The Shadow of His Equipage:

Loren Eiseley and Animals

> [The real goal of science is to understand] the essence of what our species has been and still is, beyond thought and beneath society: an essence that may be vouchsafed to us in a mineral more beautiful than any work of Man; in the scent, more subtly evolved than books, that lingers in the heart of a lily; or in wink of an eye, heavy with patience, serenity, mutual forgiveness, that sometimes, through an involuntary understanding, one can exchange with a cat.
>
> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (473-74)

> Once a fear pierced him
> In that he mistook
> The shadow of his equipage
> For blackbirds.
>
> Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" *(Collected Poems* 94)

> In [the] labyrinth [of the self] where it seems one must trust to blind instinct, there is, von Franz points out, one—only one—consistent rule or “ethic”: "Anyone who earns the gratitude of animals, or whom they help for any reason, invariably wins out. This is the only unfailing rule that I have been able to find." Our instinct, in other words, is not blind. The animal does not reason, but it sees. And it acts with certainty, it acts "rightly," appropriately. That is why all animals are beautiful. *It is the animal who knows the way, the way home*. It is the animal within us, the primitive, the dark brother, the shadow soul, who is the guide.
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> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night* (57; my italics)

I. The Guide

"Fox masks, wolf masks, I try them on," Loren Eiseley explains in a poem entitled "The Changeling," "as if I were a savage,” pursuing “phrenological attempts to see /

the beast in man . . ." (*Notes* 19). As a result of this preoccupation, Eiseley's essays and poems are studded with a poet/naturalist's acute observations, both charming and insightful, about the animal world: a cat named Maddy who bows repeatedly to garner human applause (*Strange* 128-138); a beaver which prompts a meditation on the validity of teleology in science (*Notes* 42-43); a crane in a zoo which inspires Eiseley to join it in a mating dance (*Strange* 152-53); a catfish, found almost frozen in river ice, which demands of its discoverer that he get it a tank (*Immense* 21-23); a snow leopard in a cage whose unceasing gaze cannot be imprisoned (*Notes* 34); an "innocent fox" which teaches him that the world "as it begins for all things" is really "a child's universe, a tiny and laughing universe" (*Unexpected* 210-11); a hunting poodle named Beau that lives in a smell prison "in which the contours and direction change with every gust of air" (*Invisible* 38-40), a sparrow hawk still living, even in the midst of a big city landscape, in "the time before man" (*Autumn* 88).

Eiseley's writings again and again attempt to answer the question he once posed in a poem: "How does a man [and a scientist] say to his fellows / he has been enchanted / by a bird?" (*Notes* 69). Animals are to the totemic mind, as Levi-Strauss observes, "things with which to think" and not merely objects. In Eiseley's totemism they likewise provide an essential means for thought: because they are the natural world's true natives, in thinking out their place in the structure of his own imagination he reconstructs an important chapter of his own autobiography.

Because he perceived himself to be a "changeling" "born from a fourth dimension" (*Notes* 21); because he understood that through time and evolution he is genealogically related, in mind and body, to the animal world; because he knew that his own thoughts and perceptions, and indeed his whole personality, have "rooted their way up"—out of the "triune brain"[1]—"through dynasties of neocortex" (*Innocent* 23), Eiseley retained a lifelong fascination with the creature world, a fascination which came naturally enough to his evolutionary imagination: "I see animal faces as readily as though I sat with my mother's one blighted gift in a Cro-Magnon cave," he explains. "The religious forms of the present leave me unmoved. My eye is round, open and undomesticated as an owl's in a primeval forest—a world that for me has never truly departed" (*Strange* 139). It is in the ways of animals that

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[1]The theory of the triune brain—that the distinctly human neo-cortex evolved out of and still remains uncomfortably linked to, the the "lower" "reptilian" and "mammalian" brain—was first proposed by biologist Paul McLean. See Hampden Turner, *Maps of the Mind* for a discussion of McLean's ideas.

he most clearly feels the presence of what Martin Buber called “the world order”[2] ("I had a growing feeling that miracles were particularly concerned with life, with the animal aspect of things," he writes [*Unexpected* 200]); and it is in large part by their example that he hopes to find a way of conquering his own alienation and surmounting his own longing. Since childhood, animals had served as guides for his vision quest; he pays close heed to their pedagogy. Animals, he seems to sense, know the way home.

