

Searching for Loren Eiseley: An Attempt at
Reconstruction from a Few Fragments

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American literati often view scientists with mixed feelings of awe, envy and perhaps pained disappointment. Loren Corey Eiseley might have won the admiration of poets sooner had he not first appeared in scientist's clothing. To regard him as a scientist who wrote well (a Bronowski, a Snow, a Bruner) or a tinkerer with the left hand, however, would be a misapprehension, and worse, a condescension.

Many onlookers were slow to recognize Eiseley's talent. W. H. Auden was one who was not. They met once, in the early 1970s in New York City. The conversation was recalled by Eiseley in his autobiography, All The Strange Hours, published in 1975. Auden could be short with scientists. He had once written, "Thou shalt not sit/ With statisticians nor commit/ A social science." (Note 1) He would not have long suffered a foolish scientist, not for all the ardent pleas to bridge the two cultures. Their one meeting was warm; they spoke of childhood and earliest memories. A poem soon appeared dedicated to Auden. Eiseley probably wrote it on the train ride back to Philadelphia after their meeting. Auden looked forward eagerly to the first published volume of Eiseley's poems, The Innocent Assassins: "I know that whatever else they may be, they are not going to sound like anybody else." He was proud that "And As For Man" was dedicated to him.

In 1970, Auden published a critical appreciation of Eiseley's work in The New Yorker. He praised Eiseley; he had read everything Eiseley had written. The subject of Eiseley's work evoked the gnostic, the mystical in Auden. "I must now openly state my own bias and say that I do not believe in Chance; I believe in Providence and Miracles." "I do not personally believe there is such a thing as a 'random' event. 'Unpredictable' is a factual description; 'random' contains, without having the honesty to admit it, a philosophical bias typical of persons who have forgotten how to pray. Though he does use the term once, I don't think Dr. Eiseley believes in it either." Yet, for all the vicarious satisfaction one might feel to see one poet so honored by another, Auden's praises fail to illuminate one side of Eiseley, perhaps the more important side. Eiseley was no prayerful man, short of some vague pantheistic sense of the word. The side of Eiseley that was left untouched by his admirer would not have been neglected by the early Auden, the Auden whom Edward Mendelson has recently shown to have been one of the first

poets to read and be moved artistically by Freud. (Note 2) Auden could hardly have lost altogether his early fascination with the dynamics of inner emotional life. Perhaps for all its apparent cosmological rapture, Auden's response to Eiseley's work came in part from the understanding they shared: that the child lives on in the man. For, in spite of the numinous quality of his writings, Eiseley was no mystic. In the end, he revealed himself to be a psychologist—a student, an observer of the mind—with extraordinary gifts.

To regard Eiseley as a mystic does him no particular honor. The tag hangs awkwardly on a man who labored as a paleontologist during the most rigid and positivist half century of the science. Edward Hoagland read The Night Country and called Eiseley's imagination "transcendent." Robert Kirsch heard "a poetic cry, even a mystical one" in The Invisible Pyramid. In the foreword to The Innocent Assassins, Eiseley's first book of poetry, he declared his allegiances and gently reflected the aura of mysticism to its proper source:

As is readily observable, these are the poems of a bone Hunter and a naturalist, or at least those themes are Predominant in the book. 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. Like most poets I am probably all these things by turns, or such speculations are read into me by those who are pursuing some night path of their own.

No matter how much one might see in Eiseley's work, in the end to call it "mystical" is faint-hearted, a withholding of comprehension, perhaps even a staunching of an emotional response. One wishes to bar from conscious experience the unwelcome thoughts of death and love that Eiseley evokes with tangible objects and common actions. Mysticism is that which can not be rationally grasped; a work deemed mystical need not be fully apprehended and may be forgotten more easily. In this respect, an attitude toward literature may imitate an attitude toward dreams. A dreamer may transform his dreams into psychodrama or pick through them in search of archetypes and residue of the collective unconscious of the race; both routes bypass the terror of the dream, the terror that justifies the work of disguise that is characteristic of many dreams and some art. The inclination of mind that too quickly relegates either a dream or work of art to the category of mysticism may fail to understand either.

I wish most to dispell any notion that Eiseley was some sort of cosmic guru, a seer with eyes trained on the empty darkness beyond the solar system about which he wrote so much. He was a scientist with a poet's gifts. As he grew older, his scholarly

writings grew more evocative and poetic, and he dared to publish more poetry. He died in 1977, less than two months short of his seventieth birthday; in 1975, he published an autobiography, All the Strange Hours. For twenty years, Eiseley had been digging at the site of his past life. In a poem or an essay, he would uncover a bone, regard it contemplatively, then toss it aside. In All the Strange Hours, he excavated an entire life. To understand Eiseley's writings, they must be read in reverse sequence. The autobiography is the key to the images and reflections that make up his ten books and few hundred poems. Eiseley's autobiography is easily one the most psychologically penetrating works to be published in a generation. It is built out of the reflections of an insomniac, from the recollections and night thoughts that come to a melancholic after the television set is shut off and the night grows too late for friends to telephone.

Autobiography.

