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“The Borders between Us”

Loren Eiseley's Ecopoetics

TOM LYNCH

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for I
love forms beyond my own
and regret the borders between us.
LOREN EISELEY, "MAGIC"

Loren Eiseley's literary reputation today rests almost exclusively on the significance of his nonfiction nature essays, which deservedly stand as influential exemplars of creative nonfiction science and nature writing. However, in his early years as an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, Eiseley had the reputation as an important and promising poet, and he published poetry in a range of literary journals. Most notably, his work appeared in the earliest editions of *Prairie Schooner*, whose editorial staff he joined in 1927, the year after it began publication. And, not limited to his own school's journal, he published in a variety of other venues, even in Harriet Monroe's prestigious *Poetry* magazine. As a young man, Eiseley was immersed in the lively poetry world of the 1920s and 1930s and poised to become an important voice in that world. In particular, he was an enthusiastic champion of Robinson Jeffer's controversial inhumanistic poetry. Eiseley admired Jeffers "above all modern writers because of their common heritage — 'the poet and the scientist in one'" (Christianson, Fox 191).

Eiseley's education exemplified this mix of poet and scientist; he received dual bachelor's degrees in English and anthropology. But for a variety of reasons, English lost out, and Eiseley chose to pursue graduate studies in anthropology. In spite of the promising start to his career as a poet, his poetic publications diminished precipitously after he took his first teaching job in 1937 at the University of Kansas. By 1945 he had ceased altogether to publish poetry. Alas, he would seem to have become that all too familiar, pitiful spectacle, the promising poet nipped in blossoming bud by the cold shears of economic necessity. It seems likely that to have continued to publish poetry while simultaneously pursuing a career in science would have been not only a distraction but likely a hindrance to professional advancement, for who would take him seriously as a scientist

if he were also publishing, of all things, poetry. And later, at the University of Pennsylvania during the 1950s and 1960s, even as his reputation as a popular writer of science and nature essays grew, he nevertheless continued to refrain from poetry — from publishing it, that is, but not, it would seem, from writing it.

Ever the furtive fox, Eiseley had continued to scribble poems through these years among the data and scientific trivia accumulating in his notebooks, while outwardly conforming to the sober and responsible demeanor of a scientist, interchanging, as he says, "an artifact for a poem or a poem for an artifact" (*Notes* 11). In his later years, as his academic career drew to a close and being known as a publishing poet could no longer injure his professional reputation, Eiseley released in quick succession three volumes of poetry: *Notes of an Alchemist* in 1972, *The Innocent Assassins* in 1973, and *Another Kind of Autumn*, posthumously published in 1977.

In general, Eiseley scholars have tended to overlook his poetry. At best, they have seen his youthful poetry as a formative apprenticeship, laying the foundation for his real work, the crafting of his nonfiction prose essays. That his prose essays are so often praised for their poetic qualities has not seemed to suggest that his poetry itself might deserve a closer look. Poetry scholars have likewise overlooked Eiseley's poetry. At the time of the publication of his poetry books in the mid-1970s, poetry criticism was ill-suited to assessing and appreciating Eiseley's poetic output. Neither the lingering New Criticism nor the emerging postmodern hermeneutics of skepticism had much sympathy for Eiseley's earnest engagement with serious questions regarding a world that lay very much outside the text.

ECOPOETICS

In recent years, however, a new approach to the analysis of poetry has emerged, ecopoetics, which provides new opportunities for exploring and explicating poetry that exhibits the sorts of characteristics represented in Eiseley's work. So far, scholars applying ecopoetics have analyzed writers from a number of literary traditions. The English Romantics have been appropriately addressed. Jeffers has received long-overdue attention, and

considerable work has been done on more recent American poets such as Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, W. S. Merwin, Joy Harjo, and Linda Hogan. In spite of its obvious relevance to ecopoetics, however, I have been unable to find any reference to Eiseley's poetry anywhere in the growing body of ecopoetical studies. It is my contention that this neglect is a serious oversight and that Eiseley should be seen as an important figure in the development of the ecopoem.

