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***Intimate moments among the Dead:  
Death and Time in the work of Loren Eiseley***

Lawrence Kimmel

... the greatest mystery of all, I who write these words on paper am by any reasonable and considered logic, dead, and I can assure you that all men are as dead as I. There is no life in the carbon of my body and it comes as a profound shock as I run down the list of elements: there is no life in the iron, there is no life in the phosphorus, the nitrogen does not contain me, nor the water that soaks my tissues...The carbon does not speak, calcium does not remember, iron does not weep— where in all this array of pipes and hurried flotsam is the dweller? From whence and out of what steaming pools or boiling cloudburst did he first arise? What forces can we find which brought him up the shore, scaled his body into an antique reptilian shape and then cracked it like an egg to let a soft-furred animal with a warmer heart emerge..?

--Loren Eiseley, *The Night Country*

This essay is written in the shadow of the wisdom of Loren Eiseley. The source of the thought herein is drawn from Eiseley's unique vision of time and the relational ambiguities of the living and the dead, or at the very least these notes are haunted by the penetrating and often dark insights of this inveterate bone hunter and very human scholar of man's origins. What follows, then, is written

against the background reference to what is arguably a unique approach and singular sensitivity to the world of the dead in the writings of Loren Eiseley.

In existential terms death is a limiting concept, like infinity and God. It marks an absolute boundary that has been and always will be a subject of inquiry and dispute, the ground of poetic imagination and the aspect of quiet terror in the dark of the night. Since the beginning of time as we can best read it from the ancient remains and dead ruins of cultures and from the hominoid scraps of human anthropology, there has been a sense of the unnaturalness of death—death as the absolute other. The idea that only human beings die is based on the apparent naturalness of death in all other life forms.

I expect we are most used to think at any depth of death as up close and personal—as something inevitable and regrettable. If we are especially troubled at the prospect of our own death we feel it a particular, acute and unnatural offense. But there is as well, an alternative and important idea of death at a distance. I don't mean by this the dealing of death at a distance that has become the modern preference in waging war. But rather death as a natural function of time and thus, with the human capacity for the transcendence of time, death is understood as the necessary and natural basis for the continuing present. The vast reach of memory aided by the evolutionary and historical sciences makes the world of the dead a ready resource for understanding the past and in so doing provides a basis for acknowledging in ourselves the remnants of eons of phylogenetic and cultural human development.

It takes a special temperament as well as special training to devote oneself to the past, to the land of the dead and to a studied devotion in reconstructing the lost times of life's tenure. For the archeologist and anthropologist especially, the dead seem to carry a sentience that overrides the

existential concerns that normally arise in thinking about death. Even so, in a soul sensitive to the nuance of both humanistic and scientific interest there may attain a resonance that is unique with respect to death and the dead. Eiseley is perhaps a figure who stands alone in the genre of essays on the dead. This is not the usual category of description given to his many books, essays and remarkable autobiography, but it is an arguably apt depiction of the somber is hopeful temper of his work.

Men die, Man does not. While life, as Schopenhauer persuasively argued, is only in the present, time is a feature of consciousness that stretches before and after—in remembrance and in projection. If this is so we can extend the scale of the Stoic mantra—that ‘when I am death is not, when death is I am not’—to encompass the idea that if life is only now—the continuing present—then the future is as dead as the past. In the case of the future, of course, we do not call it death, but the unknown. With respect to the living however, it is only by analogy that we speak of time as past and future—as the life of anticipation and the life of memory.

In the configurations of time the modern world is radically separated from classical antiquity. In the cyclical sense of time among ancient Greeks the Wheel of Ixion bound men to the law that what has been is, passes, and will be. Still tied to a *mythos* of eternal recurrence from death to life to death, it was not until the later Christian rendition of the Edenic Garden that fixed a beginning and end of history. But in the turn to the modern world and evolutionary corrections to historicity, time has been reordered such that there is no repetition: what is will not be at all, again, ever. At the loss of the assurance of an end to the story of man, the present is ever open, and man is in every birthing of genetic difference and in every new generation of culture an open question. The centuries of analytic discourse and the progress of the

sciences has not escaped Heraclitus's insight that man is most of all a mystery to himself. In the evolutionary landscape of perpetual and irreversible change, man is himself a changeling and his wisdom is only garnered from the dead. The past is knowable, the future is not.