Like many men, Eiseley's lifelong attempt to "effect his own escape" began innocently enough in childhood when he tried to run away from home. He was in flight from an environment he found suffocating and a deaf mother whose harsh, discordant voice and fits of madness menaced him as a child and haunted him until his death. Climbing aboard a neighborhood delivery truck, Eiseley tells us in "The Gold Wheel" in *The Night Country*, he soon found himself outside the city limits, embarked on his "first great adventure into the outer wilderness." The journey itself, he later remembered, was "the most marvelous ride I shall ever make in this life. . . . On that day . . . we were moving through the kind of eternal light which exists only in the minds of the very young." But afraid of continuing too far into the unknown, the young Eiseley jumps from the wagon and, since a heavy thunderstorm has come up, hides immediately in a nearby hedgerow. There, in the midst of that secret world, Eiseley gradually begins to realize that he is not alone:

> In that hedge where I crouched . . . were hundred of brown birds, strangers sitting immovable and still. They paid no attention to me. In fact, they were immersed in a kind of waiting silence so secret and immense that I was much too overawed to disturb them. Instead, I huddled into that thin world beneath the birds while the storm leaped and flickered as though hesitating whether

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[2]In *I and Thou,* Buber distinguishes between what he calls “the ordered world” and “the world order.” The former is the natural world as shaped and reshaped by human logic and structure. The latter names being beyond any possibility of human organization or ordering. We may live our lives within “the ordered world,” oblivious to the presence of the world order from which we—and all things—sprang, Buber observes, but we cannot die into it; at death we are again alone with the world order.

> to harry us out of our refuge into the rolling domain of the clouds. Today I know that those birds were migrating and had sought shelter from exhaustion.

The storm eventually subsides and Eiseley, his escape attempt frustrated, turns homeward, but he "felt in the process some obscure sense of loss. It was as though I had been on the verge of a great adventure into another world that eluded me; the green light had passed away from the fields." The incident constituted for Eiseley a major point of departure, for he remained thereafter, by his own admission, always a "fugitive," forever on a prodigal journey of flight away from home, and the trappings of adulthood and maturity, which he donned daily to meet the world, he knew to be only a kind of mimicry, "the protective coloration" of a creature pretending to be a man and a university professor when his real allegiance was elsewhere: "I should have stayed under the hedge with the birds" (*Night* 9-12).

Among the Blackfeet Indians of the American West there exists a myth, as Eiseley himself explains in *The Unexpected Universe*, which tells how the tribe's earliest ancestors, not knowing how to live in the strange new world where they found themselves "poor and naked," implored their maker "Old Man" to assist them in their plight, only to be advised by their creator to "Go to sleep and get power. Whatever animals appear in your dream, pray and listen." The tale, Eiseley comments, has an "elemental ring," for it is, in fact, "the story of an orphan—man—bereft of instinctive instruction and dependent upon dream, upon, in the end, his own interpretation of the world. He has to seek animal helpers because they alone remembered what was to be done" (*Unexpected* 113).

Like the Blackfeet, Eiseley understood that as both a man and a writer he too did not know how to live, and he never forgot the injunction of "Old Man" to turn always to the natural world and its more experienced inhabitants in order to discover "what was to be done." Eiseley's near mystical understanding of the ways of animals was the legacy of that first glimpse into the creaturely during his youthful escape attempt: the birds in that hedgerow had appeared to him to be almost magical simply because they were autochthonal creatures, what the poet Rilke called "great accustomed things," sprung from the earth and at peace within it. Even their migration was the result of adaptation; they did not journey into the distance out of longing, nor did they feel the call of destiny which has prompted *Homo sapiens*. But could such resignation to the ways of the earth—the change of the seasons, the upheaval of a storm—ever be mankind's? This question lies at the heart of Eiseley's

autobiographical meditations. During his childhood flight he had sensed the presence of "another world" he was then unable to reach; in adulthood he again sought to enter it, to make "the green light of enchantment" return to the fields.

II. The Night Country

> The descent beckons as the ascent beckoned.
> William Carlos Williams, *Pictures from Brueghel* (73)

> already the knowing brutes are aware
> that we don't feel very securely at home
> within our interpreted world.
> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* (21)

Eiseley's initial attempts to accommodate himself to the natural world, to become a mere creature, are prevented by his sense that nature is a realm inimical to mankind's nature, a "Night Country" of terror, an abyss of evil. He even devoted an entire book (*The Night Country*) to portraying this world of inhuman darkness. In *The Immense Journey*, he explains his first discovery of the reality of the Night Country. Once, he removed the cover from an old well and discovered, peering over the rim into its depths, a large spider scurrying about. The spider, he realized with a shock, *chose* to be there; like those things "that did not love the sun" populating the vast depths of the ocean, the spider desired darkness; the Night Country was its element (37-38). There is, Eiseley knew, no escaping the somber conclusion that the "whole infinite ladder of life was filled with this backward yearning" (*Night* 26), a yearning which totally contradicts humankind's whole symbolic equation of light with the Good, and the prospect often seemed to fill Eiseley with terror.