I forthrightly acknowledge some of Eiseley's weaknesses as a poet, especially his professor's tendency to lecture, his propensity to allow images to serve as illustrations of ideas, and his sometimes too prosaic prosody. So I do not want to make the case that Eiseley is an overlooked poetic genius. But I do want to offer that he was an early practitioner of what we now call ecopoetry; he struggled with some of the same issues that bedevil ecopoets today and therefore deserves greater recognition for his accomplishments. These challenging issues include how to incorporate scientific ideas and vocabulary into poetry, how to express empathy for other animals without colonizing their subjectivity, how to evoke compassion for and identify with a natural order that fewer and fewer readers have any direct contact with, and how to generate a sense of cosmic, geologic, and evolutionary time and space in the limited medium of language.

Ecopoems are a type of poetry that, while clearly related to the long-standing tradition of nature poetry, engage with various new understandings of the character of the natural world and of the responsibility of poetry toward it. (An analogy might be made with feminist poetry: while many poems have women in them, only a small subset of those could be considered feminist poems. Similarly, while many poems have nature in them, only a few of those could be considered ecopoems.) In ecopoetry, nature is perceived not as a storehouse of images observed and ordered by the poet primarily as figurations of some other more primary concern, such as the poet's emotional state, but as a complex, evolving, simultaneously autonomous and yet reciprocal ecology in which the poet is a part but typically only a very small part. What precisely distinguishes ecopoetry from more traditional nature poetry is an area of some dispute. Undoubtedly there is more of a continuum than a fixed boundary, and so establishing

a rigid dichotomy is misleading (as well as a violation of ecocriticism's oft-professed distrust of binary thinking). Nevertheless, some distinctive ecopoetical tendencies can be outlined. Terry Gifford, for example, proposes that ecopoems differ from traditional nature poems in their engagement "directly with environmental issues" (3). Leonard M. Scigaj has argued for what he calls a sustainable poetry "that treats nature as a separate and equal other and includes respect for nature conceived as a series of ecosystems — dynamic and potentially self-regulating cyclic feedback systems" (5). J. Scott Bryson states that ecopoems are distinguished by "an emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world," by "an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature," and by their display of "an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe" (5–6). David W. Gilcrest suggests that "as a first principle . . . the ecological poem allies itself with ecological science's complaint against atomistic and mechanistic Newtonian science" (16). Perhaps most fundamental, as Scigaj proposes, ecopoets seek to alter our perceptions of nature to engender a more sustainable relationship with it. Ecopoems "provide models of altered perception that promote environmental awareness and active agency" (22). As I hope to show, all of these characteristics of the ecopoem are present in varying degrees in Eiseley's poetry.

Furthermore, Eiseley adds a key feature that is implied but unstated in some of these descriptions of ecopoems and that we ought to consider as an essential dimension to ecopoetry: an appreciation for the evolutionary matrix of all living things. Indeed, I would suggest that an evolutionary understanding is the foundation for a poem's ability to do many of the sorts of things that ecopoetics envisions; certainly, it is the crucial factor in providing us with a sense of nature as an ever-emergent process rather than as a finished and static product. Eiseley's evolutionary consciousness imbeds contemporary humans and our culture deeply into the processes that gave rise to all living things and provides us with an understanding of how an awareness of such processes helps us engage with and perhaps

resolve a major anxiety-provoking issue in ecopoetics: our potential to empathize with, express solidarity for, and imaginatively represent the lives of other animals. For Eiseley this evolutionary matrix bonds us, in both affirming and sometimes ominous ways, to every other living thing. An evolutionary perspective is also key to shifting us from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric understanding of our place in the cosmos. A humbling awareness of the myriad permutations of living forms through cosmic and geologic time, and of the mind-boggling array of random chances that accumulated to bring about the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, can only serve to shift our locus of understanding from the anthro- toward the ecocentric, fundamentally altering our perceptions of what it means to be a human being on a planet we share with 30 million to 100 million other similarly evolved and enduring species. As Gilcrest argues, among the key factors that led to the emergence of ecopoetry was “the development of a geological and evolutionary sense of time that served to de-emphasize the importance of human experience and human history” (2). With Walt Whitman and Robinson Jeffers as notable antecedents, Eiseley was among the earliest to incorporate this profound sense of time into his poetry.