A paradox surrounds All the Strange Hours, as well as most of Eiseley's later writings. Although they may rightly be claimed among the most personally revealing portrayals of a life, Eiseley remains in conventional ways a private figure throughout and in the end. He has a wife, one can infer from two off-hand remarks. About his marriage no more is said. There may have been children, or there may not. The people who walked through his adult life are blurred, their conventional lineaments indistinct, seen through aged window panes, half hidden in shadows. Only his mother and his father are clearly drawn. The anonymity is appropriate, since persons in his adult life served in one way or another to help him hold onto an image of his parents and eventually understand them. Colleagues and friends must not be seen too clearly so that they may serve in place of those so clearly seen and never forgotten.

Eiseley explored and revealed those parts of his life so private that lesser writers run from them into numbing activity or drink. And yet he remained a private person. The paradox turns on precisely what it is he disclosed. He revealed nothing superficial that would give one the sense of acquaintance that marks a neighbor, say, as an individual. Did he prefer the Phillies to the Philadelphia Symphony? Did he always wear his hair in that dated pompadour the publicity photos reveal? All that one knows of him in conventional terms must be gathered from the dust covers and "About the Author" inscriptions, which must have embarrassed him painfully. In All the Strange Hours,

Eiseley excavated the emotions of a painful life, yet he preserved privacy and dignity. He wrote of those things that now bind men together and always have: the wonder at life, the search for uncertain love, the fear of death. He revealed about himself that which is shared by all persons but which few can feel and fewer still can express. He betrayed nothing that was individual or that should have remained private.

The understanding and appreciation of Eiseley's poetry and expressive essays is enhanced when they are viewed psychoanalytically. Like a dream or an analytic hour, they are constructions of a rich unconscious reservoir, which Eiseley was extraordinarily capable of tapping. The seemingly illogical sequence of images is strung on a thread of unconscious need and conflict. Properly viewed, the images are coherent and complete, a logical expression of the child and man Eiseley was. He is Richard Jones's "dream poet," (Note 3) or Keats's man with vision, "well nurtured in his mother tounge" ("For Poesy alone can tell her dreams, / with the fine spell of words alone can save / Imagination from the sable charm / and dumb enchantment.") His essays no less than his poems reflect the qualities of dreams: scenes shift rapidly through no apparent logical sequence; individuals are not developed as complete personalities, rather they are invoked to symbolize a single quality; and the images are visual scenes projected on a soundless background, as dreams are predominantly visual hallucinations. Through his own efforts, I assume, Eiseley struggled throughout his adult life to find a place beside his dream censor for a dream poet. He succeeded as few have.

"The Hidden Teacher".

One literary effort may serve as well as another to illustrate how Eiseley crafted poetry from his inner world. "The Hidden Teacher," an essay of some 5,000 words, which Eiseley wrote in about 1963, was first published in The Unexpected Universe (1969). It was republished in The Star Thrower (1978), which contains an introduction by Auden. It appears as the eleventh essay in the first section of The Star Thrower, which carried the title "Nature and autobiography." "The Hidden Teacher" seems a particularly challenging choice for analysis because of its opacity and mystical quality. The dramatis personae are unusual: a spider, a filamentous seed, the Hindu god Krishna, an eccentric professor raised by a Pequot-Mohegan squaw, a novelist haunted by a dream of a mirror.

The essay opens with a brief recounting of a portion of scripture (roughly, the 32nd through the 42nd chapters of the Book of Job). Job is questioned pitilessly by God, the voice in the whirlwind; he feels tormented and betrayed because God neither provided the answers nor manifested Himself. Wisdom is spoken by the young bystander, Elihu: “. . . if the old are not always wise, neither can the teacher’s way be ordered by the young whom he would teach.” (“THT,” p. 117) (Note 4) Eiseley’s thesis is over 2,000 years old: “. . . our teachers may be hidden, even the greatest teacher” (p.116). Like Job, Eiseley may have felt old and put upon when he wrote this essay. He was in his late fifties; soon he would sit in the Provost’s chair of his university. Students had begun to seek him out. He felt anger toward some of them; it intrudes once or twice in this essay. His message is ostensibly directed at those who loudly demanded the right to “evaluate” their professors and who, given the power, would have turned true education into something shallow and obvious. The introduction is a self-conscious reflection on the essay itself. It stands like a frame outside the rapid flow of images and scenes that soon follow. One can imagine its having been written last and tacked onto the essay proper, something of an apology, perhaps, for what might have struck even its author as opaque. The essay then rushes for 4,500 words through a sequence of five visual memories with interpolated reflections on the mystery and unpredictability of learning.

Eiseley is hunting fossils on a rainy morning in his beloved Badlands or Wild Cat Hills. He encounters a hug orb spider tending her web in the buffalo grass. He touches a strand of the web with a pencil; the spider tends her guy-lines, and tries to read the movements but the message is incomprehensible.

A pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed. Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside was irrational, extraneous, at best raw material for spider. As I proceeded on my way along the gully, like a vast impossible shadow, I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist. (“THT,” p.117)

As he tramps on his way, he contemplates the white blood cells racing through his body, as indifferent to their host and ignorant of him as the spider is unknowing of the universe beyond her web. Thoughts rush in on Eiseley and the reader: the evolution of human

life, the tenuous hold of the individual and the species to a place on the earth. Then, Eiseley offers his own analysis:

I saw, at last, the reason for my recollection of that great Spider on the arroyo's rim, fingering its universe against the sky. The spider was a symbol of man in miniature. The wheel of the web brought the analogy home clearly. Man, too, lies at the heart of a web, a web extending through the starry reaches of sidereal space, as well as backward into the dark realm of prehistory. His great eye upon Mount Palomar looks into a distance of millions of light-years, his radio ear hears the whisper of even more remote galaxies, he peers through the electron microscope upon the minute particles of his own being. It is a web no creature of earth has ever spun before. Like the orb spider, man lies at the heart of it, listening. ("THT," p.119) What is it we are a part of that we do not see, as the spider was not gifted to discern my face, or my little probe into her world? ("THT," p.120)

True Learning, but more, begins in a sense of wonder. "Man . . .

is at heart a listener and a searcher for some transcendent realm beyond himself . . . he searches as the single living cell in the beginning must have sought the ghostly creature it was to serve. ("THT," p.121)

The scene shifts. Eiseley is standing in shopping center near his Philadelphia home. He sees what appears to be a long legged spider climbing down a wall. It swings into the air, rides the wind into the parking lot and then back toward him.

With great difficulty I discovered the creature was actually a filamentous seed, seeking a place to hide and scurrying about with the uncanny surety of a conscious animal. In fact, it did escape me before I could secure it. Its flexible limbs were stiffer than milkweed down, and, propelled by the wind, it ran rapidly and evasively over the pavement. It was like a gnome scampering somewhere with a hidden packet – for all that I could tell, a totally new one: one of the jumbled alphabets of life. ("THT," pp.121-2)

The "jumbled alphabet of life" is the DNA code, and Eiseley's brief meeting with this second spider causes him to wonder what strange mutations may lie in common places. He drops this thought without reflecting further on it.

The third scene is introduced with two curious sentences.

It is told in the Orient of the Hindu god Krishna that his mother, wiping his mouth when he was a child, inadvertently peered in and beheld the universe, though the sight was mercifully and immediately veiled from her. In a sense,

this is what happened to me. ("THT," p.122)

He recalls a scene from elementary school. The principal parades a young child from classroom to classroom. He is a calculating prodigy, perhaps more. Huge arithmetic problems are written on the chalkboard; the child, soon removed from school by his parents, was a missionary to the paleanthropes, sent to teach a moral lesson. Eiseley learned from him what none of them had intended to teach. . . .

we collapse inward with age. We die. Our bodies . . . are dismissed into their elements. What is carried onward, assuming we have descendants, is the little capsule of instructions such as I encountered hastening by me in the shape of a running seed. We have learned the first biological lesson: that in each generation life passes through the eye of a needle . . . As the ages pass, so too variants of the code . . . or the code changes by subtle degrees through the statistical altering of individuals; until I, as the fading Neanderthals must once have done, have looked with still-living eyes upon the creature whose genotype was possibly to replace me. ("THT," p. 234)

That which happened to Deva Ki was not what happened to Eiseley. She saw perfection and remained ignorant of it; he saw genius and recognized it. The similarity on which he first remarks must be found in some different meaning.

Eiseley pauses between the third and fourth recollections in a contemplation on the evolution of civilization, carried as it is on "invisible puffs of air known as words, which like the genetic code, are shuffled and reshuffled as they hurry through eternity. Like a mutation, an idea may be recorded in the wrong time, to lie latent like a recessive gene and spring once more to life in auspicious era." ("THT," p. 124)

He reaches back thirty years for the fourth scene. A young man, who later came to play a central role in Eiseley's life, sits in a university classroom; the intricacies of Hebrew linguistics are being deciphered. He speaks to his professor:

"I believe I can understand that, sir. It is very similar to what exists in Mohegan."
The linguist paused and adjusted his glasses. "Young man," he said, "Mohegan is a dead language. Nothing has been recorded of it since the eighteenth century. Don't bluff."
"But sir," the young student countered hopefully, "it can't be dead so long as an old woman I know still speaks it. She is Pequot-Mohegan. I learned a bit of vocabulary from her and could speak with her myself. She took care of me when I was a child." ("THT," pp.125-6)

Within months, the young man had published a paper on Mohegan linguistics; for the rest of his life he studied the language and culture of the northeastern Indians. He was changed by a hidden teacher.

But just who was the teacher? The young man himself, his instructor, or that solitary speaker of a dying tongue who had so yearned to hear her people's voice that she had softly jabbed it to a child? Later, this man was to become one of my professors. I absorbed much from him . . . I have regarded this man as an extraordinary individual, in fact, a hidden teacher. ("THT," p.126)

The final scene concerns a dream. A friend of Eiseley's, a writer, relates a dream that came to him while he was working on a novel. It might have been Eiseley's dream; it probably was, for he heard it recounted with "a sympathetic shudder" and asked "out of a comparable experience" of his own whether the writer ever dreamed it again.