Eiseley's fear, he realized, was not unique. Human beings have always feared that this "night tide" will one day engulf them and all their achievements. Such fear probably began, he speculates, in our earliest ancestors as they sat by their cave fires watching the "big eyes" of the predators which lurked outside the human circle. This fear is immense, Eiseley knew, because the tide itself is immense: it stretches, in fact, to the ends of the universe. The menace of this night tide causes us to string lamps out into country lanes in a futile attempt to conquer its province; it makes us run down night creatures on the road. In response to the night tide, Eiseley realizes,

mankind "lights and lights in a passion for illumination that is insatiable—a poor day-born thing contending against one of the greatest powers in the universe" (*Night* 32).

The Night Country even sends "personal messages" to our species upon occasion, to remind us of its threatening presence offstage. Eiseley collected such messages: the rat, described in *The Night Country*, that jumps from an open hotel window into the bed of one of Eiseley's friends; the "trickster" rat in *All the Strange Hours* which upstages and parodies Eiseley's own lecture on restoring "great dead cities as shrines of meditation"; the "millions-upon-millions" of daddy longlegs Eiseley once unexpectedly encountered while sliding along on his back through a narrow subterranean passage. These and other encounters with the Night Country for a time drive Eiseley further and further away from identification with the natural order and make him that much more of a fugitive.

Eiseley the fugitive finds cause for trepidation in the animal aspect of the world even when it does not show itself as an emblem of the ominous Night Country. After pondering Heraclitus' concept of *polemos* in a poem, for example, he finds in the Greek idea of the elemental strife from which all things are born a possible subversion of the whole progress of civilization. For humans and animals are at war, he thinks, in competition for the goods of life, and there is no guarantee mankind will win:

> Polemos, war—tell you
>   they keep coming, keep coming,
> raccoons, foxes, butterflies.
>   I heard a chipmunk whistle
> in the drain pipe.
> The city is ours
>   I think,
>   but less certain now. (*Notes* 81)

To Eiseley, the effects of *polemos* are visible everywhere, even in the activities of the most innocent of creatures, as he describes in *The Immense Journey*:

I know the sort of watch birds keep on us. I've listened to sparrows tapping tentatively on the outside of air conditioners when they thought no one was listening, and I know how other birds test the vibrations that come up to them through the television aerials.

> “Is he gone?" they ask, and the vibrations come up from below, "Not yet, not yet.” (*Immense* 187)

In *All the Strange Hours*, as he watches growing packs of wild dogs prowling along Market Street in Philadelphia, Eiseley imagines that the takeover is very far advanced and that the very same dogs he watches may even outlive their masters and "still be waiting when the first wild oak bursts through the asphalt of Market Street." Yet these and all dogs may, Eiseley thinks, retain even then at least a memory of a "dim hand that they all feel but have never known," a "dim memory of a visiting god who could not save himself but whose touch wrought something ineffable." But when that "racial memory" is no longer experienced, "then man will in truth be gone.”

One of those dogs, however, brings a message to Eiseley, a message he communicates only through the licking of his tongue, but which Eiseley, a scientist on a vision quest into knowledge, is able to translate into human language: "If you would come out of your doors and stonework," the dog pleads with Eiseley, "we could lie here in the dust and be safe, as it was in the beginning when you, the gods, lived close to us and we came in to you around the fire." This dog, an emissary from the Night Country which Eiseley had so long feared, delivers a summons, Eiseley discerns, because he simply "did not understand the gods nor *why they persisted in going so far away*" (*Strange* 47-49; my italics).

The dog seems to know intuitively and more intensely than we ourselves do how human longing has alienated the species from the creaturely state. Since that day in his childhood when he had waited patiently in a hedgerow among migrating birds, Eiseley knew that he too had journeyed "far away," into a solely human, adult realm in which his primary relationship to his world had become, to use a favorite metaphor of the American poet Robinson Jeffers, "incestuous"—where he has intercourse only within his own limited human family to the neglect of the natural world from which he sprang. It is only from this perspective, as he came to realize, that the creaturely appears to his own prodigal imagination to be a Night Country. But such a realization required of Eiseley a redirection of his odyssey—a momentary divagation from pursuit of the distance and mankind's immense journey—which comes for him in the form of a descent.

The necessity of the descent in the attainment of wisdom has always been a theme of the world's literature, as the journeys into hell of Odysseus, Hercules,

Aeneas, and Dante illustrate well. In the world's literature and mythology, the descent traditionally serves as a means of acquiring the wisdom necessary for the completion of a journey, as in Aeneas' consultation with his father in Hades, or Odysseus' seeking out of Tiresias, or Dante's passage through the Inferno. The descent of Loren Eiseley, an autobiographical one, involved—in keeping with the traditional vision quest of primitive peoples—the mediumship of animals, the true spirits of the Night Country, into an underworld which at one time seemed to Eiseley to lie far below the powers of human illumination. With this descent, Eiseley slowly begins to reclaim for himself the heritage of creatureliness which he had once abandoned.