NATURE AT RISK

A key feature of ecopoetry is the poet's recognition that over the past few centuries nature has been increasingly injured by human activity and that it is no longer appropriate to portray nature exclusively as an idyllic escape from the human world. Eiseley was well aware of human abuse of nature, both of the natural world in general, and of animals in particular. Very few of his poems could be described as unreflective, innocent portrayals of an idyllic nature. Rather, they show both overtly and by implication the injury humans have caused. For example, in “No Place for Boy or Badger,” from *Another Kind of Autumn*, he laments the destruction of the woods and fields on the outskirts of Lincoln that were his boyhood haunts and their replacement by suburban development. Returning to Lincoln many decades after he had moved away, he wanders his childhood neighborhood, displeased by what he finds. The “straight streets” and “endless suburbs”

have obliterated the tangled mess of wild nature in which he once played and the neat lawns now provide "no place for boy or badger to hide in the hedgerows" (lines 4, 5, 9). The rich diversity of nature has been replaced by a stifling monocultural conformity that allows for "no milkweed pods in autumn, no tiger swallowtails floating" (12).

The loss of wild habitat is not just a loss for badgers and foxes, milkweeds and tiger swallowtails, but for children as well, who are deprived of the foundational experience of intimate contact with unruly nature. This loss of childhood time in nature is a concern recently expressed by many environmental educators (most notably Richard Louv), but Eiseley anticipated this current lament decades ago. And given Eiseley's bleak home life, the opportunity for escape presented by nearby wildlands would have been all the more cherished, and the implications of its loss all the more deeply felt.

Eiseley's poem "The Box Turtle," published in *The Innocent Assassins*, focuses such concern on the plight of a single wild animal that finds itself surrounded by the multifarious dangers of the modern city. Just as human progress has left no place for boy or badger, so it has left no place for box turtles.¹ In the poem, the narrator rescues a box turtle he finds attempting to "crawl across the / Pike" (line 1). Knowing well that the "roaring speedway would kill anything," the narrator scoops up the turtle and carries him to safety (3). But, after having risked his own life to rescue the unappreciative turtle, the narrator then realizes that in this urban, ecophobic environment there is no safe place to which he can restore it. The surrounding environment is full of manicured garden apartments "notable in spring for chain saws, tree sprays," and whose inhabitants "dislike old reptile shapes that wander by" (7, 9). He further worries that the turtle, left alone, might "go right back to that concrete / roadway he had been rescued from" (11-12).

As in "No Place for Boy or Badger" the injury humans cause to nature in "The Box Turtle" is not so much intentional and malicious as inadvertent, which makes it all the more sinister and difficult to redress. Nobody wants to kill the turtle, but we need our roads, don't we? And so the lives of creatures such as turtles are placed at risk. People who would be appalled

at the idea of directly killing a turtle, or any other animal, nevertheless freely participate in a modern lifestyle that includes the destruction of habitat and the incursion of highways, phenomena that are every bit as deadly to animals as are hunting rifles or slaughterhouses.

In response to his question of, "What to do then?" (line 6) the poet seeks a refuge for the turtle. He finds an "unsold estate," whose lot is conveniently enclosed in an "old stone wall" and where neglect has allowed the leaf mould to build up thick and a "half-wild undergrowth" to persist (29, 28, 30). Hopping the wall, the poet leaves the turtle in this sanctuary of neglect, hoping the turtle will not find a way out but will "just settle in, sink down in leaves / to wait / an age or two" (33–35). The poet's answer to the question of "what to do" satisfies the immediate concern of how to save the turtle, but the larger question of what to do about the loss of habit is only deferred; in Eiseley's grim assessment one can only hunker down in the leaf mould and hope for the best, patience being a very turtle-like virtue.

NATURE AS CYCLICAL FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Another characteristic that distinguishes ecopoets is their perception of landscapes not as simple scenery but as complex and dynamic fields of energy transformations. In such transformational processes the poet is not simply a witness, but, whether willingly or not — indeed, whether consciously or not — also a participant. In many of his poems, perhaps most notably in "The Sunflower Song" from *The Innocent Assassins*, Eiseley celebrates just these sorts of cyclings and transformations that occur as soil grows a sunflower that produces a seed that feeds a cardinal who sings a song that gladdens the poet's generally rather somber heart, a song that he then vainly strives to imitate by consuming the same seeds the cardinal has eaten. The poet concludes that it is "the seeds that sing" because "without seeds, / the cardinal could not sing" (lines 26–27). And, indeed, it is the earth that sings because "the seeds are brought / up from the leaf mould" (27–28). Beginning rather conventionally, the poet asserts that "I think this bird a miracle / to so transform a seed" (34) but continues this line

of thinking along its ecological course to muse that "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" (35–37). Seeking to become a part of this creative cycle, and transfer its energy to his own struggling poetic efforts, the poet decides to "eat one of his sunflower seeds and try again" (39).