The writer dreams of walking a snowy path through an orchard that led to the porch of his childhood home. He peers through a window:

I was drawn by a strange mixture of repulsion and desire to press my face against the glass. I knew intuitively they were all there waiting for me within, if I could by see them. My mother and my father. Those I had loved and those I hated. But the window was black to my gaze. I hesitated a moment and struck a match. For an instant in that freezing silence I saw my father's face glimmer wan and remote behind the glass. My mother's face was there, with the hard, distorted lines that marked her later years . . . As the match guttered down, my face was pressed almost to the glass. In some quick transformation, such as only a dream can effect, I saw that it was my own face into which I stared, just as it was reflected in the black glass. ("THT," p. 127)

"The Hidden Teacher" Analyzed.

Essays like this one gave Eiseley his reputation as a mystic. But the mystical tone stems less from his reaching for something cosmic and transcendent than from the close connection between what he wrote and his unconscious, his dream maker. The essay is the mystery of a night's dream work, but it can be unraveled. One can not be certain how the essay was conceived, yet it has the quality of a single night's dreaming or an hour's recollections. Scenes are recalled serially; they are felt to be connected, but the

connecting thread is disguised. The task of the analysis is to find the thread and trace it back toward its origin.

Eiseley's topic in the essay was the hidden teacher who instructs, or more that that, changes a life. The hidden teacher may not reveal itself to the pupil for years or at all. A warning is sounded to those who would take their teachers or their own learning too simply. But in a sense not intended by Eiseley, there may be even more about the unseen forces that shape a life in the pages of "The Hidden Teacher," for the essay speaks of dissembling while it dissembles. There is something hidden within the essay which speaks as surely as the words of the essay itself of those forces which teach and mold a life. The essay is also a recapitulation of Eiseley's own development as a mature adult through a series of identifications with the adults he loved and tried to hold close. The sequence of images in the essay recapitulates the identifications Eiseley passed through on his way to maturity. First his mother, then his father; in the end, the flame fed by both is guttering low and Eiseley, old and childless perhaps, watches as his line is dying out.

The first two scenes in "The Hidden Teacher" grow out of Eiseley's intense and deeply ambivalent feelings toward his mother. She was his father's second wife. His father married her in his late thirties after his first wife died. Eiseley wrote much about her; she is likely to enter any narrative or poem: ". . . my mother was stone deaf I was growing up alone in a house whose dead silence was broken only by the harsh discordant jangling of a voice that could not hear itself." (The Night Country, p. 197) Her deafness became a *leitmotiv* in his creative work; it was symbolic of his unfulfilled wish for a comforting and reassuring maternal love. Again and again in life's noisy and trying moments, he escaped to the silence of graveyards: in the anxious days while enrolling in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, when as a young man he learned that his lungs were tubercular, and as a paleontologist digging in the graveyards of primitive man.

Of course he loved her, though he denied it. He admired her courage, but he also knew ". . . that she was paranoid, neurotic and unstable."

There will be those to say, in this mother-worshipping Culture, that I am harsh, embittered. They will be quite wrong. Why should I be embittered? It is far too late. A month ago, after a passage of many years, I stood above

her grave in a place called Wyuka. We, she and I, were close to being one now, lying like the skeletons of last year's leaves in a fence corner. And it was all nothing. Nothing, do you understand? All the pain, all the anguish. Nothing. We were, both of us, merely the debris life always leaves in its passing. . . . I murmured to myself and tried to tell her this belatedly: Nothing, mama, nothing. Rest. You could never rest. This was your burden. But now, sleep. Soon I will join you, although, forgive me, not here. Neither of us then would rest. I will go far to lie down; the time draws on; it is unlikely that I will return. Now you will understand, I said, touching the October warmth of the gravestone. It was for nothing. It has taken me all my life to grasp this one fact.

The lines shatter a thousand pretenses and remind us, as he says, that we are a mother-worshipping culture. Eiseley's anger shapes the first two scenes of "The Hidden Teacher" and ties them together: first the rejection and loneliness, then the hateful retaliation. The spider – as it is in the Freudian notion of *die Symbolik* (Note 5) -- is the malevolent mother. She lies at the center of a web stretched between stalks of buffalo grass in an arroyo in the arid West. Thus she resembles the Spider Women of Navaho mythology, one of the thirty-five monsters and dangers spawned by the Navaho women's self-abuse. In the Navaho religion, the Spider Women plays a dual role, sometimes helpful but more often horrible. (Note 6) The spider's malevolence is expressed toward Eiseley in a peculiar way. He enters her world with the point of his pencil, but self-absorbed and unequipped to sense the intrusion, the spider takes no notice: ". . . I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist."

The child, rejected and alone, travels back and forth between pathetic longing for the ungiving mother's love and angry retaliation. Eiseley's next recollection symbolizes his rejection of her. At the opening of the second scene, he mistakes a seed for a spider; in fact they are one: the spider in the gully has become the seed which carries the duplicator of the species inside her. He reflects on whether the seed that is blown across his path may be the statistical improbability, the mutation of the line, the lower order that begets the higher order. The meaning of the recollection and its hostility are enhanced by the succeeding image. Deva Ki opens the mouth of Krishna, and if her senses had not been shrouded, she would have seen that she begat a god. The defective mother bore and nursed a genius; spider, seed and Hindu. Surely Eiseley knew even as a young man that

he was gifted well beyond normal limits. Shortly after his father died when Eiseley was twenty, his father's letters to a sister were burned.