In "Big Eyes and Small Eyes" in *The Night Country*, Eiseley describes a difficult cross-country journey he once made over a western mountain range to a nearby city. "I will not say where the journey began," he explains cryptically at the outset; what we do learn, however, is that the journey was for him free from care, at least initially: "I was complete in myself like a young migrating animal whose world exists totally in the present moment.” (He had repossessed, it would seem, the magical sense he had felt in childhood in the hedgerow with the birds.) But the journey soon becomes for various reasons—the onset of night, his growing weariness—more and more difficult, until at its end he faces the stern test of descending a sharp escarpment which presents the final obstacle between himself and the city below it—his destination. Halfway down the dangerous cliff, Eiseley hears the frenzied barking of guard dogs from a mine located at its foot, and although he fears their likely attack, he has, he realizes, little choice but to drop from his perch on the side of the cliff directly into their midst.

To his great astonishment, however, he finds that “the great hounds, with the total irrationality that prevails over the sheer cliff of Chaos, leaped and bounded about me as though I were their returning master." Gradually their behavior becomes clear to his clairvoyant eye: "Did they take me,” he asks, "because of my successful descent as a demon like themselves—for if I had fallen, they had given every indication of devouring me—or are the dogs of Cerberus, the hoarse-voiced, much feared guardian of Darkness, actually abysmally lonely and friendly creatures?” Having been accepted as a fellow creature, proven to be so because of his accomplishment, Eiseley comes to see his descent as a redirection of his prodigal journey. He vanquishes his fear of the dark and consequently understands that even a descent into hell is an assailable phase of the human journey: "When I come to the

Final Pit in which they howl," he explains, "I shall, without too great a show of confidence, put out my hand and speak once more. Perhaps the great hounds of fear may wait with wagging tails for a voice which knows them" (*Night* 27-44).

Like Rilke, Eiseley is thus able to see that "perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us" (xxx), and thus he begins to feel the call of the ascent and the resumption of his journey. He then feels himself becoming one with the animal world: "My thoughts are becoming animals," he even tells us in a poem (*Notes* 37) . But while the spectre of the Night Country threatened Eiseley with alienation from the world order, identification with the animal world brings with it a corresponding danger for him: the temptation to abandon *The Immense Journey* short of completion and thereby to rob it of all meaning.

III. Defecting

> When I saw that clumsy crow
> Flap from a wasted tree,
> A shape in the mind rose up:
> Over the gulfs of dream
> Flew a tremendous bird
> Further and further away
> Into a moonless black,
> Deep in the brain, far back.
> Theodore Roethke, "Night Crow" (*Collected Poems* 47)

Chuang-tzu, the famous Taoist philosopher, dreamed one night that he was a grasshopper, a dream which caused him to wonder upon awakening, so the story informs us, whether he was not, rather, a grasshopper dreaming he was a man.

In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," the American poet Wallace Stevens tells of a man who "rode over Connecticut in a glass coach" and came to experience a sense of puzzlement about the human condition nearly the equal of Chuang-tzu's. Stripped of the normally ever-present frame of the "ordered world" in his means of conveyance, the man perceives from his "glass coach" a world which is, perhaps for the first time, transparently clear to him and senses the presence of another order of being. His vision becomes, in fact, so clairvoyant that, as Stevens informs us,

Once, a fear pierced him
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

Like Chuang-tzu, Stevens' coach rider has for the moment forgotten the distinctions between man and animal, the seer and the seen, and as Stevens explains earlier in the poem, to be so forgetful is to attain a new kind of understanding: for it is to see that

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

But even this understanding, as Stevens makes clear, is, at first acquisition, a piercing fear; for it involves nothing less than a loss of human identity and a merger with the world of the creature

The "line" which separates the human and animal world, Eiseley knew, is a thin one and not always apparent: it is "like an invisible wall, a line you can't see," and yet it is everywhere, a net running through one's brain as well as the outside world" (*Night* 12). A major function of civilized religion, Eiseley liked to think, is to prevent mankind from straying too near or crossing over such a line of demarcation (*Invisible* 150-51). But animals themselves know of its existence, even when we do not: "birds sit on those lines and you never knew which side the birds were on because they sat so quietly and were waiting" (*Night* 12).

Eiseley often felt the shudder which accompanies crossing over the line and the subsequent confusion of realms; he experienced it both at first and second hand. In an essay left unpublished at his death, "The Dance of the Frogs" (now to be found in *The Star Thrower*), Eiseley describes perhaps the first time he sensed that the creaturely constituted the shadow of his own equipage.