Even so, prophets continue to sketch portraits of man. No longer drawn toward the idea of an essence, however, the contemporary visionary tries to draw a face on the future. But if taken seriously, this is futile if not dangerous. One thing for certain the past has taught is this: that which we devoutly wish will come. Such prophets when they are believed serve only to direct us toward realizing their prophecies. Eiseley refers to contemporary prophets, whether political, scientific or otherwise who still speak in the manner of Macbeth's witches. As in the tragedy of Macbeth, such prophecies are simply the projection of possibilities embodied in the character of man, but once codified into action, doom character to fulfillment. He comments on this fact in the context of Shakespeare's insight that this is the deadliest message man will ever encounter in all of literature.

The concern is not with 'false' prophets, of course, but rather with putting faith—that is the whole of one's energies—into future projections. Eiseley is inclined toward the view that wisdom if it is to be found at all is more likely to be discovered in the bones, in the internal realities of the heart that have a connection with all we have been, with the elemental and first world of nature that resides beneath the empowered extravagancies and conceits of culture.

## II

The dead: I have written in this series about the existential *experience* of death, the phenomenon that pervades consciousness in anticipation, anxiety, despair, whether considering the inevitability or immanence of one's own

death or absorbing the fact and loss in the death of another. But it requires a considerable conceptual shift and change of venue to consider the work and thought of people whose professional lives are spent rummaging among the remains and refuse of long dead peoples and cultures. Eiseley is likely the best known of such thinkers, and few have written with such accessible force and depth, and with such engaging passion. In reading his work I am reminded of a panel I was once on with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in the early days of her work with the dying. I somehow expected that one who spent so much time actual time with terminally ill and dying patients would speak in somber tones about distressing if not terrible things. However what I met with was a person whose everyday confrontation with death was in voice and manner, sympathies and activities, wholly with the living. A good deal of criticism has been leveled concerning her conception of the stages of awareness and acceptance of death, but no one could possibly fault the courage and energy of her approach to an issue laden with such terror among those living not in the immediate presence of the dying. Loren Eiseley brings some of this same spirit of vitality and humanity to the world of the dead. As a bone hunter who must pillage the once sacred and hallowed places of burial in the name of science and toward an understanding the past to better understand the continuing present, he has always shown an uncanny sense for avoiding sacrilege of the dead, an incredible sensitivity to the life that still remains in the threadbare and weathered remains of the once living.

He tells the story in his autobiography of an incident when he was a fledgling bone hunter during a scouting expedition in which the group unearthed a child's skeleton "tenderly wrapped in a rabbit-skin blanket and laid on a little bed of sticks in the dry insulating dust" along with an assemblage of things to accompany the dead on his journey. He reports that he stood silent and unhappy with the feeling that the child should be left where the parents intended, left to the endless

circling of the stars beyond the cavern mouth and to all eternity. But the expedition was after bones so nothing is ever left as it is, and moreover Eiseley had no authority to protest its removal. He recalls that he stood in the cave entrance for a while “holding the burial cradle and the cuddled child in my arms” before he sets the cradle gently down beyond the debris of the excavation.

This plaintive memory gives some sense to the indistinct and uneven line Eiseley draws between present and past, living and dead, and also an indication of his sense of eternity that sustains their relationship. He goes on to say that he could have spent a day up there on the great range just listening to the wind and talking to the child, murmuring to it across the centuries. But in the end of course, they went down into the town, and the cradle and its little occupant were handed over to the local authorities for their museum.

For Eiseley, there is a thread of life running through the phantoms and faces of our recalling and resurrecting of the past that reaches both ways—to the living and the dead.

“Since the first human eye saw a leaf in Devonian sandstone and a puzzled finger reached to touch it, sadness has lain over the heart of man. By this tenuous thread of living protoplasm, stretching backward into time we are linked forever to lost beaches whose sands have long since hardened into stone.”

It is an understandable human illusion that seeks to project this thread toward a consummate goal, to link it to a meaningful terminus that would lend significance to the journey and shore up the spirit to the inevitability and mundanity of death. But in place of the finally empty myths that would seek resolution, there is the wonder that such a tenuous beginning has endured, so that the thread of life ran

onward such that if you look closely you can see the singing reptile in the bird, or some elemental amphibian impulse in the child who delights wading in the mud.

Eiseley reminds us that, in terms of evolutionary science—in surveying the quest for systematic understanding of emergence—it is necessary, to consider death before life. In the absence of extinct species there would be no record against which to trace the continuance and transformations of life forms. In these terms, death is the medium through which we come to understand the force and forms of life.