A week or so after the funeral I came upon her incinerating in the yard the remaining letters. Perhaps it was just as well. As I stood beside her a charred sheet turned over. Written across it in the fine bold penmanship of my father was a sentence rapidly being obliterated in the flames. I saw it curl and crumble as I read.

"Remember, the boy is a genius, but moody." Whatever reservations the letter contained would never be read by me. There was only the little licking flame and the words curling up and going black. I could never reread them. Of course I was no genius, of course I was moody, as anyone young would have been under the restraints of that household. Nevertheless, the words were proudly comforting. My father had recognized me after all.

His demurrer is no simple false modesty. Of course he wished himself a genius. No man writes such themes as he wrote unless he feels himself set far apart. His account of the mathematical prodigy in the third scene is tinged with envy. As an intellectual and an academic, he would never have claimed himself a genius. But the lowly seed whose kind was to be surpassed by the improbable mutation within it, the unwitting Deva Ki who bore a god, and the prodigy performing before the paleanthropes speak of an immodest wish we all may be forgiven in our dreams.

The side of the mind that wishes one were not the child of one's hated parents is the same side of the mind that dreams dreams in which this wish comes true. The "family romance" dream is a fantasy in which the child's relationship to its true parents is altered; often the child in the dream becomes a foundling. (Note 7) Eiseley had such dreams, we can assume, though, as with the dream at the end of "The Hidden Teacher," he usually disguised dreams and their dreamers.

I remembered a ruined farmhouse that I had stumbled upon in my solitary ramblings after school. The road was one I had never taken before. Rain was falling. Leaves lay thick on the abandoned road. Hesitantly I approached and stood in the doorway. Plaster had collapsed from the ceiling; wind mourned through the empty windows. I crunched tentatively over shattered glass upon the floor. Papers lay scattered about in wild disorder. Some looked like school examination papers. I picked one up in curiosity, but this my own mature judgment tells me, no one will believe. The name Eiseley was scrawled across the cover. I was too shocked even to read the paper. No such family had ever been mentioned by my parents. We had come from elsewhere.

But here, in poverty like our own, at the edge of town, had subsisted in this ruined house a boy with my own name. Gingerly I picked up another paper. There was the scrawled name again, not too unlike my own rough signature. The date was what might have been expected in that tottering clapboard house. It read from the last decade of the century before. They were gone, whoever they were, and another Eiseley was tiptoeing through the ruined house.

All that remained in a room that might in those days have been called the parlor were two dice lying forlornly amidst the plaster, forgotten at the owners' last exit. I picked up the pretty cubes uncertainly in the growing sunset through the window, and on impulse cast them. I did not know how adults played, I merely cast and cast again, making up my own game as I played. Sometimes I thought I won and murmured to myself as children will. Sometimes I thought I lost, but I liked the clicking sound before I rolled the dice. For what stakes did I play, with my childish mind gravely considering? I think I was too naïve for such wishes as money and fortune. I played, and here memory almost fails me. I think I played against the universe . . . I played against time . . . , I played for adventure and escape. Then, clutching the dice, but not the paper with my name, I fled frantically down the leafsodden unused road never to return. One of the dice survives still in my desk drawer. The time is sixty years away. (ATSH, pp. 30-1)

He played with dice and asked why he had been cast down into his father's second marriage, the unhappy one. As a man and paleontologist, he played with bones and produced scientific speculations on the origin of life. He wrote wonderful stories of the evolution of life; there too, he was aware that the mutation of genes was a toss of dice that could not be predicted.

Eiseley and Freud were matched in those circumstances (each the first son of a second marriage) and in that ability which permitted each to know the wishes of a child's heart. Eiseley's father's first wife had borne a son fourteen years before Loren was born to the second wife. The other Eiseley family in the dream is the father's first family. As he watched his father die, he realized that he had been born an orphan.

It was the last day. I stood in a corner of the room and watched him die. For hours there had been no sign of consciousness. A nurse intervened. She shouted in his ear. "Your son Leo is here. Leo has come. Leo, Leo is here." Leo was my half-brother, fourteen years older than I, the son of an earlier marriage. Leo's mother was dead. I was the child of a second marriage, long after.

Slowly, to my boundless surprise, the dying man's eyes, indifferent to me for many hours, opened. There was an instant of recognition between the two of them, from which

I was excluded. My father had come back an infinite distance for that meeting. It was wordless.

I walked out into the hall unnoticed. It was only just, I thought fleetingly without rancor. Leo was the son of my father's youth, of a first love who had perished in her springtime and of whom my father could never bring himself to speak. . . . My brother who had been summoned was the one true son, not I. For him my father had come the long way back, if only for a moment. (ATSH, p. 15)

At age ten, Loren rejected his mother symbolically, but in a way that even his young mind knew was final.

