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LOREN EISELEY: SPIRITUAL WANDERER AND NATURALIST

Joan Rosen

Nature is Loren Eiseley's teacher. In the creatures of the natural world, in the stars, in the flora and fauna, he witnesses the miracles and wonders of the ages. In the Preface to **The Innocent Assassins** he writes, "Some have called me Gothic in my tastes. Others have chosen to regard me as a Platonist, a mystic, a concealed Christian, a midnight optimist....I am probably all these things by turns..." (11). Whatever he is, and he does defy categories, he unceasingly observes, searches, probes, and reflects upon just about everything he sees, hears, and touches, ever aware of the reflection of nature in the human mind. In **"The Mind as Nature"** included in **The Night Country**, Eiseley writes, "I believe that in one way or another we mirror in ourselves the universe with all its dark vacuity and also its simultaneous urge to create anew, in each generation, the beauty and terror of our mortal existence" (196). Eiseley can be abstract and speculative or exact and measuring; his is the eye of the trained observer who moves from observation to philosophical speculation in the tradition of W.H. Hudson and Henry David Thoreau; in fact, when he describes Thoreau as "a spiritual wanderer through the deserts of the modern world" in **"Thoreau's Vision of the Natural World"** in the essay collection **The Star Thrower** (224), he is describing himself. Indeed, most of what he writes about Thoreau in this eloquent essay, can be as aptly applied to his own life and work:

As a naturalist he possessed the kind of memory which fixes certain scenes in the mind forever--a feeling for the vastness and mystery contained in nature, a powerful aesthetic response when, in his own words, 'a thousand bare twigs gleam like cobwebs in the sun.' He had

been imprinted, as it were, by his own landscape at an early age. (224)

Eiseley was imprinted by his landscape, too. The child of a mother who was deaf and could hardly speak, and a father who was an itinerant actor and hardware salesman, he lived in a house where two kinds of communication developed. He did, in fact, inhabit two worlds: one of primitive, guttural speech and signs, the other a world of the drama and the lines of Shakespeare recited to him by his father. His origins mapped his life. In **The Night Country** he confesses:

When I was a small boy I lived, more than most children in two worlds. One was dark, hidden, and self-examining. The other world in which I also managed to exist was external, boisterous....These two worlds simultaneously existing in one growing brain had in them something of the dichotomy present in the actual universe, where one finds, behind the ridiculous, wonderful tent show of woodpeckers, giraffes, and hoptoads, some kind of dark, brooding, but creative void out of which these things emerge--some antimatter universe, some dark web of tensions running beneath and creating the superficial show of form that so delights us. (195)

The dark brooding behind the show marks Eiseley's work. Going back into the eons of geological time this scientist and philosopher tries to perceive the wonders of the world. Nature is our driving force; it is Eiseley declares in **"Thoreau's Vision,"** "man's attempt to define and delimit his world, whether seen or unseen. He knows intuitively that nature is a reality which existed before him and will

survive his individual death" (225).

Eiseley's days as a "bone-hunter," his expeditions in the Nebraska plains and the badlands, his knowledge of the isolation of that land and his discoveries while a member of the South Party and other expeditions kept him always aware of the fragility of life. Some of those discoveries, such as that of the twenty million year old Miocene cat in the summer of 1933, were not only important as scientific discoveries, but were also important as material for speculation on the nature of life and the march of the evolutionary process. The discovery of the bones in the area so rich in fossils, became real and immediate to Eiseley, and they gave him much of the material for his poems and his personal essays.

The theme of fragility certainly appears in "Where Did They Go?" from **The Innocent Assassins** dedicated to the members of The Old South Party.

Why did they go, why did they go
away--

plesiosaurs, fish-reptiles, ptero-
dactyls of the air, triceratops
beneath an armored shield and frills
of thorn, tyrannosaurs with little
withered hands, but jaws more

huge
than anything that stalks the modern
world--

why did they go?