I remarked that Man does not die, although men do. It is the case however that there is a world lost to contemporary man, a world to which he is dead by virtue of his crossing the bar from the world of nature to a world of culture. This is particularly the kind of death that is so troubling to Eiseley, the one form of death that he finds deeply problematic. Archaic cultures that lie amid the remains that Eiseley has spent his life studying and which draw his deepest sense of continuity in the ‘thread of life,’ were still within the embrace of the first world of nature. Primitive man’s relation to the world was a mythical ordering of the world rather than historical or causal: at ease with the seasons he lived securely within the repetitions of nature.

Some contemporary sense of this first world of nature, and of the possibility of its living reality may be felt in a story that the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko provides out of her experience in the oral culture of a tribal people, which I have poetically shortened here:

Long ago, out on the high desert below  
Turquoise Mountain,  
there was a meeting of witches.  
And there was a contest to see which had the  
strongest medicine,

the greater power.

One witch danced and brought forth rain from a cloudless summer sky.

Another beat an ancient sacred drum, and its rhythm slowed the current of the river and stirred the high mountain Aspen and Pine.

Another drew lines in the sand with a stick and snakes came to rest in the hollows.

“What I have is a story,” one witch said, and the others laughed, at first.

“Go ahead, laugh if you want to, but as I tell the story, it will begin to happen:

Across the ocean in caves of dark hills, are white skin people, like the belly of a fish, covered with hair.

These people grow away from the earth. Then they grow away from the sun.

Then they grow away from the plants and animals.

They see no life.

When they look, they see only objects.

The world is a dead thing for them.

The trees and rivers are not alive, the mountains and stones are not alive.

The deer and the bear are objects.

They see no life.

These are people of fear. They fear the world.

They destroy what they fear.

They fear themselves.

... Set in motion now ... set in motion ...  
to destroy, to kill

... Whirling ... whirling ...”

So the other witches said: “Take it back; Call that story back!”

But the witch just shook its head at the others

in their stinking animal skins, fur, and feathers.

“It’s already turned loose. It’s already coming. It can’t be called back.”

-- after Leslie Marmon Silko

Eiseley speaks of the discovery of a Pawnee medicine bundle he uncovered on one of his field excursions which contained feathers, a mineralized fossil tooth, an archaic nail with a square head, etc. and he thinks about what powers were there in that precious bundle, along with the dreams and visions of the warrior who treasured and was empowered by his investment in this magic possession. And in that context he recalled Joseph Campbell’s remark that where there is magic, there is no death... or in any event death is integrated and a matter of course in the spiritual life of a people. We would do well to understand the nature of time in those simple cultures which are without causal or novel time, and where the veil between life and death wavers fitfully at best.

The problematic of our time, however, is that we exist in a world of culture which by contrast is a domain of illusion. Arguably, the modern temper’s obsession with comprehending the totality of the natural world has been purchased at the loss of that world through the distance of critical abstraction. Moreover, man’s unconscious response to this loss is not benign, for his invasive inquiry and activity threatens the balance of the natural world from which he is separated. He returns to it too often as a terrifying figure on the white horse of the apocalypse. For better or worse, in the attempt to understand his universe, man had to give away a part of himself which can never be regained—the certainty of the animal that what it senses is actually there in the shape that his eyes behold.

Eiseley offers an avenue of hope, if not obvious resolution to the nature of the emergent human predicament that is an echo of Silko's story. The question is how it may be possible to re-enter the primary world, the first world of Nature; how man the relatively unthinking and proud architect of the second world—the world of culture—may revivify and restore the first world which cherished and brought him into being.

Recall that T.S. Eliot was speaking of the mixed blessings of remembrance in his remark that Time the healer is Time the destroyer. But memories do persist and sometimes return to haunt. For Eiseley memories stretched back far into a long dead world where witches roamed the earth, ages where creatures walked and ruled when man was still a frail experiment in remote mountains. But the creature grew and came to prevail, and it is with man that a tear in nature occurred in which as in the witches' vision a vast whirlpool spinning faster and taster consumed flesh, stones, minerals and whatever stood in its wake. Eiseley observes that in the process the ancient sounds of nature are drowned in a cacophony of something no longer nature, something demonic and out of control. This is as apocalyptic as Eiseley's thought gets, but it has a larger point in his discourse on death. There are kinds and levels of Death: Individuals can be dead to various kinds of things, e.g. to the world of ideas, to the world of beauty...but—and this is the main focus of much of Eiseley's investigation of the past—Man, modern man, historical man, scientific man, can be dead to the natural world, to the primary world of nature which at a certain point of time was abandoned for a second world of culture.