She pursued us to a nearby pasture and in the rasping voice of deafness ordered me home.

My comrades of the fields stood watching I sensed my status in this gang was at stake. I refused to come. I had refused a parental order that was arbitrary and uncalled for and, in addition, I was humiliated. My mother was behaving in the manner of a witch. She could not hear, she was violently gesticulating without dignity

Slowly I turned and looked at my companions. Their faces could not be read. They simply waited, doubtless waited for me to break the apron strings that rested lightly and tolerably upon themselves. And so in the end I broke my father's injunction; I ran, and with me ran my childish companions, . . . with the witch, her hair flying, her clothing disarrayed, stumbling after. Escape, escape, the first stirrings of the running man. Miles of escape. (ATSH, pp. 32-4)

Eiseley became the running man, who is the subject of a poem ("Prison Break, 1912" in All the Night Wings) and the subject of the last chapters of his autobiography. In their first meeting, he and Auden exchanged earliest memories of public events. For Auden, it was the Titanic disaster. Eiseley spoke enigmatically of a prison break. He was five, and a convict blasted his way out of the Nebraska penitentiary and escaped into a blizzard. The prison stood near his home, barely beyond the edge of the city, a gray threat in the fantasies of the town's children. When the posse brought the convict back, they pushed his dead face out of the train window for the crowd at the station to see. A dead man who fled and died became the symbol for a child's wish to escape.

At about age 18, Eiseley did escape. He rode the rails west. It was a fleeing toward death, and a death eventually ended it. The paradox of his escape was that while deserting his mother, he assumed her identity—not finding her love in reality, he gained the wished-for image by becoming her.

...my mother, who had been offered a safe refuge in the home of her sister, quarreled and fought with everyone. Finally, in her inelegant way of putting things, she had “skipped town” to work as a seamstress, domestic, or housekeeper upon farms What ensued on these various short-lived adventures I neither know to this day, nor wish to know.

For a while in the late 1920’s, he lived a solitary and silent life in the boxcars and hobo camps of the West. He was summoned home as his father lay dying of cancer. The summons was fateful; it took him out of a life headed for an early, anonymous death and placed him in another that made him famous.

When a loved one dies, the survivor may assume some characteristic of the dead person as a way of holding onto a lost image. A mannerism, a habit, or an attitude of the loved person may be adopted; or so much may be taken on that the identification encompasses nearly all that is visible. In small part or *in toto*, the deserted comes to identify with the deserter. Eiseley cried when it was obvious that the cancer had control; he only cried once more in his life, because of a woman. He took from his father things that would hold his image inside for a lifetime. His father was a traveling hardware salesman before he died. As a young man he had been an itinerant actor playing Shakespeare in little midwestern “opera houses.”

He had a beautiful resonant speaking voice. Although we owned no books, and although when I knew him in middle age a harsh life had dimmed every hunger except that for rest, he could still declaim long rolling Elizabethan passages that caused shivers to run up my back.

“Give me my Robe, put on my Crowne; I have Immortall longings in me.”

(The Night Country, p.198)

Eiseley was twenty when he came home to stand by his father as he died. The poet died and the son turned to poetry. His first poem, published in a local literary journal (The Prairie Schooner) when he was twenty-one, introduces a familiar symbol and is poignant seen in the context of his life:

SPIDERS

“Spiders
are poisonous, hairy, secretive.

Spiders are old—
they watch from dark corners while wills are made.
...
people die
and spiders inherit everything.”
(All the Nite Wings, p. 3)

His mother survived his father. She did not inherit everything; his father left Loren a well-thumbed copy of Shakespeare’s poems, which he kept all his life. Otherwise there was little but memories.

I will merely say he had had a great genius for love and that his luck was very bad. He was not fitted for life under the yellow cloud. He knew it, yet played out his role there to the end. So poor were we it took me twenty years to put a monument upon his grave. (The Night Country, p.199)

The image of the father having supplanted that of the mother because he was now the greater loss, Eiseley ended his lonely wanderings. He returned to college. Perhaps he puzzled his teachers; later when he wrote of teachers and pupils, he wrote about how little each knows of the other and how little they sense what marks they leave. While a student he wrote many poems. They appeared in academic literary journals and were variously honored. Many of them were republished in 1979, in All the Night Wings. He never lost the urge to transform feelings into poems. As he grew older they appeared in more visible places. He left a few hundred; some were published by the executors of his estate in 1977 (Another Kind of Autumn).

He was drawn to paleontology. He had reason enough to find fascination in its questions: by what path did man come here? Why did he leave? In Nebraska in the 1930s, the academic excitement would have focused on the bone diggers. *Mauvaises terres*, the tertiary badlands of western Nebraska were less than two day’s ride by car. It was the great fossil bed of North America. Eiseley hunted bones with the South Party of the Morrill Expeditions of 1931-33. Soon he went east to study anthropology in Philadelphia. There he met Frank G. Speck, the precocious linguist of the fourth scent in “The Hidden Teacher.”

