM: *That’s what I was going to ask.*

I don’t know. But you can’t have love without intimacy. And you can’t have intimacy without vulnerability. And you can’t have vulnerability unless you trust the situation. Most of us are suspicious. We don’t trust the situations we’re in. We worry we might be taken out. The antidote for that is to be situated in loving relationships. By that I mean you can express your love and it’s reciprocated. The deeper you go into that, the more vulnerable you become, the more you trust, the deeper the love goes, until you end up with characters like the Desert Fathers, people who devoted themselves to the unselfish reciprocation of the love of God. Which to a metaphorical mind, rather than a fundamentalist mind, means to be fully engaged in all relations. To enter into good relations with people, with the earth, with the animals, all of that. The concise expression of this position is to say that the best life is a life in which you are in love.

In American culture, unfortunately, we have a system of commerce that militates against love. The message of commercial advertising is “Nobody really loves you but me. Buy this thing, and you’ll be happy. Don’t take a risk by getting involved instead with another *person*, and for God’s sake don’t *share* anything. Get your own lawn mower, camera, television, food in the refrigerator.

And, by the way, if you don't have your own room or your own phone, your parents don't love you."

I think the themes of *Resistance*—I don't know if I've ever thought about this actually—are to be vigilant and to seek loving relationships. That's what these people are trying to do. On one level, they're trying to reclaim the loving relationships they had when they were undergraduates together at Yale. When Owen sends out that e-mail in the first chapter, he's contacting some folks I think he hasn't heard from in five or ten years. He's just hoping they're still there. Because he makes reference in the book to a couple of people from whom we get no stories, my thought would be that some didn't respond, and some did.

CM: *I read once that you usually start your short stories with a line or an image in mind. But the stories in Resistance are so cohesive and interconnected, you must've had to plan the book's overall shape in advance of writing. How was composing this book different?*

Yeah, I've never written a book like this. It's not a "collection of stories"—that's misleading. If you pick up the book and start reading at the sixth story or the third, you miss something big. You have to get the setup first in order to understand completely the stories that follow.

In the first draft of *Resistance*, the character of Owen Daniels was still buried. Essentially, his story, "Apocalypse," the opening of the book, worked like a foreword. It was a declarative statement out of which all these stories were generated. In rewriting, I went back and brought each story up. I didn't change their structure very much, I just tried to find better language and make it tighter. To strip away everything that wasn't doing real work, get rid of the scaffolding, the space holders, that sort of thing. So I worked all the way through the stories like that but kept coming back to "Apocalypse" and seeing it didn't work. I couldn't discover how the fictional dimension of the story functioned. Do you know those two books of mine, *Desert Notes* and *River Notes*?

CM: *Sure.*

The first story in each is called "Introduction." Each is a work of fiction, but it functions like a nonfiction introduction. With this book, similarly I needed to create a real narrator in real circumstances, a person with a stake in life just like the other characters. Otherwise, the book wouldn't jell. It wasn't until I

realized that, and fully imagined Owen Daniels, that I understood what the book was about. Owen Daniels is the one of these people who happens to tell what the setup is, and he's the one through which we get the first hint of the broad philosophy they all share. In that discovery, I also saw that each one of the narrators had to become a more concrete person. That's what led to the citations at the end of the stories.

I had trouble with verb tenses in early drafts, because the characters are writing about their pasts to explain feelings they have in the present, which of course they didn't have in the past. The way I tried to solve that was, again, with the citations. It allows the reader to say, "Oh, from this point where the story ends, she went on to do these other things."

After those discoveries I could go back for the first time and edit the book all the way through as a *book*. There were about four or five edits to make each story work, then there was a sixth and a seventh complete edit, where I went through the entire manuscript to make sure I didn't have an allusion in the second story, say, that comes up again in the seventh story. In a short story collection maybe you could get away with that, but not here. Then with the final story, "Flight from Berlin," I built in that reference to Elizabeth Wangfu's letter, where she wrote Eric Rutterman about that Neanderthal child, to bring a character forward in the book.

I like all of those people. I often think about Elizabeth—such a little speed demon with her languages. She speaks all those languages. *Zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom!*

CM: *Was she the character that said something along the lines of "The reason there's no love in my life is I never made any room for it"?*

Yeah. Like Gary Sinclair in "Mortise and Tenon," the character who was sexually abused as a young man. He thought he had room in his life for love, but the door was locked. As I said, it's important for me to have it understood that these people achieved what they did because they became engaged with other people. Elizabeth went across the desert with this man, and it's the development of a loving relationship with him that opens up everything for her. The only character who seems to me to function a little bit differently is the final one, Eric Rutterman, in the jungle in Brazil. He's lost his wife, but obviously, if she hadn't stayed with him through those early years while he was so self-absorbed and self-important, he wouldn't have become the character we now

admire. He was the beneficiary of her love. What he's trying to work out in the story is the essence of a good, loving, just relationship with the Tukano people; but in the last line of the story we know he's awakened to what his wife's love meant, how it made his later life possible.

CM: *So he's trying to establish that love with a people, with an entire culture.*

Yeah. He also seems to be the character who's going to pull all this together. Perhaps he's the guy who e-mails all the stories to a publisher.

CM: *I have one final question. I wonder whether you, and this particular book, are ultimately hopeful? How does one cultivate hope when, as you recently wrote, "To read the newspapers today, to merely answer the phone, is to know the world is in flames"?*

I'm hopeful but not optimistic. The mind deals with optimism in an analytic way; it analyzes the data and then decides "I'm optimistic or pessimistic." The imagination, on the other hand, considers all the data and reinvests itself again in hope. The imagination believes in its own power to see what it's never seen before. It's not constrained by analysis.

So I get downcast, but I remain hopeful, and I think *Resistance* is hopeful. Its allegiance is to the imagination and to acts of imagination, and this is what tyrants most fear. They fear acts of imagination because they threaten the tyrant's control of reality. The book, I think, is also a kind of defense of the political imagination. It's saying, "We will give the tyrant neither our bodies nor our imaginations. We will not cease looking into these matters. And the tyrant won't know where we are. We'll turn up in some dark basement somewhere, like a light going on." I love what Owen Daniels says at the end of his story. It's so remarkable to me, his quiet elucidation of those civic principles, which are so easy to subscribe to. He doesn't want them to be forgotten. I don't either.