.....
Why did they go? Because
time and the world love change. No
answer really, but I stare

and ask
what clock ticks in the heart. We,
too, have come most recently from
caverns in the rocks. Our flesh is
linked to these
great bones that we recover.

.....
Soft-stepping cats, even the great
wolves from endless snow--
I will come and lie beside you
comfortably.

It is the way
written in the rocks,
the way
of that mysterious nature I have ever
followed. (17)

We are part of all that has been; what once appeared strong, large, almost indestructible is subject to time and change—Flux is in the order of life and change is inevitable. Humans form one link in the evolutionary chain and are as fragile as their forbears.

The lessons of the natural world always fascinate Eiseley. His teachers are the birds, the fossils, the bones, and the flowers. Essays and poems abound with these images. In **The Immense Journey**, Eiseley writes of flowers and of the way they changed the world. He sees them as life-givers, as the angiosperms which changed the face of the planet. He tells us that the emergence of the flowers contained the emergence of man—a mystifying and amazing interlink in the complexity of all life. In this matter of fact explanation of the emergence of flowers, one senses the wonder Eiseley finds in all creative evolution.

The matter of fact becomes the poetic in "How Flowers Changed the World" also included in the late collection of essays, **The Star Thrower**. "Neither the birds nor the mammals, however, were quite what they seemed. They were waiting for the Age of Flowers" (69). He describes the world before flowers as slowmoving, like the reptiles that inhabited it, and elicits mental pictures of the green, mossy, stiff, upright world of the huge sequoias; with him we enter a world of giants in which mammals exist but are as yet lost in shadow. Man was, then, "like the genie in the bottle, encased in the body of a creature about the size of a rat" (69). Then the naturalist goes on to describe the miracle of pollenization without moisture—the miracle of the seed encased in the heart of a flower. Once more, the description is poetic; the naturalist becomes the poet.

In that moment, the golden towers of man, his swarming millions, his turning wheels, the vast learning of his packed libraries, would glimmer dimly there in the ancestor of wheat, a few seeds held in a muddy hand. Without the gift of flowers and the infinite diversity of their fruits, man and bird, if they had continued to exist at all, would be today

unrecognizable. Archaeopteryx, the lizard-bird, might still be snapping at beetles on a sequoia limb: man might still be a nocturnal insectivore gnawing a roach in the dark. The weight of a petal has changed the face of the world and made it ours. (75)

Like all of Eiseley's writing, this essay explains the evolutionary process from the point of view of a man personally in the grip of the workings of nature—a man aware that every moment of our history contains the miraculous and the wonderful. We are part of nature and it is part of us in an unending and unfolding process.

Eiseley often pictures himself alone in the world, an isolated individual, a man of the night, a restless insomniac who forges a bond with the creatures of the natural world particularly at the approach of dawn. Again, in **"The Judgment of the Birds,"** as in **"How Flowers Changed the World,"** from the same collection, the speculative, contemplative poetic voice speaks. Personal experience prompts that speculation. Unable to sleep one night in a New York hotel, Eiseley goes to his window and sees the pigeons beginning to move out about the city. The watcher feels a pull toward the birds, as if his hands move by themselves and wish to take him into flight with the birds. In a moment, the speaker realizes that he cannot enter the world of the birds, that he is, "after all, only a man" (29). But for a short time, he has seen the world from an inverted angle—the world of the city, man's own creation which Eiseley tells us is not man's at all.

I will never forget how those wings went round and round, and how, by the merest pressure of the fingers and a feeling for air, one might go away over the roofs....I think of it sometimes in such a way that the wings, beginning far down in the black depths of the mind begin to rise and whirl till all the mind is lit by their spinning, and there is a sense of things passing away, but lightly, as a wing might veer over an obstacle. (29)

This moment of intersection with the natural world is what allows him to apprehend the miraculous; a moment when he teeters at the border of two worlds—perhaps those same two worlds he has spoken of in **"The Mind as Nature."** As always, Eiseley proceeds from the personal anecdote; these moments of observation become the basis for all of his speculations. This time, walking in a heavy fog, he is startled by the close flight and terrified squawking of a crow that he knows—a bird whose world meeting with the hawk in **"The Judgment of the Birds,"** stays in the writer's mind as he wonders why the bird has ventured out of his known world into the space inhabited by man.