For the human being, in contrast with the natural animal, there are two streams of evolution that have met and merged: the biological and the cultural. Man is drawn alternately by the blind instincts of the forest or by the conflicting

intuitions of a higher rational self such that he becomes capable of murder without conscience. Eiseley puts it that in the absence of fangs and claws man is isolated in his own world and dreams, and that terrified he searches for meaning behind the life he sees, and the dreams that seem so real. The worry however, as Silko's witch chanted: They destroy what they fear; they fear themselves.

In his responses to the world of his recreation, man seems to fall into two categories: that of Fear at the prospect and terror of death, and that of Gratefulness at the presence of such beauty in life. That Love and Death are the two great themes of humanistic literature is a common concession, but more than this, they are at the root of the continuing conflict among human beings in every aspect of his life from religion to science, politics to physics. At least one conceptual point of resolution is to take the terror if not the sting out of death. Its connection to fear may be primal in the development of consciousness, but once the connection between life and death becomes natural and benign, it is a simple matter of choice whether to mount a superstitious defense against what is unknown, or simply observe an openness to the possibilities that life presents.

There is an uncanny ease with which Eiseley traverses the path from living to dead to living, the present to the past and into the present, from the strange commonness of children wallowing gleefully in the rain and mud, to the primal mud-wiggling of chordates still alive in the memories and habits of the heart. In considering the prospect of man, then, it is useful first to review the evolutionary scope of what he has been and so at root still is. The enormous power of intellectual understanding has searched through the scale of human development only to return man to a shrunken tree shrew clinging to a branch in a primal forest. Whatever progress has been made, it is not too difficult to see that

same frail creature still clinging to a branch amid the violence his development has wrought.

### III

Life and Memory/ Time and Death in the second world of cultural literature and life: There are as many ways of dying as there are of living. Assuming there is something to be learned from death and that Shakespeare was right that cowards die many times before their death, there may be something to be said for cowardice, or in any event some hesitation to join the ranks of the valiant who taste of death but once. T.S.Eliot, perhaps recalling his childhood on the Mississippi, considered an analogy for the force of time and the river: I don't know much about gods, he said, but I think the River is a great brown god. The ever flowing power of this great being, random and indiscriminate in its occasional violence... links the force of nature to the godhead, and so to life. Eiseley concurs, that if there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.

Eiseley speaks movingly of the death of a wounded wild duck, running to escape his attempted rescue; the bird struggles into the sea and waterlogged, it disappears into the surf. "This is the way wild things die, without question, without knowledge of mercy in the universe, knowing only themselves and their own pathway to the end." Walking further up the beach, he wonders whether the man who shot that bird will die as well.

We can indeed be moved by the account of the struggle with death of a single living thing, and if the death of a single man can be tragic, what of the death of a people, the death of an era, the death of a species? When the dimensions of death expand in this way the measures are beyond regret or remorse. In the larger evolutionary scheme of geologic time death becomes natural and no longer an offence. Simply the effort to expand consciousness to incorporate an

awareness of the universe and of the life surrounding us leavens the prospect and lessens the tragic aspect of death.

Man both absorbs time and transcends time. The body operates with the metabolism of time; embodied in the enduring fabric of DNA are the archaic strains of the chordates. In so far as the brain enables man to track the emergence of his own kind, he must feel the tug of kinship with the lemur as the body carries the deep memory of its ancestry.

On the cultural level, a deep and consistent concern with time has been a fixture of fictive literature from its inception; poets, dramatists, and novelists have been drawn to or driven by the intensity of the realization that human beings are caught in its web, are confined within it, isolated by it, condemned to it, measured against it. Literature as a comprehensive form of cultural expression is one important and fundamental response to the human need of meaning in and against time. The creative activity of imagination is directed toward finding a sense of unity in the flux of time, some constant feature in the current of existence that threads through the random occurrences of thought and feeling of the “inner” world of consciousness consonant with the broken images that constitute an “external” world. Some way, in short, for a creature caught in time—not between past and future, but between dust and dust—to transcend time.

Whether or not we can conceive of time in a way that avoids spacializing it, there is no question that our conception of ourselves in the world, with others, toward death—whether in the ordinary discourse of everyday life or in the languages of science, religion, and art—must acknowledge the invariable axes of space and time. If life itself is understood simply as motion, that is, as time, a concept of world requires space. The human mind is a concrete manifestation in the interstices of time and space,

and human culture a manifestation of activity held in a tenuous relation between time and place.