Speck was Chairman and taught in the Anthropology Department of the University of Pennsylvania when Eiseley enrolled in 1934. Their first encounter is recalled in Chapter nine of All the Strange Hours. Eiseley describes a scene in Speck’s class. The professor threw a pile of square-cut flints on the seminar table and asked

gruffly for an identification. Loren was not fooled. They were not arrowheads; he recognized them as gun flints not more than two hundred years old. Speck challenged him and warned him not to bluff. Eiseley stood his ground and was proved right. The scene parallels nearly exactly the student Speck's confrontation with his professor in "The Hidden Teacher." Eiseley and Speck are one; two orphans raised by an old woman softly babbling a strange tongue.

Speck's image joined with that of Loren's father and Eiseley's mature personality was formed: his profession, his passions, his character. Poet and scientist. His career was distinguished and honored to an extraordinary degree. All that need be said of it here is that at first he repeated, then far outstripped Speck's achievements. Eiseley returned to the University of Pennsylvania department as a Professor in 1947 after ten years in the Midwest. It was the year in which Frank Speck died. Later he assumed the chairmanship that Speck once held, Speck's values became Eiseley's conscience.

One of Eiseley's first books, Francis Bacon and the Modern Dilemma, was published in 1962 and later revised (The Man Who Saw Through Time, 1972). Eiseley, the anthropologist and poet, spent much of his life as an academic studying the thoughts of the sixteenth century genius. In the preface to the 1972 edition, he wrote, "I rapidly discovered that I was unwittingly assuming the role of attorney for the defense against sometimes extremely selfrighteous prosecutors who had been unduly influenced by Thomas Babington Macaulay's intemperate and acerbic treatment of Bacon in the nineteenth century"

Whatever its source, Eiseley's fascination with Bacon and defense of him to the modern world took much of his energy for a few years. Knowing well that I risk exciting even the sympathetic reader's incredulity, I must remark nonetheless on the most curious coincidence in the triangle of Loren Eiseley, Francis Bacon and Frank Speck: the last two names are exact transliterations of each other between English and German, a fact that Eiseley, with his German surname, could scarcely have ignored though he never commented in writing on the peculiar coincidence.

Eiseley recognized the importance of Speck in his life. In "The Last Magician," he wrote movingly of an encounter with a stranger in Penn Station, New York. At the

time, Speck had been dead for ten years. An apparition shocked Eiseley into the realization that to be true to himself, he must be true to Speck's example.

“Every man in his youth—and who is to say when youth is ended?—meets for the last time a magician, the man who made him what he finally is to be

I was fifty years old when my youth ended I had come in through a side doorway and was slowly descending a great staircase in a slanting shaft of afternoon sunlight. Distantly I became aware of a man loitering at the bottom of the steps, as though awaiting me there. As I descended he swung about and began climbing toward me.

At the instant I saw his upturned face my feet faltered and I almost fell. I was walking to meet a man ten years dead and buried, a man who had been my teacher and confidant. . . . He had been a man of unusual mental powers and formidable personality. In all my experience no dead man but he could have so wrenched time as to walk through its cleft of darkness unharmed into the light of day.

The massive brows and forehead looked up at me as if to demand an accounting of that elapsed decade during which I had held his post and discharged his duties. Unwilling step by step I descended rigidly before the baleful eyes. We met, and as my dry mouth strove to utter his name, I was aware that he was passing me as a stranger, that his gaze was directed beyond me, and that he was hastening elsewhere. The blind eye turned sidewise was not, in truth, fixed upon me; I beheld the image but not the reality of a long dead man. Phantom or genetic twin, he passed on, and the crowds of New York closed inscrutably about him.

. . . what terror save the terror of the living toward the dead could so powerfully have enveloped me?

On the slow train running homeward the answer came. I had been away for ten years from the forest. I had had no messages from its depths, such as the dead servant had hoarded even in his disordered office where box turtles wandered over the littered floor. I had been immersed in the postwar administrative life of a growing university. But all the time some accusing spirit, the familiar of the last wood-struck magician, had lingered in by brain. Finally exteriorized, he had stridden up the stair to confront me in the autumn light I had starved and betrayed myself. It was this that had brought the terror. For the first time in years I left my office in mid-afternoon and sought the sleeping silence of a nearby cemetery. . . . It was time for a change. I wrote a letter and studied timetables. I was returning to the land that bore me.
(The Invisible Pyramid, pp. 137-9)

In the novelist's dream of the mirror, with which "The Hidden Teacher" ends, Eiseley expresses a sense of the mixture of identifications that shaped his life. Vague faces reflected in a dark glass change from mother's to father's to his own. "I learned it was just I, but more, much more, I had learned that I was they. "

In the space of five thousand words, Eiseley's imagination traced with a sequence of visual memories the history of the formation of his own personality. A thousand different images might have been selected to illustrate the thesis of the essay, namely, that at the time the mark is made, we understand little about the persons or events that change our lives, that the true teachers are hidden from the pupil's view. But just these five scenes were recalled. Whether the recollection requires explanation or whether it ought to be ignored is a choice that will separate those who regard the mind as explicable in even its most insignificant details and those who do not. I believe that there is no happenstance when the human mind is about its business. And although it has learned the art of disguise, the mind grows more artistic as it grows less disguised.