While poems reveling in the songs of various birds are legion, few consider the energy source of that song, or of its very literal connection to human acts of creativity. The power of soil to transform through various stages into song and poetry is at once scientifically explicable and yet at the same time remains "a miracle." In some very real sense this is a transformation that lies at the heart of ecopoetics, raising the fundamental question: how does poetry literally, not just figuratively, spring from the soil?

This cycling process, however, goes both ways. As soil becomes seed becomes bird, so bird becomes, alas, once again, soil. While Eiseley intellectually understands this inevitable downward side of the cycle, he expresses an honest sense of discomfort with the process in his poem "From Us without Singing," published in *Notes of an Alchemist*. Again, the focus of the poem is a bird, but this time the bird is not singing joyfully but is rather a discarded and decaying carcass he passes daily in his yard and on which "all the ugly innocent necessary work of nature / is carried on by beetles, ants, blowflies" (lines 3–4). Such a necessary, if unseemly, process, he realizes, will "ensure / the endless procession of pine needles, new eggs, / new birds," but also, he must conclude, "in their turn / new deaths" (6–9).

At this point, the poem is what we typically expect. Death is redeemed by the cycle of life. But the last line, isolated by the enjambment, introduces a troubling notion; the cycle does not conclude with the new life but returns again to death. While the molecules that make up our being persist through the various permutations of the cycle, our individual identity, our consciousness, is lost, which in this poem leads to confusion, dismay, and resentment: "I resent the slow / disarticulation of this summer bird" (25–26). And, as readers have probably inferred at this point, the poem is not just about the bird but the poet as well: "I am bound like this bird / to my own carcass, I / love this year's light, / the music in his, my mind" (29–32).

In this remarkable poem we can see the poet struggling with the tension between his appreciation for the cycle of life and his emotional desire to resist the inevitable transposition of his own molecules and hence the extinction of his own identity and consciousness. At times the vast panoply of the cycle of life is consoling and even inspiring, but at other times, with but a slight shift of mood, we must admit, it is also terrifying. In this poem Eiseley seems concerned with how consciousness, how "mind," how, that is, individual identity and awareness, is implicated in this process. How is it that, bound to our own carcasses, we yet love the music of birdsong? And how is it that, though merely a physical form, a fortuitous concatenation of molecules, we nevertheless possess a mind that resists and resents its own dissolution back into molecules? Eiseley was never one to shrink from the terrors of life. In this poem Eiseley rejects the consolation of his own culture's religious tradition, that he, unlike the bird, has an immortal soul, a discrete consciousness that will transcend life's terrible cycles. He likewise avoids the easy consolation that being dissolved into something impersonal yet cosmically vast is any compensation for the loss of one's own loved and loving individual identity.

SKEPTICISM OF SCIENCE

Ecocriticism is engaged in a delicate dance with science, a dance Eiseley himself helped to choreograph. On the one hand, ecocritics and ecopoets are entirely beholden to science for the knowledge and insights that are signaled by the cherished and definitive "eco" prefix. To abandon the methods and findings of science is to abandon any justification for the use of that distinctive designation. To reject science is to turn an ecocritic into just a critic. Yet as history has too amply demonstrated, science is not an unmixed blessing and has at times served as both agent and tool of the degradation of nature and the abuse of animals that ecocriticism critiques. So the ecopoet and the ecocritic find themselves in a quandary.

