William M. Beachly

Eiseley's Stygian Oracle

> I feel it is my duty to do what I can to make people realize that the wild creature has just as much right to live as you or I. They must learn that the wild offers a more thrilling sport than killing—that of letting live. Killing for the excitement of killing is murder. As in human life, there are tragedy, and humor, and pathos in the life of the wild. There are facts of tremendous interest, real lives, and real happenings, to be written about, and there is little necessity for drawing on the imagination. — Loren Eiseley, *The Lost Notebooks* (14).

How does a child in the eighth grade, in a dusty prairie town, from a dysfunctional, outcast home, who found little interest in schooling, produce such elegant pronouncements on morality exceeding the human sphere? Where do the insights arise, and what propels one to follow an intellectual mission to correct millennia of misplaced hubris? In 1921, when Loren wrote this for a school assignment, he had been an avid, self-taught reader: Daniel Defoe, Jack London, Ernest Thompson Seaton, and Charles G. D. Roberts were the teachers. From these writers it is not unexpected that one would develop empathy for the animal perspective, but Eiseley went further to understand something more of the human condition. In this essay I seek a more humic, unspoken and experiential source of inspiration. My search for a cryptic, archaic species in an otherwise familiar landscape leads to questions about the making and mission of a searcher. Why does one penetrate beneath the known surface to experience the "other," who — as it may turn out — is more native to place than we are? Looking down into a well, some may be startled by their own distant reflection. But to some like Eratosthenes, the insight might arise to take measure of the immeasurable. Compelled to look deeply, Loren Eiseley saw the assuring tether to time and place, our Ariadne's thread, begin to fray. I found a clue that what he glimpsed early in life challenged him to look for the stygian forms and forces that float beneath and beyond our self-made and sense-limited world, our Umwelt. Thus begins a tale of descent…

The tunnel seems impossibly deep, yet I proceed at a snail's pace, letting the cable out slowly. The dim light illuminates only what is immediately ahead. More like an aorta than a tunnel it is almost perfectly circular, just some wispy strands of silk along the smooth walls. But no sign yet of its maker, who must have been grimly determined. My descent continues, straight down. I may have seen a motion ahead, but cannot be sure

in the surrounding blackness. I stop to breathe, to clear my eyes and steady my gaze through a tiny, multi-faceted lens not unlike an insect's eye. For how many, I wonder, was such a view their last of this world? Perhaps back toward the retreating entrance, a shrinking point of light, as something like consciousness slips into oblivion. But I must focus forward, proceed on, the end must be near.

Then she strikes! I feel the tug of hardened fangs. I see momentarily a clawed leg, black as ebony. Then it's true. They ARE here. I withdraw the ureteroscope with which I violated the sanctity of her burrow. It must be 35 centimeters deep and nearly vertical in hard-packed clayey earth. My transgression was slow, millimeters at a time. My view through a fiber-optic cable of this length is restricted to a tiny disk in a dark void, like peering through a telescope backwards. It is one of several prototype ureteroscopes designed by my uncle Hal, the urologist. Of course I had to modify it to use in the field. A halogen flashlight focused on the light cable was all I really needed. It's an especially long cable, like he uses when the tigers at Omaha's zoo develop kidney stones. My quarry is comparatively tame but just as reclusive as tigers.