Finally, as I worked my way homeward along the path, the solution came to me....The borders of our worlds had shifted....That crow, and I knew him well, never under normal circumstances flew low near men. He had been lost all right, but it was more than that. He had thought he was high up, and when he encountered me looming gigantically through the fog, he had perceived a ghastly, and to the crow mind, unnatural sight. He had seen a man walking on air, desecrating the very heart of the crow kingdom, a harbinger of the most profound evil a crow mind could conceive of—air-walking men....

He caws now when he sees me leaving for the station in the morning, and I fancy that in that note I catch the uncertainty of a mind that has come to know things are not always what they seem. He has seen a marvel in his heights of air and is no longer as other crows. He has experienced the human world from an unlikely perspective. He and I share a viewpoint in common: our worlds have interpenetrated, and we both have faith in the miraculous. (33-34)

This particular essay is full of lessons learned from the natural world, for Eiseley goes on to relate stories of other birds passing judgments upon life—life as it once existed in what seems to be the dead earth: the Badlands, also known as

The Evil Lands. Again, he is alone when he has his vision or revelation, when he hears and sees the flock of warblers high above him—in a moment he understands that all those elements which lie dead beneath him and once contained life—carbon, phosphorous, calcium, still are alive in the birds who tell him that life and death are contained in each other. He had been thinking only of death as he held the barren earth of this wasteland in his hands, but the birds sing of life, and this is his lesson.

The gift of Eiseley as writer and as spiritual wanderer exists in the tone of wonder, of mystery, of awe that permeates all he writes. The reader becomes a participant watching with him on the high plains, leaning out of windows, or standing on a ladder watching spiders. In the final anecdote of this essay, Eiseley tells the story of the raven, "the bird of death," who attacks and kills a defenseless nestling. The nestling's parents are helpless and outraged; the raven is indifferent. The cries of the parents are joined by those of several other small birds who share their misery. Together they seem to point at the murderer who has violated "a dim intangible ethic" (33).

The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death....There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil things were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were singers of life, and not of death. (34)

Though Eiseley is always concerned with the brevity of our lives, with the frailty of human beings, and with the vastness of the universe and our inability to

understand it as fully as we might, he sings of life, the triumph of being over non-being, and looks with awe at the continuity of all of nature as glorifying life.

Birds often signify the connection between the human and natural worlds for Eiseley in both prose and poetry. We have looked at one prose essay, and there are others, particularly in the autobiographical work **All The Strange Hours**. Now, however, I will turn to two poems which also focus on birds for their central images. In "**The Sunflower Song**" from **The Innocent Assassins**, the speaker feeds sunflower seeds to the cardinal who comes to his window ledge. The seeds come from the fields known to the speaker, the "waste fields far west," the fields of his childhood which will always be a part of him even though he is now a city dweller in the East. Through the seeds the cardinal and the speaker join; the human and natural worlds come together and the cardinal sings his song, which, in turn, reminds the speaker of his childhood; the bird transforms the seeds and thus creates a miracle.

It is the seeds that sing, that
without seeds,
the cardinal could not sing, and
seeds are brought up from the leaf
mould underneath the dark, formed,
shaped within a flower's heart,
encased and strewn
for any bird, like those piano
scrolls we pumped at in our youth,
the music sounding
all through the house, so here the
brisk red cardinal sings a bright
sunflower song dissolving
the sullen silence of this eastern
spring. I think this

bird a miracle
to transform a seed, but then I think
the flower
also a miracle and so work down to
earth, the one composer no one has
ever seen but all have heard. (36)

Notice, too, that the flower and the seeds themselves are miracles. In the poetry all of the images come together, each feeding on the other, each relating to an incident in the poet's life and all dealing with the

creatures of the earth. In nature Eiseley reads his own countenance.

