

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

Reversing the Stream of Time

We were sitting around the other night with Edna Meudt, the Wisconsin poet from Dodgeville, congratulating her on completing her autobiography *The Ose Jar*, when someone asked her what writer or poet had influenced her the most in her life. Out of the clear blue, Edna said: "Loren Eiseley. Reading him changed my life."

Loren Eiseley, for those of you who were out canoeing the last time his name came up here, was the Nebraskaborn genius who headed the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and who referred to himself as "the old bone-picker."

He also created some of the most haunting books ever published about the human condition, books that whisper to you down the corridors of time and, as Edna Meudt says, just change you.

Who else but Loren Eiseley could possibly write a paragraph like the following about the ongoing evolution of this world?

"The world is fixed, we say: fish in the sea, birds in the air. But in the mangrove swamps by the Niger, fish climb trees and ogle uneasy naturalists who try unsuccessfully to chase them

back to the water. There are things still coming ashore."

It is the great stream of time that is endlessly fascinating to Loren Eiseley, and it is his view of it that makes him endlessly fascinating to us.

Steady Eddy thinks that if you read Loren Eiseley—"whether you're a poet or an eelpout fisherman"—there's a good chance that your life will be changed too.

"Imagine, for a moment," Loren Eiseley writes in *The Immense Journey*,



"that you have drunk from a magician's goblet. Reverse the irreversible stream of time. Go down the dark stairwell out of which the race has ascended. Find yourself at last on the bottommost steps of time, slipping, sliding and wallowing by scale and fin down in the muck and ooze out of which you arose.

"Pass by grunts and voiceless hissings below the last tree ferns. Eyeless and earless, float in the primal waters,

sense sunlight you cannot see and stretch absorbing tentacles toward vague tastes that float in the water. Still, in your formless shiftings, the *you* remains: the sliding particles, the juices, the transformations are working in an exquisitely patterned rhythm which has no other purpose than your preservation—*you*, the entity, the ameboid being whose substance contains the unfathomable future. Even so does every man come upward from the waters of his birth."

"Of course," Steady Eddy notes, "every woman comes up from the waters of her birth the same way. But this was first published in 1946, and that era was, in a manner of speaking, still the Pleistocene."

"Yet," Loren Eiseley continues, "if at any moment the magician bending over you should cry: *Speak! Tell us of the road!* you could not respond. The sensations are yours but not—and this is one of the great mysteries—the power over the body.

"You cannot describe how the body you inhabit functions or picture or control the flights and spinings, the dance of the molecules that compose it, or why they chose to dance into that particular pattern which is *you*, or, again, why up the long stairway of the eons they dance from one shape to another. It is for this reason that I am no longer interested in final particles.

"Follow them as you will, pursue them until they become nameless protein crystals replicating on the verge of life. Use all the great powers of the mind and pass backward until you hang with the dire faces of the conquerors in the hydrogen cloud from which the sun was born.

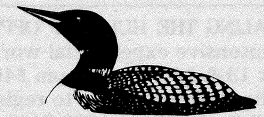
"You will then have performed the ultimate dissection that our analytic

age demands, but the cloud will still veil *the secret* and if not the cloud, then the nothingness into which, it appears, the cloud, in its turn, may be dissolved.

"The secret, if one may paraphrase a savage vocabulary, lies in the egg of night."

What strange forces at "the heart of matter," Loren Eiseley wondered, regulate the tiny beating of a rabbit's heart or the dim dream that builds a milkweed pod?

"I do not think," he wrote in the conclusion to *The Immense Journey*, "if someone finally twists the key successfully in the tiniest and most humble house of life, that many of these questions will be answered, or that the dark forces which create lights in the deep sea and living batteries in the waters of tropical swamps, or the dread



cycles of parasites, or the most noble workings of the human brain, will be much if at all revealed.

"I would say that if 'dead' matter has reared up this curious landscape of fiddling crickets, song sparrows and wondering men, it must be plain even to the most devoted materialist that the matter of which he speaks contains amazing, if not dreadful powers, and may not impossibly be, as Hardy suggested, 'but one mask of many worn by the Great Face behind.'"

Of his many books, Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey* has sold over a million copies. As has Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*.

"The old bone-picker was right," Steady says, "there are things still coming ashore." ■