In "The Dance of the Frogs," Eiseley tells the incredible story of Albert Dreyer, a University of Pennsylvania zoologist and a specialist in amphibians, who, while

conducting an experiment in the woods of Pennsylvania on the axolotl, for a moment lost—like Chuang-tzu and Stevens' blackbird watcher—the customary objectivity of the human condition. As he explains to Eiseley, his captive listener in a bar, Dreyer had, it seems, discovered one night in the woods a large spring migration of thousands of peeper frogs heading for nearby waters in order to mate and lay eggs. Feeling, along with the frogs themselves, the "mighty and archaic life welling up from the very ground," and with the water and "the mother, the ancient life force" pulling him, Dreyer himself began, by his own account, to follow the frogs' mad skip across the land, moving in imitation of their dance.

But suddenly, as he traveled along what he realized to be a "four-dimensional roadway into the world of time," Dreyer sensed the presence in the surrounding darkness of "giant batrachian feet joining the dance." The feet, Dreyer explained to Eiseley, he believed to be those of a "game lord" such as the Indians native to the area believed in—a gigantic, "immaterial," controller of the movements of various species of animals, a kind of archetype of the species itself, an "immortal renewer of substance." In a trance, Dreyer continued to follow the frogs and their leader to the very edge of the water, and only at the last moment broke the spell they had cast upon him before he too, like the frogs, dove into the river. As Dreyer tells his tale, Eiseley (then a young man) looks upon him skeptically, until, in a last attempt to convince his listener of the veracity of his tale, Dreyer lifts his hands and removes a glove to reveal that his own hand is atavistically webbed between his otherwise human fingers; the chromosomes of the frogs, it seems, are still alive within him (*Star Thrower* 106-115).

In "The Judgment of the Birds," Eiseley describes one of a number of his own experiences of existential reversal, experiences that would seem to indicate that Dreyer's vivid demonstration of the presence of the creature within us not only convinced the initially doubting Eiseley but made him aware of similar presences within himself. Awakening in a New York City hotel in the very early morning, Eiseley goes to the window to view the coming of dawn. Instead he witnesses a deserted city occupied only by pigeons flying aimlessly about the nearby tall buildings. But then reality begins to shift before his very eyes:

> As I crouched half asleep across the sill, I had a moment's illusion that the world had changed in the night, as in some immense snowfall, and that if I were to leave it would have to be as these other inhabitants were doing, by

> the window. I should have to launch out into that great bottomless void with the simple confidence of young birds reared high up there among the familiar chimney pots and interposed horrors of the abyss.

And he begins to feel, within the tact dimension of his own body, invisible wings beginning to rise in anticipation of his coming flight, as if wings are still part of his "equipage" (*Immense* 166).

Like Albert Dreyer, Eiseley came to accept as well the reality of the "game lords" through first hand experience. In *The Unexpected Universe* he tells how once while driving among a lonely forest road at night he saw something racing along beside his car:

> It was not an animal; it was a gliding, leaping mythology. I felt the skin crawl on the back of my neck, for this was still the forest of the windigo. . . . I was lost, but I understood the forest. The blood that ran in me was not urban. I almost said not human. (*Unexpected* 202-203)

Although he soon realizes that the creature is only a spotted dog, he continues to believe that he has really seen "an illusory momentarily succession of forms, finally, but momentarily frozen into shape 'dog' by me." "How was I to know it would remain 'dog'?" he asks. "By experience? No, it had been picked by me out of a running weave of colors and faces into which it would lapse once more as it bounded silently into the inhuman, unpopulated wood." "We deceive ourselves," Eiseley concludes, "if we think our self drawn categories exist there."

After the experience, Eiseley feels his own "flesh" and seemingly unique personality already slipping like flying mist, like the colors of the dog, away from the little parcel of my bones." Carlos Casteneda's Don Juan would, no doubt, have explained to Eiseley that he had just encountered a supernatural being known as an "ally." But Loren Eiseley needed no Yaqui Indian sorcerer's tutelage to see such things. His evolutionary imagination was his only sorcerer, and he routinely witnessed such encounters with the creaturely and felt the presence of its shadow within his body until the mutability of form became a given of his world.

At the end of *Darwin's Century*, his scholarly study of the development of the idea of evolution, Eiseley quotes a passage from the notebooks of the young Charles Darwin in which, Eiseley observes, the theory of evolution was already contained in

germ: “If we chose to let conjecture run wild," Darwin wrote, "then animals, our fellow brethren in pain, disease, suffering and fame—our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements—they may partake of our origin in one common ancestor—we may all be melted together.” This vision of the unity of evolution's "tangled bank," Eiseley claims, constitutes nothing less than "one of the most tremendous insights a living being ever had" (*Darwin’s Century* 351-52) It is a vision that shapes as well all of Eiseley's own perceptions of animals.