Consciousness of time, and so of life and death, has seemed to destroy any permanent sense of human meaning. The existentialists have made a virtue of such contingency, but a great deal of literature has responded in opposition to the dominion of time, seeking to achieve a sense of place, however fragile in passing. Literature has thus conceived of its possibilities as both transcending and transfiguring time in an effort to overcome its devouring maw.

These are only the most obvious expressions that characterize our collective concerns with consciousness and the phenomenon of passing life and in which cultures have defined themselves in the configuration of and comportment toward time. It is not difficult to defend the idea that the whole of human culture is in some or another way an attempt to deal with consciousness as, of and in time. Clearly the contingency of human life, the finality of individual consciousness in the terrible intimacy of the knowledge of our own death, is an existential framing of time. What can we do to shore up our lives against the relentless pull and fatal reach of time? The pyramids of ancient Egypt stand as weathered monuments to the desperation of would-be gods to escape time; even the magnificent sphinx, majestic and solemn, staring with stone dead eyes across a desert waste into eternity, is subject to the corroding elements in service to time.

But for men below the horizons of the gods, there will be time, the weary voice of Koheleth assures us, for all the days and hands of men. For to every living thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a

time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

But even as the sun also rises and passes away, there is only vanity in the days of men. Wisdom is but recognition of the dominion of time—‘Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?’ An ancient Asian tale on this theme counsels that there is but a single resolution for every season, good or ill: ‘This too shall pass.’ But if time heals all things, as we are reminded by the poet Time the healer is Time the destroyer.

Whether the culture is classical or modern, ironic or tragic, the dominion of time frames its lament: “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...” is the familiar paradigm of tragic self-realization at the convergence of overweening ambition and the retributions of destiny. This expression has become an indelible inscription of the paradox of time within human consciousness. The sequence of tomorrow’s creeps in petty pace for a despairing Macbeth; but in the consciousness of another, tomorrow may still be alive to possibility, the pace of its rhythm may race or skip to its last syllable. For some, tomorrows may weary and all recede into yesterdays, or they may actively match the energy of youth. Whether our projects bleed together into a continuing space of hope or into an intensity of despair in which neither yesterday or tomorrow exist, the insistence of tragic literature, voiced in another mood in the lamentations of Ecclesiastes, is that in time, consciousness falters finally into death and destruction.

The time of our lives can be and is transfigured in the many ways in which we put events into stories, and in turn transform our lives. The self-life-writing of autobiography, for example, can begin with a genealogy and birth, presenting a recorded sequence of accomplishments, or it can begin with a remembered event or situation that has become a touchstone for the ensuing re-construction of the continuing story of one's life. That story remains an open one and without an ending: one can offer a summing up of her life that may or may not be accurate or believable, but the final ending can only be told by another. The individual's story simply trails off; even if the last gesture is suicide, the detail of its telling requires a survivor, and the story then becomes the teller's story in the time line that continues life

Poets write within and against the measured passion of life and death in time. The two great themes of Love and Death, celebrate in their separate and synchronous ways the reality of consciousness. In each case, Life and Death, or rather Love and Death, are metaphors of transcendence in the transfiguration of time. The familiar line of Dylan Thomas discovers the point of convergence of these two great passions beneath the ease and bloom of youth: Time held me green and dying/ though I sang in my chains like the Sea.'

The whole of human culture is arguably a creative sometimes desperate response to Time's dominion and Death's inevitability. All life is subject to its authority, but only the human being is acutely aware of its insistent finality and confronted with finding a resolution to its sentence through creative imagination. The easy lyricism of Dylan Thomas is a faint echo of the song of this ancient god: as we are young and easy beneath the apple bough, a moment's thought brings the truth that time holds us green and dying. But consciousness of the dominion of time also generates the

passion of poetic expression: though green and dying, we sing in our chains like the sea. The human life and death sentence of time arguably covers the whole range of symbolic systems of expression, but the arts in general and literature especially addresses the possibilities of variance within the bounds and bonds of time.

Whether we celebrate the gift of time in life, or lament its passing in litanies of death, time is a crucible of poetic expression. It is less a theme of literature than its very structure. Philosophical literature records a complex, sometimes contradictory tradition setting out and arguing the meaning(s) of time. Modern discussions of time tend to take their cue from St. Augustine's framing of time in which the present is inclusive of past as remembrance and future as anticipation, against the background of eternity. Contemporary discussions vary relying on the variations between the categorical distinction of Kant, who considers time the internal order of experience as space is the external order, and H. Bergson, who engages a more elemental metabolism of consciousness and dynamic of time through a foundational *élan vital* of creative evolution. What is invariable and evident in both, however, is the convergence of time and life, energy, motion and consciousness.