In **"The Cardinals"** from **Notes of an Alchemist**, the emphasis is on the birds as players in a ritual of life which is beyond understanding. Again, they are teachers. The male and female cardinal have lived alone in the winter, depending on no one; now they appear on the speaker's window-ledge and exchange seeds "in an ancient ritual/welcoming spring" (93). Their demeanor is "grave and dignified" (93), yet they are very wild; we do not understand them because our standards are human standards, but we learn from them as they depend on and respect one another. Looking at the cardinals leads the speaker to contemplate creation, the ritual that accompanies life, and the dignity of the wild.

Finally, the poem, **"Magic,"** establishes a bond between the beautiful red bird and the poet. As in **"The Judgment of the Birds,"** their worlds intersect, and the lesson is for the human—the cardinal becomes the magician, the transformer; his presence has changed the life of the man as one can read in the final sections of the poem:

Magic runs to the beginnings of life
because

life is a gift and uncertain.
Both I and the bird practiced magic
and were
beginning to pass a mutual
threshold.

.
I was the sorcerer's apprentice for a
little while. I am
powerless without him.
I learned from him also how little
magic can do
to stave off death
but this does not seem
the whole lesson.
I continue to feed the birds. I wait
for another
friendly magician.
He convinced me
we were on the same path.

.
How does a man say to his fellows
he has been enchanted
by a bird?

(Notes, 68-69)

Eiseley's poetry speaks of the plains, the forests, the lakes and ponds he visited as a boy and as a field worker in Nebraska and Colorado; he looks to the past as he finds bones and relics of time gone by; he sees that past changed but present in the moments of his discoveries, and he envisions a future which both frightens and thrills him. Eiseley has a great regard for his fellow human beings, but he is also frightened by the possible destruction the human being is capable of perpetrating. He is afraid that the potential for good and evil is not in proportion, and that humans do not take the time to see themselves as part of nature—part of a larger scheme in which only they have the ability to reason. This ability carries with it responsibility. Thus, the individual must look to the natural past and to the miraculous in the process of evolution to understand—we are but small creatures when compared, for example, with Halley's Comet. We must see ourselves in proportion to the universe we inhabit; we are not free—we live in a cosmic prison and we must know what it demands of us. We would do well to remember that we are no freer in terms of the universe than are the phagocytes in our bodies without whom we could not function; to them we may not exist, but without them, we could not exist; on this planet, all life depends on life. So Eiseley tells us poetically in **"Song for the Wolf's Coat,"**

Under the wind's cold roof what
shelter have we--
What tattered garment can the flesh
put on?
Walk in the wolf's coat, you would be
more happy;
Stare with a wolf's eye, you would
greet the sun

Only as warmth from rain. In the
hollow bracken
Stretching your toes and fiercely at
peace,
The minutes would run and your wild
thought be unshaken,
By the side of death you would doze
and take your ease.

We, in the fury of thought, drink
bitter water,

Loren Eiseley

The crystal springs of the mind are
like acid pools--
Under the wind's cold roof we are
lost and homeless,
And the flesh is flesh--we have cast
the garment of fools.

But better we might have run in the
wolf's coat, shaggy,
Fierce, with the yellow eyes of death
in the sun,
In the flesh of beasts, with the
blood like a boiling caldron--
In the flesh of beasts it had been
better to run. (40)

Bitterness and disappointment fill this
poem. We humans do not stop to look at our

world as inhabited by creatures other than
ourselves. The poet pleads for continuity
—for oneness with the natural world. He
asks us to remember that "a flower might
open a man's mind, a box tortoise endow
him with mercy, a mist enable him to see
his own shifting and uncertain configura-
tion" (**Star Thrower** 238). Loren
Eiseley does, through a "kind of alchemy,"
transmute the sharp images of his
scientific profession into "something
deeply subjective" (**Notes** 11). To know him
we must probe and discover with him—we
must make the "immense journey" and explore
the "firmament of time" with this alchemist
who transforms the ordinary into the extra-
ordinary by inhabiting two worlds
simultaneously.

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