There are, Eiseley understood,

> aspects of the world and its inhabitants that are eternal, like ripples marked in stone on fossil beaches. There is a biological preordination that no one can change. There are seriatim events that only the complete reversal of time could undo. An example would be the moment when the bats dropped into the air and fluttered away from the insectivore line that gave rise to ourselves. What fragment of man, perhaps a useful fragment, departed with them? Something, shall we say, that had it lingered, might have made a small, brave twilight difference in the mind of man? (*Invisible* 35)

It is this evolutionary questioning which allowed Eiseley to surmount his paralyzing fear of the Night Country; for such questioning brought Eiseley to the realization that—in the words of William Blake—"The Bat that flits at close of Eve / Has left the Brain that won't Believe." And so he chose instead to include it and its capabilities as part of his mind's equipment, rejecting, as did the great Romantic visionary, the superstitious symbolism which so often obscures man's apprehension of the natural unity of things. Instead, Eiseley sought always to incorporate, through the power of his imagination, all those atavistic ways of experience which man has, through biological necessity, abandoned along the way of his evolutionary passage, in the hope that the "small, brave twilight difference" thus recaptured might bring him needed wisdom in his own Odyssey, might aid him in authentically writing an autobiography which could serve as a "peace treaty" with things.

Mankind's attempts at understanding the universe, Eiseley observes in *The Invisible Pyramid*, have involved a tremendous irony: for although we have gained much knowledge in the effort, we have as well necessarily given away "a part of [ourselves] which can never be regained—the certainty of the animal that what it senses is actually there in the shape the eye beholds. By contrast, [we find

ourselves] in Plato's cave of illusion. [We have] acquired an interest in the whole of the natural world at the expense of being ejected from it and returning, all too frequently, as an angry despoiler" (142). To forget the animal within, then, is to become what Eiseley called (in *The Invisible Pyramid*) a "world eater"—a parasite upon earth, a destroyer of nature's delicate ecological balance. Consequently, Eiseley finds far greater ecological wisdom in the mythology of the American Indian than in that of the Greeks. For the Greeks, as Eiseley explains in a poem, were only able to see "in their strong sunlight / . . . the gods as men though immortal . . . ," while the Indian knew, thanks to "visions caught by / starving men on hilltops . . . ," that we are a "mosaic" of all the things of the living world, and so too must our gods be (*Notes* 36-37).

"All the great civilized religions remain primarily human centered," the poet Gary Snyder observes; as such they ignore that wisdom attainable only through communication with the animal world. We now can no longer hear the "language of the birds" which was once so vital a factor in the lives of ancient peoples. We now know nothing of the "pure sensual speech" of which the mystical shoemaker Jacob Boehme wrote as late as the seventeenth century. We are, therefore, incapable of realizing, as Snyder has explained, the most profound of all religious truths: "that we are many selves looking at each other, through the same eye" (62). And so we dream of voyaging to other planets beyond the Earth in hopes of discovering a "nonterrestrial intelligence" with which to converse and thereby to vanquish the "long loneliness" (*Star Thrower* 37-44) which always plagues an alienated creature like *Homo sapiens*; we refuse to accept that "Perhaps we have some things still to learn from the natural world before we turn to the far shores of space and whatever creatures may await us there" (*Star Thrower* 38-39).

"One does not meet oneself," Eiseley notes in *The Unexpected Universe*, thinking of Argos' recognition of his master Odysseus after nineteen years of waiting, "until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human." For such a meeting serves to remind us that we are, in fact, prodigal. For "the magic that gleams an instant between Argos and Odysseus," Eiseley observes, "is both the recognition of diversity and the need for affection across the illusions of form. It is nature's cry to homeless, far-wandering, insatiable man: 'Do not forget your brethren, nor the green wood from which you sprang'" (*Unexpected* 23). By such magic, Eiseley knew, even the hounds of hell can be tamed. Yet to attain such a recognition is a near impossibility in the midst of a logically ordered, desecrated "natural" world.

Our inability to communicate with animals can be traced, as Eiseley shows, back to our earliest ancestors. When we are first embarked on our time voyage, the quantum leap our intellectual powers performed brought with it a corresponding profanation of our world: "Man no longer saw distinct and powerful spirits in every tree or running brook. His animal confreres slunk like pariahs soulless from his presence. They no longer spoke, their influence upon him was broken . . ." (*Invisible* 14). There has always remained, however, the temptation to rectify this alienation by returning completely to the animal world in a sort of consummate Romanticism. (In the seventeenth-century Italian poet Gelli's *Circe*, Eiseley observes, this manifests itself in Gelli's version of the Odysseus legend: in *Circe*, all but one of those whom Circe transforms into animals refuse to be restored, feeling themselves to be "done with humanity.") Eiseley himself knew the power of the temptation. "Sometimes I think of defecting," he explains in the poem "The Last Days":

> I have begun to hear
> trees in the night;
> I wander around too much
> and need replacements.
> Animals are beginning to look better
> than my own kind;
> I *request transfer*.
> Sometimes I think they are talking.
> My cat is talking but I don't quite hear. (*Notes* 82)

The sense that he is himself becoming an animal is so great that, as he explains on numerous occasions, Eiseley refused to look into mirrors for fear that he will, like the legendary Werewolves, actually observe the transformation in progress.