There remains in cultural consciousness, however, the idea of a transcendence of time within the space of the sacred, a hope of recovery or rediscovery of eternity. The experience of ecstasy is one such mode of transcendence, an aspiration of poetic imagination as well as religious mysticism. The poet W.H. Auden speaks in a secular voice of the sacred in gardens that time is forever outside. In philosophy, Nietzsche's analytic transvaluation of values includes a poetic transvaluation of time, described in the cyclical cosmology and depth psychology of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche discovers the reconfiguration of time also in ecstasy experienced in the tragic drama of antiquity, in

which an audience, in domesticated ritual of Dionysian celebration, is drawn into the time of the god, and so loses any sense of individuation or iteration of the ordinary commonplace of time. Heidegger's pitched battle against what he regards as the dehumanizing mechanics of time in the modern world requires a similar poetic reevaluation: the concept of Being and the grounding concept of human being is transfigured to gain an authentic and dynamic experience of time in which past present and future all remain open and alive within a human reality that transcends the commonplace of everyday.

Ever against or in tension with the sculpted Place of works is an unrelenting metabolism of Time, of motion, change, decay, death. On an exclusive poetics of Time, in which Time is the constituting value of human life—time as life, life as time—history and culture as well become only time, not remembrance, blowing dust, vacant images draining into an empty eternity. It is only the tension created in these two visions, in the collision and collusion of metaphors of Time and Place, which accounts for the felt depth of tragic drama. Nietzsche's early analysis of the birth and death of Greek tragic drama in terms of the conflicting but complementary forces of the Dionysian and Apollinian is a parallel distinction to what we are here calling Place and Time. Apollo represents and reflects an Olympian Place, a projected permanence and possession of form which can reflect and represent; Dionysus, in contrast, is the dying god, caught in the devouring turn of seasons, who spiritually embodies Time, who can only find significance in the flux of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche's point, of course, was that tragic drama can work, is possible, only when reflection becomes embodied, time represented within place. An art, a culture, can only flourish worshipping at the temple of both gods.

Whether the tragic sensibility of culture in the poetic reconciliation with time and death can match the deeper sense of Eiseley's measured optimism in the thread of life that reaches back through and beyond the second world to a more natural assimilation of man and the archaic roots of his being is an open and troubling question. It is, however in an important sense a question of life and death, and so worth our serious consideration.

I have said that the ruins of every civilization are the marks of men trying to express themselves, to leave an impression upon the earth. We in the modern world have turned more stones, listened to more buried voices than any culture before us. There should be a kind of pity that comes with time, when one grows truly conscious and looks behind as well as forward, for nothing is more brutally savage than the man who is not aware he is a shadow. Nothing is more real than the real; and that is why it is well for men to hurt themselves with the past—it is one road to tolerance.

It is appropriate to leave Eiseley in the ruins of a dead landscape, as he sees the elements beneath his feet still alive in the life above him passing by into a further oblivion. In his story "The Judgment of the Birds" he is standing in the stark country of the Badlands. The ash of ancient volcanic outburst still sterilizes its soil, and its colors in that waste are the colors of a flame in the lonely sunsets of dead planets. Looking up to see a flight of birds racing southward toward him Eiseley has a revelation, standing in the middle of a dead world at sunset. "Fifty million years lay under my feet, fifty million years of bellowing monsters moving in a green world now gone so utterly that its very light was traveling on

the farther edge of space. The chemicals of all that vanished age lay about me in the ground.” Looking down at the chemicals at his feet, black streaks of carbon, the stain of iron in the clay, he remarks:

The iron did not remember the blood it had once moved within, the phosphorus had forgot the savage brain. I had lifted up a fistful of the ground and held it while that wild flight of southbound warblers hurled over me into the oncoming dark. There went phosphorous, there went iron, there went carbon, there beat the calcium in those hurrying wings. Alone on a dead planet I watch that incredible miracle speeding past. It ran by some true compass over field and wasteland. It cried its individual ecstasies into the air until the gullies rang. It swerved like a single body. It knew itself, and lonely, it bunched close in the racing darkness, its individual entities feeling about them in the rising night. And so, crying out to each other their identity, they passed away out of my view

I can think of no other single passage in all of literature in which past and present, death and life are brought together into such intimate and enduring presence.

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