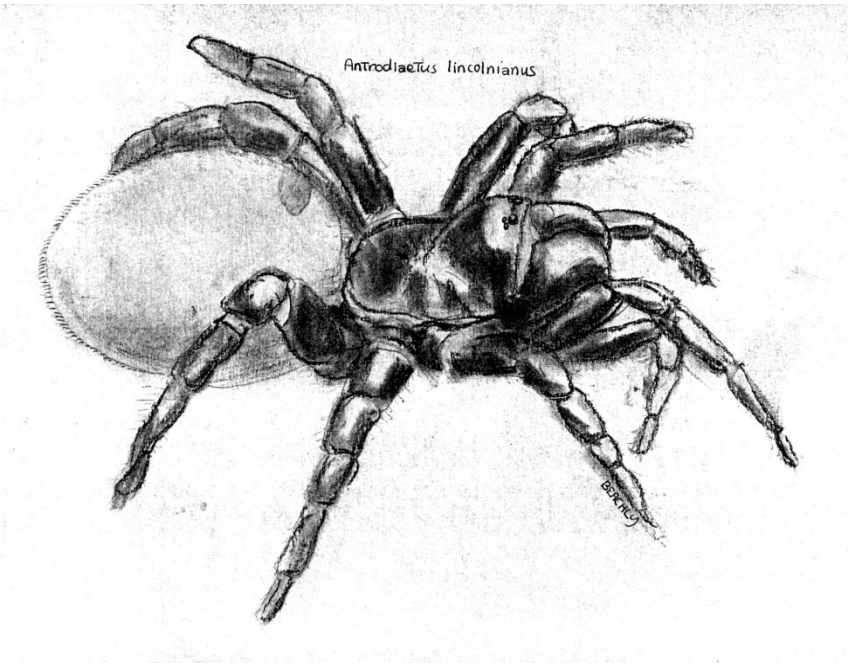
That summer of 1988 I had travelled to the Highlands Biological Station in the Appalachians to study spiders. Fred Coyle was one of my instructors and he had earned his doctorate revising the Genus *Antrodiaetus*, which in Latin means "to pass through a cave." These are not true spiders, but remnants of a Paleozoic world. He taught me how to look for burrows of the more common species there in the damp, flocculent humus of those primeval forests. I was surprised to learn that a species collected in (and named after) my home town — *Antrodiaetus lincolnianus* — was genuine. The species was described by two University of Nebraska scientists in 1928. That same year a young university student submitted his first poem to *Prairie Schooner*, titled "The Spider." In it Loren wrote:

> Foundations buried underfoot
> Are forfeit to the mole and worm
> But spiders know it and will put
> Their trust in airy dreams more firm (*The Star Thrower*, 119)

I wonder if Eiseley knew then of the spiders that retained their stygian habits, their ancient foundations, underfoot in his own town.

Like phantoms these burrowing spiders reappeared only sporadically, roughly at 30 year intervals, since the type specimens (all males) were described. A female was

collected near Lincoln in the early 1950's. On leap day, February 29th, 1984, one crossed the sidewalk in front of arachnologist Hank Guarisco in Lawrence, Kansas. Most anyone else would have either stepped on it, or recoiled in horror. While they are members of the tarantula clan (mygal-omorpha), these spiders are not huge. Not all tarantulas are; one found only on the bald tops of the Great Smokey Mountains is no bigger than a flea. These Antrodiaetids can have an inch-long body like a good-sized wolf spider but with stockier builds. Their comparatively short legs are good for burrowing. Unlike a wolf spider, all eight eyes are tiny. The stout bases of the fangs project forward, rather than down, a mygalomorph trait. Their shiny exoskeleton is the color of chestnuts, except the abdomen which looks like a tiny, fuzzy Kiwi fruit. On the soft abdomen, just behind the narrow pedicel are two shields of black, hardened chitin. See this archaic characteristic, and you know it is *Antrodiaetus*.



Charcoal by William R. Beachly

When I returned to Lincoln after the spider class, I was determined to find *Antrodiaetus lincolnianus*. I recalled years before reading about a mygalomorph in Worley and Pickwells' *Spiders of Nebraska* and thinking it improbable that one of these archaic spiders would be here. They might be expected in ancient places, like the Appalachians. They are also found around the Pacific Rim: not so ancient, but mostly damp places. But back in Lincoln the soil was dry, even in riparian woodlands it was like pavement, with

sparse leaf litter. I searched the most likely collection localities along Salt Creek, many of which had been preserved as park land because they were prone to spring flooding or isolated by railroads. But all that summer I could find neither spider nor burrow. The type specimens, the basis of a species taxonomic identity, had been collected under logs in the spring of 1928. By summer's end, I was resigned to the prospect of waiting all winter for another chance. But chance does not wait for us.