For example, in Bryson's claim, previously cited, that ecopoets possess "an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world,"

he employs several qualifications that seek to dance around the difficulty (6). As he formulates it, ecopoets are not skeptical of "rationality," but only of "*hyperrationality*." Nor do they indict technology per se, but only the "*overtechnologized*." While one might praise the pirouettes of nuance here, one might also sense a deft evasion. Surely few are in favor of *hyper* or *over* anything; indeed, the formulation is a bit of a tautology. The rather significant question of when the rational becomes the *hyperrational* or the technological becomes the *overtechnologized* is left unanswered. Gilcrest sees a way out of this dilemma in considering that the science of ecology, being holistic, is itself subversive in regard to mainstream science, which is, on the whole, reductive. In this case, the criticism is that atomistic and mechanistic science is too enamored of reductivism and not engaged enough with the sort of holistic perspective whose elucidation is the desire of ecology (26).

Eiseley was all too familiar with this debate. While grateful for the knowledge and insights of science, he felt that its unmistakable powers had too often resulted in a hubristic dismissal of other values. Although Eiseley was both a practicing scientist as well as a historian of science who championed such figures as Bacon and Darwin, this sort of critique of science's hyperationalism pervades his prose essays.

It also arises in his poetry. Indeed, one might well argue that Eiseley chose to write poetry specifically to have a forum in which to express this tension between science and something-more-than science. For example, in "Five Men from the Great Sciences" from *The Innocent Assassins*, the narrator describes five scientists whom he has overheard discussing how, thanks to the powers of science (and to the powers of men such as themselves), humans had at last succeeded in transcending nature. The skeptical poet, we are not surprised to read, is dubious, for he sees these men of science as trapped and limited rather than liberated by their increasing specialization and reliance on fancy tools. These men, he considers, "were caught inside . . . in a perpetually narrowing corner" (lines 6–7). What they are "really looking / for" he speculates, is "something beyond human cognizance" (8–9). However, he concludes, "We have not found it in the laboratory; / we have not found it in a billion light years; / we have not

found it in the cyclotrons;" nor have we found it in any of the other sparkling apparatus of modern science (11–13). And yet the poet concludes, "It exists and lies truly outside or beyond nature, / conceived / in some intangible way by her (20–22).

What this "it" is, this "something beyond human cognizance," is, not surprisingly, left unclear. Some readers would be prompt to label it God, but the notion that this "it" is conceived by nature, rather than the other way around, might suggest a different sort of answer. Perhaps "it" is not something specific, but only the ever-mysterious unknown that lies just beyond the horizons of our knowing. Certainly, its evasiveness suggests that we adopt a more humble position in regard to nature, the sort of position advocated by ecopoetics but alien to the sorts of scientists Eiseley overhears.

SOLIDARITY WITH ANIMALS

One of Eiseley's main critiques of science (although clearly not original with him) is its willingness to "murder to dissect." Eiseley possessed a deep and lifelong sense of empathy for animals and was disturbed by their confinement or use in scientific experiments. In 1976 he received the Joseph Wood Krutch medal from the National Humane Society for a lifetime of service to the welfare of animals.

Eiseley was clearly a believer in some version of what has come to be called animal rights, and this ethic appears repeatedly in his poetry. For example, in the poem "The Changelings," he discusses his sorrow at the unwarranted confinement of animals: "My childhood was preoccupied with dreams / of how to free all animals immured / in shabby local zoos, / in boxes foul" (lines 67–70). In "The Last Days," he reflects on the widespread notion that humans are engaged in a war against nature, signaling his own mixed allegiance by punning on the ambiguity of the word "den": "My den is a command post, / a suburban fire center" (*Notes*, lines 17–18). He notes, however, the persistence of animals, a fox in a neighbor's garden, a tiger swallowtail "by god in spite of DDT" (21). If such a war is in fact in progress, Eiseley is unsure of his loyalties and considers the possibility of

"defecting," because "animals are beginning to look better / than my own kind" (70, 75–76). "Sometimes," he admits, "I think they are talking. / My cat is talking / but I don't quite hear" (78–80).

