

Anthropologist, Poet, Hobo

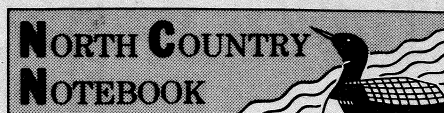
BY GEORGE VUKELICH

When Steady Eddy observes that the best way to kick one dumb habit is to replace it with another dumb habit, you have a ringing truth normally identified with papal bulls.

For example, in those distant, blood-leafed autumns when I was afield with rifle and shotgun, I sure as hell didn't waste precious hunting time in a place like a secondhand bookstore.

"Because," Steady notes, "the chances of finding a pheasant in such habitat are akin to finding the Masonic lodge at midnight Mass."

Since I gave up the rifle and the shotgun, I spend a large part of all seasons, autumn included, in second-hand bookstores, hunting the rows of shelves as intently as I once hunted the rows of corn.



Steady Eddy describes my book stalking as "peasant, hunting."

Steady jests. But I'll tell you: Some of the trophies you bag in the bookstores bring on a high only a serious garage-sale junkie can appreciate.

I bagged one the other day at Paul's Book Store on State Street: *The Lost Notebooks of Loren Eiseley*, edited by Kenneth Heuer. The book was published in 1987 by Little, Brown and Co.

Following Professor Eiseley's death in 1982, the publisher notes, a dozen of Eiseley's unpublished notebooks and journals were relegated for years to the University of Pennsylvania archives

and a closet off the author's old study. Eiseley's widow, Mabel, finally agreed to having the 1953-1960 journal published intact; if it was successful, others might be made available for publication.

This journal includes Eiseley's poetry and short stories about his Nebraska boyhood and hobo days during the Great Depression, as well as observations about his life as a "bone hunter" and academic. There are also letters to and from other eminent writers such as W.H. Auden, Archibald MacLeish, Ray Bradbury, Hal Borland, Lewis Mumford and Phyllis McGinley.

After reading Eiseley's essay "Man and the Porpoise: Two Solitary Destinies," McGinley wrote him a veritable love note: "I nominate you herewith for the Pulitzer Prize (or perhaps the Nobel Award) for poetry. Somewhat belatedly, today I read your piece on the porpoise in the *American Scholar* and I am in love with you. Together, you and Pierre Teilhard are rescuing anthropology from its estate as a science and restoring it to its rightful purpose as a philosophy. Long may you live!"

In a section of the lost notebooks titled "Of Bones and Searches," Eiseley sets down the lesson plan by which he lived his anthropologist's life, exploring the basements of time and setting down his finds in his classic books *The Immense Journey*, *The Firmament of Time*, *The Unexpected Universe*, *The Invisible Pyramid*, *The Night Country*, *The Star Thrower*, *All The Strange Hours* and others.

"I am a college professor," Eiseley whispers in that haunting voice that echoes from the unexplored caverns, "and a castaway. I write it as shipwrecked men on islands toss messages into the current and stand and watch the bottles bob away and vanish into unknown seas. I am marooned on a sandspit in time at the far end of an obscure and brutal century. I shall never escape.

"How I arrived and staggered naked but living up the shore I do not know, nor whence it was I came. Around me is the great chaos of the shouting waters out of which I, and all men living, have emerged. Over me when I build my campfire on the beach is the enormous unplumbed night of space. In my head is another darkness where bog lights glow in forgotten marshes and the sleeper writhes and cries out in his sleep. Men call that darkness time, and it is the most dreadful deep of all. The

nature of my profession is such that I have gone as far into that darkness as any man alive. As a consequence, the wish strikes me to leave a record, the record of a castaway's thoughts...."

Eiseley's thoughts go tumbling up into the air above our heads, reminding you of the film *2001* and the image of the bludgeon animal bone flung high by the conquerer-ape and transformed in a twinkling into a spaceship floating into its dockage, graceful as a waltzing dancer. That is the magic of Loren Eiseley. His words change our world, or more accurately, our perception of our world, in a twinkling.

"No, it is not because I am filled with obscure guilt that I step gently over, and not upon, an autumn cricket. It is not because of guilt that I refuse to shoot the last osprey from her nest in the tide marsh. I possess empathy; I

'I am marooned at the far end of a brutal century,' writes Eiseley.

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have grown with man in his mind's growing. I share that sympathy and compassion which extends beyond the barriers of class and race and form until it partakes of the universal whole. I am not ashamed to profess this emotion, nor will I call it a pathology. Only through this experience many times repeated and enhanced does man become truly human. Only then will his gun arm be forever lowered. I pray that it may sometime be so."

People have said that there is a deep melancholy in Loren Eiseley, and the old bone hunter agrees.

"I would never again make a profession of time. My walls are lined with books expounding its mysteries. My hands have been split and raw with grubbing into its waste bins and hidden crevices. I have stared so much at death that I can recognize the lingering personalities in the faces of skulls and feel accompanying affinities and revulsions. I am the last in an Ice Age leaf fall."

The tombstone that Loren Eiseley chose for his wife and himself reads: "We loved the earth but could not stay." Thank God his books could. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 10 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).