An Image of Eiseley.

A patient will frequently announce a theme to his analyst with the first words out of his mouth. The theme will eventually reveal the source of his pain and suffering. It may take years before this salutatory riddle can be understood. The opening riddle is often observed in literature; the first sentence read again when the book has been finished may be seen to contain a theme which, as with an overture, was repeated and swelled and eventually came to typify the entire book. "Gustave Aschenbach—or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday—had set out alone from his house in Price Regent Street, Munich, for an extended walk." Aschenbach, the stream of ashes, embarks on a journey to Venice and to death. In Eiseley's autobiography, he speaks first of death and a mirror:

When my aunt died I found among her effects a beautiful silver backed Victorian hand mirror. It had been one of a twin pair my maternal grandfather had given to his girls. The last time I had seen my mother's mirror it had been scarred by petulant violence and the handle had been snapped off. It had marked the difference between the two girls—their care of things, perhaps their lives. I had looked into the mirror as a child, admiring the scrollwork on the silver. Mostly things like that did not exist in our house. Finally it disappeared. The face of a child vanished with it, my own face. Without the mirror I was unaware

when it departed. ("ATSH," p.5)

The mirror is a fitting symbol. Its unusually frequent appearance in literature is matched by the power of its appearance in dreams. (Note 8) The mirror reflects the viewer's double, whose existence is the ego's insurance against destruction. The Doppelgänger in literature is the educated person's equivalent of the aborigine's belief that the mirror harbors the viewer's soul, as Otto Rank showed. In Eiseley's first sentence there is a death and a mirror. And before the first paragraph ends, both the mirror and the soul it contains have vanished, and a young child is left to face life with no defense against the threat of destruction.

Eiseley's theme is death; separation, loneliness and death. Death is the night country that he would rather visit than sleep. He suffered from insomnia which began the day his father died. Death sleeps in graveyards, to which he was drawn. Death haunts his poetry as it haunted his life. He dug with his hands among the remnants of a dead past. His last poem, found in his desk after he died, asks hopelessly that he be buried with dignity among artifacts and keepsakes, upright in his chair with his office as his tomb; it would be an ancient burial that "recognizes man's true nature." He warns whomever next occupies his office, "Henceforth I shall linger about here." ("Beward, My Successor, All the Nights Wings, pp. 97-8). In his more academic writings (The Immense Journey, Darwin's Century, The Unexpected Universe, The Invisible Pyramid), Eiseley's thoughts were constantly drawn through sidereal time to empty space. Personality, the human species itself, is annihilated in a future beyond comprehension. The man's thoughts seldom stray far from the memory of a tenuous hold on love, which if broken means annihilation. The child's fate became the man's obsession. He had the novelist in "The Hidden Teacher" speak his fears and sadness: "My line is dying, but I understood. I hope they understand, too." (p. 128)

Perhaps Eiseley suffered in the care of an inadequate mother. Perhaps he lost the mother he loved to his father and could never fully forgive him. He seemed more a lonely man than an angry one, but one can not know. This much is clear: he thought of death more than most people do, and he returned to it repeatedly in his writings. Like Wright Morris, with whom he shared an era and a boyhood homeland in Nebraska,

Eiseley could not abide that duplicity in the artistic treatment of love and death that Fiedler (Note 9) saw as characteristic of American writing.

There is no diagnosis of a personality here, whatever the appearance to the contrary. The same facts can not be used both to adduce a psychological diagnosis and then be explained themselves by it. We have no direct observations of how Eiseley was raised by his mother or how his father spoke to him. I never met the man, although we were born and raised two miles and thirty years apart. He left his recollections and those only in the form of creative work.

What one dares to think are only fragments of what is kept in one's mind. What one dares to write are fragments of fragments, rationalized and made pretty at that. A critic may fashion a coherent picture of Eiseley's life and his works; but coherence is not cause, and the man must remain largely unknown. Though causes compel their effects, surely pictures do not. There can be many pictures. True pictures, like first causes, were seen only by Eiseley or by no one at all. His art was like a dream:

Dreams or art may emerge without warning from the soundless depths of the unconscious, just as supernovas may blaze up suddenly in the farther reaches of void space. The critics, like astronomers, can afterward triangulate such worlds but not account for them. ("The Hidden Teacher," pp. 126-7)

Notes

1. Auden, W. H. "Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times," Nones. New York: Random House, 1950.
2. Edward Mendelson. Early Auden. Viking, 1981.
3. Richard M. Jones, The Dream Poet. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1979.
4. The reference is to "The Hidden Teacher," and the pagination is from The Star Thrower (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), the most accessible source. Frequent references to Eiseley's autobiography will be marked by ATSH and page numbers will refer to the 1975 Scribners publication of All the Strange Hours.
5. J. Laplanche and J.G. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis. W.W. Norton, 1973.

6. Gladys A. Reichard. Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism. Princeton University Press, 1963.

7. J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis. *Ibid*.

8. Charles Feigelson. The mirror dream. The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child. 1975, Vol. 30, pp. 341-55.

9. Fiedler, Leslie A. Love and Death in the American Novel. New York: Stein and Day, 1960.

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