In poems such as this Eiseley indicates that his allegiances are with the rest of nature and cannot be counted on by his own species. His inability to hear his cat talking, however, raises a potentially vexing limitation to the human capacity to sympathetically identify with other animals, the seemingly fundamental gap opened by our acquisition of language. A number of critics have proposed that the idea that humans can empathize with and "speak for" the interests of animals is, though well intended, nevertheless a colonizing gesture. For them the barriers between humans and other creatures are insurmountable and any attempt to speak for animals is redolent of sentimentalism, if not a whiff of imperialism. Gilcrest, for example, argues "that the attempt to represent nonhuman entities as speaking subjects, while serving to establish a less hierarchical relationship with the nonhuman by deprivileging human linguistic ability, is appropriately viewed as a colonizing move that remains susceptible to serious epistemological and ethical critique." He proffers a solution, arguing that "an environmental ethic does not necessitate the identification of the human and the nonhuman, whether in terms of linguistic competency or along any other dimension, and may in fact require the conservation of difference. . . . I argue . . . that by resisting identification with the nonhuman by embracing an antagonistic poetics, the contemporary nature poet cultivates an ethic of restraint consistent with ecocentric values" (6). While ethics of restraint are certainly laudable in our relations with animals, Eiseley offers a different solution, a solution based on human-animal similarity that is derived from our common evolutionary heritage.

ARCHEOPOEMS AND EVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS

Eiseley's evolutionary consciousness can attenuate the seemingly insurmountable border that exists between humans and other animals. As E. Fred Carlisle has noted, Eiseley not only accepted evolution intellectually but "also interiorized the theory, so that it functioned as a major

structure for perceiving and comprehending experience. He dwelt in it, so to speak, and through it he made contact with reality" ("Achievement" 42). By interiorizing an evolutionary perspective, Eiseley made a major contribution to the development of the ecopoem: the poem of evolutionary consciousness. This consciousness is most obvious in what I refer to as his archeopoetry. In such poetry Eiseley dramatizes the uncovering of an artifact in order to place humans within the vast context of geologic and evolutionary history, seeking to evince in the reader an appreciation for the long view of time and an understanding of humans as recently evolved animals whose distinctive features may make us feel superior but, in fact, in the context of evolution, are no different than the distinctive features of any other species.

Eiseley's signature archeopoem is "The Innocent Assassins," in which the recovered item is a sabertooth skull (*Innocent*). But similar poems include "The Little Treasures," in which the found object is a flint blade (*Another*); "Arrowhead," in which he finds a flint arrowhead (*Notes*); "The Beaver," in which he uncovers a beaver skull; "The High Plains," where he discovers a "pink catlinite bowl of an Indian pipe" (line 54); "The Hand Ax," where he stumbles across an incongruous stone ax; and "An Owl's Day," in which is found a bone needle, a flint knife, and the bones of an owl.

Poems of this sort seek to evoke both awe and humility, anxiety and hope, and work to internalize in the reader a subjective and visceral appreciation for the place of humans within the vast panoply of evolutionary time, while also revealing that the barrier we have erected between ourselves and other animals is the product of a self-important but deluded vanity. In such poems we often experience a sudden and perhaps disorienting enlargement of our psychic horizons. Initially, our attention is drawn downward to some small object immediately present on the ground. Excavating that object from the shadows, the poet illuminates its implications, and our perspective suddenly leaps to encompass vast dimensions of space and time. Sharing the archaeologist-poet's perspective, we glance up from the unearthed artifact to the landscape around us, and that landscape is forever altered. Through the intervention of the artifact, the familiar, drab ground on which we stand becomes numinous.

Many of these poems are based on Eiseley's experiences during his undergraduate years, when he spent parts of three summers as a sort of work-study research aid on paleontological digs in the panhandle of western Nebraska. These expeditions, known as the South Party and sponsored by the University of Nebraska's Morrill Hall Natural History Museum under the leadership of C. Bertrand Schultz, unearthed a wide variety of fossil remains, including oreodonts, mastadons, rhinos, camels, saber-toothed cats, and the tools of early humans. When these expeditions were conducted, the scientific consensus was that humans had inhabited North America for around two thousand years. The evidence collected on these expeditions helped to push that timeline back to about fifteen thousand years (Christianson, *Fox* 157).

Eiseley, the impressionistic and moody young poet, was transformed by his experience searching for and digging up fossil remains in the rugged reaches of the short-grass prairie, and his time on these expeditions in the Nebraska panhandle served as inspiration and material for much of the writing he was later to do. Forty years later, he dedicated his second book of poetry, *The Innocent Assassins*, to "the bone hunters of the old South Party, Morrill Expeditions 1931-33." In his autobiography he graciously thanks Schultz for enabling him to accompany these archaeological expeditions, an experience that "seared its way into my brain and into my writing" (*All* 83). Among the many things that seared into his brain was the recognition that evolution was not just a matter of intellectual thought, but of tactile sensation. Evolution was a phenomenon that could not only be imagined by the mind but felt by and within the body as well.

