

Great Silences and Frightening Dreams

Traveling
through Time
with Loren Eiseley.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

“On a planet where snow falls,” Loren Eiseley wrote in his book *The Invisible Pyramid*, “the light changes and when the light is changed, all is changed, including life.”

Loren Eiseley was an anthropologist who spent much of his life in the dark places of the earth—the basements of Time, he called them—squinting into the shadows for those who had huddled in the lightless caves when the ancient snows buried the entrances. He called himself a “bonepicker,” searching all his life for the shards and



skulls of our vanished ancestors, treasuring them as family relics, to be honored, to be studied, to be wondered about.

As much as any scientist-poet who ever wrote, Loren Eiseley was a time traveler who enabled you to see and feel the haunted past, to crawl through the dripping corridors of Time, and yes, to often feel spooked because you were being transported to a frightening state where mortality and immortality seemed to be one and the same.

Eiseley knew too much of this world.

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Perhaps it was because he had seen and held so many bone shards in his hands, so many skulls. Reading him, even today, when he is gone, will not make you happier than you were. But it will make you wiser—especially if you read him during the first snowfall of the year and remem-

ber the cave again and the great silences and the frightening dreams that bite into your face in the darkness.

“The first snows of winter,” Eiseley writes, “always leave an intimation in each drifting flake of a thousand-year turn toward a world in which summer may sometimes forget to come back.... Snow, like a vast white amoeba, has descended at intervals from the mountains and crept over the hills and valleys of the continents ingesting forests and spewing forth boulders.”

Loren Eiseley's night walk through a snowfilled woods near his house in the suburbs is not unlike the walks taken by Madisonians through the Arboretum, along the railroad tracks, on the fringes of the drifted golf courses. He bonds with us when he pauses, shelters his back against an enormous oak tree and stares up at the old winter sky. Who hasn't?

“I watched for a long time,” Eiseley reports, “the circling of remote constellations above my head. Perhaps somewhere across the void, another plotting eye on a similar midnight errand might be searching this arm of the galaxy. Would our eyes meet?”

Squinting into the night sky on a winter's night, the cold pinching even your eyes to pain, one knows for certain that this cold can kill you, will kill you if you let it. If you fall asleep in this cold tonight, you will drowse away and your heat will drowse away and they'll find you in the daylight, under the snow. They would find you there in this cold, alien planet that you always thought was your home.

Freezing to death is like going to sleep, the north country old-timers will tell you. They say you get numb, and the numbing stops all pain—“like cold brandy.” They also say that you get a warm and cozy feeling; the colder you get, the warmer you feel. There are worse ways to go.

I remember reading about the great battles fought on the Russian steppes in winter. It was there the Russian winter destroyed Napoleon's Grand Army of the Republic. It was there the Russian winter destroyed Hitler's Sixth Army at Stalingrad. One writer traveled those Russian steppes in winter and thought of all the dead soldiers under the snows “stuffed like raisins in a pudding.”

As the night cold deepened around Eiseley, he meditated on it. The cosmos is out there in the great cold and the cosmos is where our civilization dreams of going—and we are not the first civilization to dream that dream of going.

“Egypt,” Eiseley says, “which had planted in the pyramids man's mightiest challenge to effacing Time, had conceived long millennia ago the dream of a sky-traveling boat that might reach the pole star.

“The Maya of the New World rain forests had also watched the drift of the constellations from their temples...but of what their dreamers thought, the remaining hieroglyphs tell us little. We know only that the Maya were able to grope with mathematical accuracy through unlimited millions of years of which Christian Europe had no contemporary comprehension. The lost culture had remarkably accurate eclipse tables and precise time-commemorating monuments.”

When you are alone under the night sky of earth, the mind can play tricks, and that can happen if the night is cold as steel or warm as rain. As Steady Eddy says: “You really have to be together to be alone.”

“What if,” Loren Eiseley asked when he was alone, “what if during all that thousand years of computing among heavy unnatural numbers, they had found a way to clamber through some hidden galactic doorway? Would it not have been necessary to abandon these monumental cities and leave their illiterate worshipers behind?”

“Who, after all, among such ruins, could be sure that we were the first of the planet viruses to depart? Perhaps in the numbers and the hieroglyphs of long ago there had been hidden some other formula than that based upon the mathematics of rocket travel—some key to a doorway of air, leaving behind only the empty seedpods of the fallen cities.”

The snow still falls. The winter light again changes. Is Loren Eiseley still out there? Does he still watch?

From where? ■