My chance came that fall. It was serendipity in a most unexpected place. My rationale for searching riparian woodlands (after Appalachia, I no longer call these forests) was that they were among the few unplowed places left in Eastern Nebraska. Burrowing spiders tend not to thrive with regular cultivation. Whatever the pre-settlement range of this species had been, it must now be severely fragmented. I could not think of any good reason why this area, part of a vast ecocline or continuum, should have any endemic species. "Nebraska, where the West begins" was then the official tourism mantra; soon afterward came the bumper sticker rejoinder: "Nebraska, where the East peeters out." Both were true biogeographically. But really: an endemic species? One found only here? That these spiders had been collected in Lincoln and Lawrence said more about the distribution of arachnologists than that of the species. I had only conjectures, no real evidence. Not yet.

One warm autumn day I was in my back yard, an unkempt, infrequently mowed kind of place, and happened to kick over a large section of bark. Something like a piece of toilet tissue caught my eye. Lifting the bark had ripped open a six-inch long silken tube, pure white on the inside, disguised by bits of debris on the outside. It began at the edge of the bark and then disappeared down a white hole, about the diameter of a dime. That hole went straight down, and only one thing could have made it. At that time I hadn't yet obtained the ureteroscope, but I did have a shovel. So I carefully trenched in the hard, clayey soil alongside the burrow to follow it down. Except for curving around a root, it was strictly vertical and smooth-walled. The loess (finely pulverized dust the consistency of confectionary sugar) that mantles this part of the state maintains vertical banks, so little reinforcement by silk was needed for the burrow. At the bottom was a small chamber, and there waited a female *A. lincolnianus*, "in the exoskeleton" so to speak, and to me she was beautiful.

So they weren't just phantoms. The mystery only deepened. Why here? Another species that Dr. Coyle collected lived in the Ozarks. He named it *stygius* after the River Styx of Greek Mythology. Based on morphological comparisons with the few museum specimens of *lincolnianus* he thought these could be close relatives. I have found

burrows of *stygius* in Missouri and they were very different, angling diagonally down in banks along spring-fed streams. But all members of the genus *Antrodiaetus* have a burrow entrance that extends like a turtleneck collar beyond the surface. The spider pulls this in to form a slit covering the opening and then it waits patiently beneath for passers-by. It's not like a trap-door, rather a folding door. The exterior is always disguised by moss, or dirt, or dead vegetation such that only the pure white interior can reveal the entrance. I found that by scraping the soil carefully, one can reveal these entrances. Knowing how, I found more burrows in my yard, then in the riparian woodland, and then in a piece of native prairie. I did some research on my back yard. It was once part of a dairy farm, hence left as unplowed pasture, until Lincoln sprawled over it. Here was a native, I thought. And I? I was like Eiseley;

> A creature molded of plains dust and the seed of those who came west with the wagons…That ancient contingent, with a lost memory and a gene or two from the Indian, is underscored by the final German of my own name. *(All the Strange Hours 23-24)*

Change is an inevitable truth of life on Earth; and urban sprawl is only one of many things impacting the reclusive lifestyle of *Antrodiaetus*. Since most mygalomorph spiderlings do not balloon like the true spiders, their capability of colonizing new habitats when conditions warrant are limited. The Homestead Act of 150 years ago was the first bugle call of an assault west of the Missouri River that continues today, but most farmers retained some pasturage for work animals until the fuller mechanization of farming after World War II. Earl Butz's "fencerow to fencerow" farm policies probably left only relict populations in cemeteries and isolated bottomlands. Who knows to what degree the synthetic pesticides accumulated in these relatively sedentary and probably long-lived soil residents? And now corn and soybeans convert ever more marginal lands into biofuels. Even if we could measure these impacts, could we stop any of this? Would anyone care about a spider? A flimsy folding door of silk hardly seems an adequate defense against climate change. If the world loses one more piece of its archaic self, one more frayed end of the vast evolutionary bush, at least one person noticed and wanted to know something of their lives. In his notebooks, Eiseley made note of many small passings:

> Last evening the largest house centipede I have ever seen died peacefully on our bathroom rug…Toward the end this centipede was very tired, and like two aging animals who have come into a belated understanding with

> each other, we achieved a mutual tolerance, if not respect. He had ceased to run with that flowing, lightning-like menace which is part of the horror of centipedes to man; and I, in my turn, ceased to drive him away from the woolly bathroom rug on which his final desires had centered. (*The Lost Notebooks* 86)

But Eiseley also wrote on the role of extinctions in evolutionary change; an inconvenient truth for intelligent design proponents and other teleological attempts to impart purpose to evolution. He knew the successions had more to do with chance than destiny. In an eroded gully he called "the slit" in *The Immense Journey* he contemplated a fossil skull he likened to a Paleocene *ur*-mammal, looking up at him:

> The skull lay tilted in such a manner that it stared, sightless, up at me as though I, too, were already caught a few feet above him in the strata and, in my turn, were staring upward at that strip of sky which the ages were carrying farther and farther away from me beneath the tumbling debris of falling mountains. That creature had never lived to see a man, and I, what was I never going to see? (*The Immense Journey* 5)

Deep within the slit I had made, I felt as if I had found a Paleozoic *ur*-spider. I built an "ant farm" like frame for that first female, and she readily made a new burrow in it where I could watch her activities. She seemed to prefer small ants, a resource for which she would have little competition — some toads or perhaps the occasional flicker. I knew of some spiders that mimic ants for protection, but not many that ate them with regularity. With the ureteroscope I was able to view other burrows without destroying them, to verify occupancy and describe their form. I found that during the drier summer months they entomb themselves by packing soil in the upper burrow, whence no trace of the entrance remains. But I had never seen one of these spiders wandering outside a burrow. Those who do must be males in search of females.

Now, winters in Nebraska can be hard, but not unrelenting. Oftentimes we experience a thaw in late January or early February when the temperature can reach the 70's. I found that on the evening of those rare, balmy days, the burrows of the *Antrodiaetus* in my back yard were open, and the females were waiting near the entrances. Yet I never collected a wandering male there. Perhaps there were no suitors left. I did collect a wasp hovering by one burrow entrance, an ominous sign for it belonged to a group known to be parasitoids of spiders. Could this mid-winter mating be a way to avoid the risks of exposure to these tiny terrors? One can hardly imagine a fate more horrible than

being paralyzed by one of these wasps, who then lays tiny eggs under your skin that will hatch into maggots that will eat you alive, but slowly and selectively to keep vital functions intact until they mature. Then your role as incubator is finished.

I wouldn't say I had been obsessed with things stygian, but I impulsively scrape likely locations. If I see a wolf spider burrow (these are always open at the top), I stop to insert a thin stem of a grass inflorescence, just to see a tell-tale motion if an occupant attempts to remove it. I've always been drawn to caves and crevasses. My childhood birthday ritual was to give out flashlights as party favors, pile into station wagons, and our parents dropped us off at Robber's Cave. Here one approached a plain-looking white house and knocked on the screen door. You gave the elderly lady a dime, she'd switch on the lights, and in back you entered what looked like an outhouse. But it had stairs leading steeply down — carved into soft sandstone — that then turned back and went down some more. It was always 55 degrees and damp down there, whatever the weather was topside. A single wire with the occasional operational light bulb ran along the ceilings of corridors that split and rejoined on several levels. In some places you felt your way. The floor was soft sand. Every inch of that cool sandstone wall had initials carved into it, several times over. Every sound you made was odd and muffled with just a little distance. We gathered in larger rooms to set rules and decide who would be the Cyclops, whose gaze (light beam), if it caught you, would freeze you for later consumption (not unlike the sting of the parasitoid wasp). Only one of the others, the No-man, could unfreeze you. If he was frozen, the rest were doomed, and the first-frozen became the new Cyclops. Fleeing, we squeezed through Fat Man's Misery, or hid in the damp darkness of The Well. If you needed a restroom, you held your nose and entered The Question Mark. The most intriguing place was a large corridor that ended in a bricked-up wall. When we asked the old woman where that led, she told us it went under the penitentiary, six blocks away, dug by escaping prisoners. We'd play down there for hours and emerge with that orange Dakota Sandstone ground into every bit of our old clothes.