Eiseley was involved in three notable archaeological finds, all of which found their way not only into scholarly papers but also into poems. One was the early excavations at the Signal Butte bison quarry, west of Scottsbluff. Here, Folsom points were found in association with remains of the extinct *Bison antiquus*, evidence that pushed the dating of the first humans in the Americas back several thousand years. This discovery resulted in a joint publication with Schultz, "Paleontological Evidence for the Antiquity of the Scottsbluff Bison Quarry and Its Associated Artifacts."

However, skeptics could still suggest the remains had been tumbled

together at this site, and so the find did not provide conclusive evidence of simultaneous human–*Bison antiquus* occupation. This archaeological work was followed by an excavation at Lindenmeier, north of Fort Collins, Colorado, in which Eiseley found the smoking gun, a Folsom point that was actually imbedded in the vertebra of a *Bison antiquus* (Christianson, *Fox* 161). This find was recounted in a poem published many years later in *Notes of an Alchemist*, titled “Flight 857.” On an airplane approaching Denver, the poet looks down from “thirty thousand feet” at the Lindenmeier site, where he had dug trenches forty years earlier, and ponders “what the earth covers” there (line 2). Though he and his colleagues, he admits, never found the human remains for which they were searching, they did uncover remains of the “Ice Age long-horned bison, / the deadly point buried still / in the massive vertebra (16–18).

Though not as scientifically important as his finds at Scottsbluff and Lindenmeier, Eiseley’s best-known discovery was what has come to be known as the “Innocent Assassins” skull, after his poem and book of that title. It is the skull of a saber-toothed cat, a 25 million-year-old smilodon, with its tooth piercing the humerus of another of its kind. The poem opens with an evocation of a landscape that resembles the Toadstool Park area of Nebraska: “Once in the sun-fierce badlands of the west / in that strange country of volcanic ash and cones, / runneled by rains, cut into purgatorial shapes, / where nothing grows” (lines 1–4). And, indeed, in his biography of Eiseley, Christianson identifies Toadstool Park as the location of the find (*Fox* 131). However, work by Bing Chen and others has concluded that the actual site of the find was in the Wildcat Hills near Chimney Rock.² This discrepancy suggests that Eiseley took liberties in his portrayal of the landscape where this artifact was uncovered. The poem describes a more barren and lifeless landscape than the one in which the skull was actually unearthed, evoking a sense of a surreal “purgatorial” desolation he felt more appropriate for the ominous character of the artifact and the mood he was seeking to evoke in the poem. And this is not the only change Eiseley made. He also altered the type of bone that was pierced by the tooth, referring to it as a “scapula,” when in fact it is a humerus. The word “scapula” certainly sounds better in the phrase “fractured scapula”

but is not factually correct (*Innocent*, line 16). Oddly, Christianson refers to the bone as a "tibia" (*Fox* 131).

In this scene Eiseley sees a striking tableau of a possible, and to him quite likely, human future. Like this sabertooth, we too can be destroyed by our own excessive weaponry. The Cold War's Mutually Assured Destruction scenario would seem to have been played out by these two sabertooths.

TRANSCENDING BORDERS

Evolution taught Eiseley that, despite what many of us would prefer to think, we humans were not so different from other animals. And while this thought had certain frightening implications, they were more than compensated for by the bonds it revealed. Put simply, the further back in time we look, the closer humans become to the other animals. During the Paleolithic period, for example, we lived in much greater intimacy with wild nature, and as Eiseley describes, the animals were our gods. Then, as we descend further back in time, we reach a point where "we" are no longer humans at all, where the borders between us and animals entirely dissolve as we, quite literally, become them. For Eiseley, unlike for most of us, these earlier periods are not remote. His professional career was about tracing them down and finding their artifacts. And they remain alive in us today as part of our evolved and not really so distant heritage, the artifacts of which, through acts of the imagination such as poetry, we can reach into ourselves and unearth.