Eiseley's own mentor, the noted anthropologist Frank Speck, once told him that his proper place was not the modern world, but way back among "the simpler peoples" like the Iroquois Indians. But even the Iroquois, Eiseley knew better, are not the "right people" with whom he can share a true sense of brotherhood. "I belonged," he explains in *All the Strange Hours*, "further back—back on the *altiplano* with the great gray beasts of the crossing." To fulfill this most sovereign wish—to re-enter the natural order of things during the ice age at the very point where Eiseley believed that the "rift"—mankind's separation from biological evolution—began, it

was, as Eiseley knew, imperative that he abandon every vestige of species chauvinism within himself and commit himself willingly to the ultimate heresy of identification with the natural world, accepting willingly the humiliation which comes with the disavowal of the projects of the world eaters. This humiliation Eiseley gladly accepted: "I did not care for taxonomic definitions, that was the truth of it," he would confess on the penultimate page of his formal autobiography. "I did not care to be a man, only a being" (*Strange* 91-95, 265).

IV. The Mockingbird

> There is a profound, inescapable need for animals that is in all people everywhere, an urgent requirement for which no substitute exists. It is no vague, romantic, or intangible yearning, no simple sop to our loneliness for Paradise. It is as hard and unavoidable as the compounds of our inner chemistry. It is universal but poorly recognized. It is the peculiar way that animals are used in the growth and development of the human person, in those most priceless qualities which we lump together as "mind". . . . Animals are among the first inhabitants of the mind's eye. They are basic to the development of speech and thought. Because of their part in the growth of consciousness, they are inseparable from a series of events in each human life, indispensable to our becoming human in the fullest sense.
>
> Paul Shepard, *Thinking Animals* (2)

Eiseley's longing to be other than human was counterbalanced in his mind by his vivid understanding that in the animal world there exists an equally profound desire to attain to the level of the human. Animals seem somehow to comprehend human destiny and their relationship to it. They feel for mankind, it is true, a kind of pity—like the dogs on Market Street; but they experience as well something very like envy. They long to be us. Like Rilke, Eiseley knew from close personal observation of animals that

> within the wakefully-warm beast
> there lies the weight and care of a great sadness.

> For that which often overwhelms us clings
> to him as well,— a kind of memory
> that what we're pressing after now was once
> nearer and truer and attached to us
> with infinite tenderness.

This crucial insight—that *Homo sapiens* represents, in Michael Polanyi's words, "the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world,"[3] a stage all life has striven to achieve—is brought home to Eiseley in his memories of his childhood pet, a dog named Mickey.

Mickey, Eiseley remembers, was a dog who envied the human advance and "wanted very much to be a genuine human being," though his futile attempts to sit up to eat at the Eiseley dinner table were met only with derisive laughter, and his look of shame revealed that he "knew very well he was being mocked for not being human." No one took his ambition seriously. But Mickey's great desire was no mere animal whim. As he looks at Mickey's paw print in a half-century old cement sidewalk during a visit in middle age to his home town, Eiseley understands that

> Mickey tried hard to be a human being. And as I stood after the lapse of years and looked at the faint impression of his paw, it struck me that every ruined civilization is, in a sense, the mark of men trying to be human, trying to transcend themselves. Like Mickey, none of them has quite made it. . . . (*Night* 79-80)

For "Man is not man, he is elsewhere" (*Night* 54), Eiseley reminds.

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[3]The passage referred to in the text (the final words of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*) reads in full:

> so far as we know, the tiny framents of the universe embodied in man are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world. If that be so, the appearance of the human mind has been so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world; and all that has gone before, the strivings of a myriad of centres that have taken the risk of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now achieved by us up to this point. (405)

Likewise, Eiseley comes to realize, it is not mankind alone that experiences the exchange of realms felt by Chuang-tzu and Stevens' crow watcher. Animals too know a kind of existential reversal:

> To see from an inverted angle, however, is not a gift allotted merely to the human imagination. I have come to suspect that within their degree it is sensed by animals, though perhaps as rarely as among men. The time has to be right; one has to be, by chance or intention, upon the border of two worlds. And sometimes these two borders may shift or interpenetrate and one sees the miraculous. (*Immense* 167)

In "The Judgment of the Birds" Eiseley describes just such an occasion.