Reading Eiseley later in life, I realized my childhood experiences in Lincoln intersected with many of his own, though I had a much happier time of it. He, too, explored storm sewers, spun fantasy worlds in people's back yards, and gazed into dark pools in sandstone basins. He may never have been in Robber's Cave (or been invited to many birthday parties) but the tragic tale of a true escape from the nearby penitentiary in a blinding blizzard haunted his childhood memory. But why seek the darkness, the hidden, the unknown? What did Eiseley hope to find among the Stygians? He watched

the darkness habitually in stygian havens of all sorts: forlorn places in bustling cities, edges of dark woods, trackless swamps, and in his professional duties, caves. Perhaps he was listening for the whisper of some oracle. Often he admitted being drawn to some places for no good reason. One remote farmhouse he visited more than once had a "monster" in the cellar, an entrance to a cave leading to a sanctuary called the blue room where a cobalt-blue pool half-filled the large chamber. Like the storm sewers he explored as a child with his friend "the Rat," its waters could rise suddenly and trap the interloper. Often such places visited him unexpectedly for the Stygians were all around.

What is it about caves? Cut off from circadian cues, one's anchor to reality drifts. The third eye of ancestral vertebrates has been closed in our kind for millions of years, now encased deep in the calvarium, yet it continues to monitor day length by some errant optic fibers. To Descartes, this pineal gland was the seat of creativity and passions. Gazing into orbital fissures of skulls, Eiseley saw figurative caves, windows to the past. Artifacts left in dry caves can last for millennia, be they burial shrouds, sacred scrolls, or Ice Age sloth dung. While erosion effaces features of the surface world, it is creating new spaces below. Cave formations grow at a glacial pace. Consider the colorful natural cave paintings, patinas, and sculptures destined to be seen by no one, save the monochromatic echo-vision of bats. Caves are by nature isolated and isolating. Like prophetic wilderness, men may enter but emerge as another. In the Guadalupe Mountains, Eiseley felt he had desecrated a burial site in a cave, just to mollify some pointless collector. He wasn't seeking the bundled body of a child he found, but older, Ice Age people and their Clovis tools. In another cave a passage was revealed by dynamiting a boulder. He squeezed in and followed it down, dropping to a crawl space. Only after sifting a bit through the curious sediment on the floor, did he notice in the fringe of his flashlight beam an ethereal motion on the ceiling, which seemed to be alive. It was an undulating gray mass of opiliones (otherwise known as daddy long legs). I've entered such chambers in the ancient buried mountains of Oklahoma, and know exactly the feeling he had as they began to drop upon him.

In a panic he squeezed back out, shaken but stirred. What kind of consciousness had he found? What purpose in their gathering and swaying together there in the blackness? Even more unnerving was an episode in another Guadalupe cave. After a rope descent into an unexplored cavern he and his companion became lost until they realized, crawling on their bellies, they had broken tiny stalagmites that belied their route of trespass, likely the first in our epoch, perhaps ever. When he emerged he felt himself a trespasser in his own time:

> By the time I stood at the cave entrance I was looking at life, at my companions, at the traffic below on the road, as though I had just arisen, a frozen man, from a torrent of melting ice. I wiped a muddy hand across my brow. The hand was ten thousand years away. So were my eyes, so would they ever be…"We are dwarfed," I muttered to myself alone, "the tiny projection of a lantern show." (*All the Strange Hours* 104)

Plato's cave of illusion or Dante's vivid depiction of the underworld do not belie the value of caves to our own struggles through the Pleistocene and even before. Recently, South African anthropologists found evidence of our ancestors surviving a severe drought episode by living in seaside caves and harvesting shellfish for protein. While a small population persisted during this hard time (195-123 thousand years ago) most others died out. Independent genetic evidence suggests this lineage alone may have survived to repopulate Africa, and eventually the world.[1] It was a bottleneck both for human genes and consciousness.

How much of the former life was forgotten—how much carried on through the stories of elders? Yet death seems a companion to nearly all moderns who venture into caves. Native Americans seemed to have avoided going further than natural light penetrated. In a Pawnee legend an innocent youth was sacrificed by his father and cast into the Platte. After drifting downstream his body was lifted to a sacred bluff by vultures, whence a kingfisher dove down into the river and emerged through a cave into a *Nahu'rac*, or council of the animals, to whom the bird related the boy's misfortune. What did the animals do? They discussed, debated, and explored possibilities. Eventually through their ministrations he was revived like Lazarus.[2] I recall exploring the Elephant Caves in that very same sacred bluff, emerging with a pox of spider bites and poison ivy, but touched in some other way as well. Young Jim White, who explored the vastness of Carlsbad Caverns, brought only makeshift oil lamps and candles to light and mark the way with darkened spots. What a tenuous tether to the surface in a place that howls on occasion with unexplained winds. Those who trust to their internal bearings are most apt to be among the lost in caves. Despite these trepidations and the many legends about the underworld, some seek caves to find their past, rather than oracular premonitions or the counsel of animals.

When we go beyond the familiar, fear often accompanies us. This may be part of what allows us to see ourselves and our world differently. But seeing involves an interior landscape as well. James Papez (in 1937) began tracing the neural relays and circuits

that link emotion with sensation. In the 1950s, neurobiologist Paul D. MacLean, describing the limbic system as a paleo-mammalian brain, associated the experience of fear with the amygdalae — a pair of almond shaped structures beneath the temporal lobes. Recent research into the many connections to and from the amygdala points to a broader importance. All five senses have inputs here, odor being the most direct of these, and the conception of danger begins here. The amygdala is part of our limbic system, at the root of emotional states. Researchers in Montreal recently reported the amygdalae of children of depressed or withdrawn mothers (like Eiseley), also of orphans, were significantly larger. The amygdala sits at the tail end of a sea-horse shaped structure, the hippocampus, known to be the crucial gateway to memory formation. While aversive conditioning is one of the powerful results of this pathway and of clear evolutionary significance, it is also activated when we experience unexpected rewards. It may play a role in evaluating novelties (desirable or not) and shaping those tenuous boundaries between familiar and foreign, self and other. Perhaps, linked to the nearby nerve clusters of the deep anterior insula, even our aesthetic sense of rarity and wonder may be activated. If so, this would be a surprising link between the poles of aversion and aesthetic attraction. The Papez Circuit is a labyrinth to rival Lechuguilla. In a cave where sensory deprivation, disorientation, and heightened peripheral experience are combined with fear, we are allowed, via the amygdalae, to create new neural constructs of both who we are and what we are part of — being and belonging.

Death is often a visitor in Eiseley's essays, though not obtrusively so, at least not the personal death most authors treat with dread and loathing. As a child, Eiseley found dead animals, observed them carefully (one woodpecker eventually revived from a deathly shock), and buried them in an empty lot behind his yard. He made tiny wooden crosses, gilded them with precious gold paint, and marked his little graveyard. One day a mower collected these crosses, a reaper whose purpose he puzzled over. His memorials were effaced, seemingly as ephemeral as his theological inclinations. The reaper was time, always time. Time catches up to all species, and Eiseley knew modern man would be no exception.