In his poem "The Old Ones," Eiseley expresses a preference for the old animistic religions rather than the worship of humanlike deities, such as Zeus and his later monotheistic manifestations. This interesting poem, from *Notes of an Alchemist*, begins "The old gods are mosaics," by which he means that the gods humans originally worshipped often possessed combinations of human and animal features (line 1). As the poem proceeds, he berates the Greeks for having turned the gods into solely human figures. Rather, he finds the human-animal mosaic gods more appropriate because, as evolution teaches, and as DNA studies have since confirmed, we are in fact complex mosaics of all that has come before us. "I have found

animals in me when I stroll in the forest" the poet writes. He notes that he will "step / like a cat in the night" and that he has "felt something / lift along my neck / when a wolf howls" (22, 23–26).

Such passages illustrate how our instincts tie us to our animal kin, revealing our mosaic status. And it further implies that many of the poetic metaphors we employ ("I step / like a cat in the night") are perhaps not just flights of fancy, but intimations of our evolutionary past that serve to write us back into the animal realm. The poem suggests that the traditional folk tales of oral cultures reveal a far greater, and for Eiseley a truer, degree of intimacy between humans and animals than modern monotheistic religions are willing to recognize. In tales of "how the beaver got his tail" or of how one might "marry the seal's daughter," we see our kinship with nature displayed (33, 35). Though the poet lives in "a very ordinary landscape," nevertheless, he reports, "I feel in my body / the lost mosaic" (36–37). Identifying with the figures of Native American mythology, he imagines, "I am Lone Man and Snow Rabbit: the earth pleases me. / The wind has stolen my coat away, / my thoughts are becoming animals" (38–40). And he concludes that "In this suddenly absurd landscape I find myself / laughing, laughing" (41–42).

The move toward what we call civilization, toward the wearing of coats as well as the worship of humanlike gods and the consequent drift to monotheisms, has been a move away from our animal kin. The old ones, that is, the shamans, were closer to animals, and their thoughts could, by shedding their human coats, as it were, become animals in an absurd trickster world that inspires a life-affirming laughter. To feel in one's body the lost mosaic is to reconnect with that heritage that is ever-present in us. In this sense, we are, as it were, always already animals, and our separation from them is an illusion, an illusion Eiseley's poetry seeks to correct.

In numerous poems Eiseley feels himself becoming those previous incarnations of what we once were, and in many ways still are, ever-so-much further back in time even than the Pleistocene. In "The Leaf Pile," for example, from *The Innocent Assassins*, he meditates on how the sense of smell, part of our reptile brain, can trigger deep responses when earlier parts of our being are activated by a particular scent, producing a nostalgic

longing for the world of 10 million centuries ago. Having raked leaves in his yard, Eiseley inhales the scent and feels something stirring within, something that "has slept a long time" (line 24). This being who "breathes and snuffles," we are told, "has been a long time in the black dark, / scaled, snouted" (27, 28–29). Nevertheless, resurrected by the scent of autumn leaves, this creature begins to breathe the autumn air and is, the poet claims, "part of myself" (33). This being "has rooted his way up / through dynasties of neocortex" (36–37). Therefore, we are advised, "Let him breathe. / Let him savor the earth; / let him nuzzle the leaves" (38–40).

In evolutionary poems such as these, we see hints for an ecopoetical solution to the problem of human divorce from nature, as well as a suggestion of how, by tapping into the visceral dynasties lurking beneath our evolved neocortex, we can relearn to savor the earth. Surely this is a poetic affect worthy of consideration as an expression of ecopoetry.

NOTES

1. Typically, scientists distinguish between tortoises and turtles. Tortoises are strictly terrestrial, while turtles are usually aquatic. In this poem, Eiseley uses the terms "tortoise" and "turtle" interchangeably. It seems likely the creature referred to in the poem is an eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*), a terrestrial turtle common throughout the eastern half of the United States, including the Philadelphia area, the likely setting for the poem. No tortoises live in this region.

2. According to a personal e-mail from Bing Chen, "As to the Innocent Assassins skull discovery location, the field notes from the South Party indicate that it was found in Black Hank Canyon which is approximately 3 miles to the south and 1 mile to the east of Chimney Rock. If nothing else, the appearance of the red fox during our search on June 25th, 2008 confirmed it for me. An earlier visit with Dr. Voorhees confirming the discovery site is another vote for Black Hank canyon."