Walking toward the campus of the University of Pennsylvania one morning, Eiseley follows an accustomed path through an extraordinarily heavy early morning fog. Suddenly jolted by a flutter of wings and a loud shriek, Eiseley recognizes the cry of a familiar crow which had almost collided with him. Gradually Eiseley realizes what had happened. The crow which had nearly crashed into him was a regular around the neighborhood, one Eiseley saw every day and who, in turn, saw him daily as well. But in the thick fog he had evidently become momentarily confused:

> He had thought he was high up, and when he encountered me looming gigantically through the fog, he had perceived a ghastly and, to the crow mind, unnatural sight. He had seen a man walking on air, desecrating the very heart of the crow kingdom, a harbinger of the most profound evil a crow mind could conceive of—airwalking men. The encounter, he must have thought, had taken place a hundred feet over the roofs. (*Immense* 169)

Once a fear pierced him, Stevens might have said, in that he mistook the shadow of his equipage for men.

Nor is it our seemingly unique ability to travel through time in inner experience—a favorite Eiseley theme—that truly distinguishes us. Even an animal can do it, Eiseley comprehends one night while playing with his dog Wolf, as he describes in "The Angry Winter." At work on the harvest of an archaeological dig, Eiseley throws Wolf the ancient bone of a fossil bison over 10,000 years old. Suddenly, Eiseley explains, Wolf begins to snarl and bare his teeth, assuming a posture of

defense. He does so, Eiseley grasps, because "ancient shapes were moving in his mind and determining his utterance," informing him that "only fools give up bones" in the time of ice in which he momentarily found himself and signaling him to attack, if necessary, his master, the "most beloved object in his universe." But the dog, Eiseley knew, did not really want to strike; in his "strained and desperate eyes" Eiseley reads another message which the animal does not have the words to otherwise express:

> Do not . . . force me. I am what I am and cannot be otherwise because of the shadows. Do not reach out. You are a man and my very god. I love you, but do not put out your hand. It is midnight. We are in another time, in the snow. (*Unexpected* 94-95)

Through the power of an atavistic instinct alone, Wolf had returned to that same spot in time in which Eiseley himself sought refuge, to that very moment in evolution—before the rift opened between the human and the animal—into which Eiseley hoped to die. And at the end of *All the Strange Hours*, his last major published work, Eiseley does join Wolf—his Argos—in the shadows of that instinctive world, in a verbal passage toward death that presaged Eiseley's own real one two years later, "muffled in snow upon the altiplano" (*Strange* 266). But the passage to that world is for Eiseley a difficult one, an Odyssey, and not to be navigated merely through an atavistic escape.

In mankind's search for a return to nature, an end to his prodigal journey beyond the biological into time, and our pursuit of a proper death, animals can, Eiseley knew, serve as an inspiration and a guide, as they did once for the totemic mind; but we need more than they can ever finally give: for we seek, he tells us in the poem "The Bats," the attainment of the "Peace that long ago was said to pass / beyond understanding." Raising his poetic voice in prayer, Eiseley asks, however, that such peace be conferred on all living things as well, not just on the human: "Give it to all your creatures, / for we too are a part of them as they of us / entwined in one great whole that cannot keep / the mind from terror so long as one lost leaf / upon the pavement struggles within its solitude to rise" (*Notes* 89). The "leaf" of which he speaks is, in reality, a bat which once came miraculously back to life at his feet; thus Eiseley's prayer seeks to redeem the Night Country, to lift its darkness into the realm of light and understanding.

To pray in this way is to begin to create “an ethic not alone directed toward his fellows, but extended to the living world around him"; it is an attempt to establish a presence before the world in which "by way of his cultural world, man can attempt an actual conscious re-entry into the sunflower forest he had thought merely to exploit or abandon." This feat humans can accomplish *only* alone: "for man himself must be his last magician. He must seek his own way home" (*Invisible* 155). And this humans *alone* can do because we are, as a species, like those water striders Eiseley writes of in a poem, "a strider over light and air," a creature of two realms, who "glides magnificently upon a web of music and of light," while below, under the sway of the Night Country, "Something . . . contends against the dark,” and although it does not always win, that part of us which lives within the light

> wins enough
> that music rises and a mocking bird
> has his own repertoire of notes,
> preserving others
> of birds who sang once and were still. (*Notes* 31-32)

Man is a mockingbird, Eiseley is telling us; he steals his songs from other singers. He is a mimic merely; his life is mimicry. ("Really we create nothing," Eiseley quotes Jean Baitaillon in *The Invisible Pyramid* [51]. "We merely plagiarize nature.") For to Eiseley, only the ventriloquist in back of nature can truly speak, and of all its messages those which come from the animal world are most eloquent, at least for those who, like Loren Eiseley, are able to heed.