Eiseley's stygian outlook became a reckoning of sorts with time the effacer. He knew what men fear more than death is irrelevance. Eiseley saw the irrelevance in many human endeavors, including science. He was unique among science writers of his time in not conveying a sense of hubris to the public, a public wary of nuclear weapons in the hands of ideologues. For all that science had accomplished Eiseley was a reluctant, humble pitch-man. No amount of scientific knowledge could clear the fog in which he

probed, ever doubting surface appearances. No, we were not to be the masters of Nature, but drifters within it. We would be transients, orphans of the Pleistocene, and always cursed with questions of our relevance, but ever willing to concoct grand fantasies to embellish it.

Eiseley's first book of essays, *The Immense Journey*, tells the journeys of one and all.

> I am every man and no man, and will be so to the end. (*All the Strange Hours* 23)

We have entered a cave bound for regions unknown, only certain we cannot return by the route we came. Along the way, thinkers like Francis Bacon, Thoreau, and Darwin lit luminaries like that young cowboy did in Carlsbad. Yet these seem to show ever more passages. For me, Eiseley offers probing and intense insight into our human condition—like pitons in a cliff lacking handholds—but no easy answers. Still, it is a world of wonders, not just darkness, to which our amygdala and insula are tuned. The perceptive mind should never feel complacent here, nor bored. But I wonder still what set his course, began his journey. In his own words:

> Some say a child's basic character is formed by the time he is five. I can believe it. I who begged for peace at four but was never blessed for long by its presence. (*All the Strange Hours* 25)

Many have focused on the dark beginnings in Eiseley's life; the shuttered, darkened home, the arguing parents, the sense of isolation from town, and his struggle to relate with his mother's afflictions. But he continues:

> There are other things that define a child…sand piles for example…I used to spend hours turning over the gravel. Why, I wouldn't know…I prospected for hours alone. (*All the Strange Hours* 26)

Eiseley would remain a prospector all his life. Growing up where he did — even half a lifetime later — I can relate with many of his childhood experiences and never will doubt the perceptive acumen of children. At this stage, specifics trump generalities. The now is telescoped out, the immediate more relevant than past or future. The fortunate among us can recall those summers that were unplanned and utterly unscheduled. Each day was an open slate; just exploring was agenda enough and what better place to seize

the day than a sand box? Though we were being conditioned to become mindless consumers, with the corny jingles and gimmicky new toys like silly putty, sand remained the most malleable of diversions. In a sand box one's imagination races over vast scales of time and space, and all forms are protean. It is mind-work and hand-work. Each grain upon inspection is unique, its journey unfathomable, through the orogeny and pulverization of faraway mountains. Combined with a running hose, one could make and wear away such mountains in an hour. Digging brought forth earthy smells and deep connections to our limbic system and hunter-gatherer heritage. Somehow the early agriculturalists knew that digging could bring a promise of future abundance. For the paleontologist, it unlocks great mysteries, and we, too, might unearth relicts of summers past. It is, above all, an experience that teaches.

In *The Unexpected Universe* Eiseley describes the Hidden Teacher in several manifestations, including one in the form of an orb-weaver spider. He observed it from the edges of her universe, intruded briefly and insignificantly with a pencil, but knew from there in the hub, his universe was unknowable. What have I learned from *Antrodiaetus*? Here is one who is truly native to this place. Living patiently and quietly, are they oblivious to our hectic lives? Have they become accustomed to the deep rumbling of traffic that they surely must feel? Like many of Eiseley's encounters, I feel ambivalently that we are at once both tenuous and terrible intrusions in their lives. Perhaps in the end, as our tendrils reach into every last resource, we will do what asteroids and ice ages could not, but to their umwelt we are seemingly as insignificant as the teeming bacteria and mycelia on a fallen fruit are to us. And yet we are touched by such encounters with antiquity and enormity. Touched by going where others have not: touched in that insensible way that the oracle's message might be heard in the breathing of a cave. When many were transfixed by the Cyclop's glare, the stultifying satisfaction of our ego, Eiseley was No-man, the one who touched and awakened. And how was Eiseley touched early in life? I scoured his autobiography, remembering vaguely a hint I had read. Then I found it. It is this passage, one of his earliest memories, where I see both the precedent for his outlook and the most surprising oracle:

> It is true there had been my early delving into sand piles. And so strong is childhood memory, that I can still recollect the precise circumstances under which I first discovered a trap door spider's nest. My amazing, unpredictable mother was the person who explained it to me. (*All the Strange Hours* 165)

So, Eiseley had met the Stygians. No doubt it was *Antrodiaetus lincolnianus* for true trap door spiders don't occur in Nebraska. Surprisingly, his mother knew of such things. No future was told, but a bearing was set. He wondered. He probed. He found some answers from the Hidden Teacher, but more often only deeper mystery. A passage was chosen, but to what end?

> The stage was vast and made for greater things than myself. It was an enormous cavern with only the small yellow glow of a light on the podium. What was wrong? I was beginning to tread as on a rope over an infinity of time. (*All the Strange Hours* 5)

Eiseley begins his autobiography with this scene of disorientation late in his public speaking career, doubting his significance, and a vacancy reserved for "greater things." When he wrote this in 1975, science had detected the whisper of the Big Bang, confirmed the existence of black holes, and was rapidly expanding the limits of the known universe. Two years hence, Eiseley would be gone. But "an infinity of time" could mean many things, as likely telescoping inwards as outwards, and as Eiseley often peered, backwards. Looking forward, he needn't have feared irrelevance in that cavernous auditorium, for he had shown, and continues to show, countless seekers the Hidden Teacher. He did in his unique way fall into infinity. But in a scene impressed on my childhood memory, like the stone Professor Lindenbrook dropped into a phosphorescent pool[3], he sent out endless ripples of light in the darkness:

> The reality we know in our lifetimes is dwarfed by the unseen potential of the abyss where science stops. In a similar way the smaller universe of the individual human brain has its lonely cometary passages or flares suddenly like a supernova, only to subside in death while the waves of energy it has released roll on through unnumbered generations. (*The Night Country* 215)

Notes

1. See Marean, Curtis. "When the Sea saved Humanity". *Scientific American.* 303: 54-61. June 21, 2010. www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=when-the-sea-saved-humanity

2. This story "The boy who was sacrificed" is retold in Grinnel.

3. Lupien, Sonia J, Parent, Sophie, Evans, Alan C., Tremblay, Richard E., Zelazo, Philip David, Corbo, Vincent, Pruessner, Jens C., Séguin, Jean R. 2011. "Larger amygdala but no change in hippocampal volume in 10-year-old children exposed to maternal depressive symptomatology since birth." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America; 8/23/2011, Vol. 108 Issue 34, p14324-14329, 6p 10.1073/pnas.1105371108. See also

   http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2011-08/uom-cod081511.php

4. In the 1959 film adaptation of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth.*

Works Cited

Eiseley, Loren. *All the Strange Hours: The Excavation of a Life*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975.

_____. *The Immense Journey: An Imaginative Naturalist Explores the Mysteries of Man and Nature*. New York: Vintage, 1959.

_____. *The Lost Notebooks of Loren Eiseley*. Ed.Kenneth Heuer. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.

_____. *The Night Country.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.

_____. *The Star Thrower.* New York: Times Books, 1978.

_____. *The Unexpected Universe.* Boston: Mariner, 1972.

Grinnel, George Bird. *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales*. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1961.

Journey to the Center of the Earth. Dir. Henry Levin. Twentieth Century Fox. 1959.

Worley, Leonard and Gayle Pickwell. *The Spiders of Nebraska*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Studies, vol. 26-31, 1927.