

The Innocent Assassins

Once in the sun-fierce badlands of the west
in that strange country of volcanic ash and cones¹,
runneled² by rains, cut into purgatorial³ shapes,
where nothing grows, no seeds spring, no beast moves,
we found a sabertooth⁴, most ancient cat,
far down in all those cellars⁵ of dead time.
What was it made the mystery there? We dug
until the full length of the striking saber showed
beautiful as Toledo steel⁶, the fine serrations⁷ still
present along the blade, a masterpiece of murderous art conceived
by those same forces that heaved mountains up
from the flat bottoms of Cretaceous⁸ seas.

Attentive in a little silent group we squatted there.
This was no ordinary death, though forty million years
lay between us and that most gaping snarl.
Deep-driven to the root a fractured scapula⁹
hung on the mighty saber undetached¹⁰; two beasts
had died in mortal¹¹ combat, for the bone
had never been released; there was no chance
this cat had ever used its fangs¹² again or eaten—
died there, in short, though others of its kind
grew larger, larger, suddenly were gone
while the great darkness went about its task,
mountains thrust up, mountains worn down,
till this lost battle was exposed to eyes
the stalking sabertooths had never seen.

Pure nature had devised such weapons, struck
deep in the night, endured immortally¹³

¹**cones:** Anything shaped liked a cone: sawdust piled up in a great cone; the cone of a volcano, an ice cream cone, a solid having a circular base and sides that slope evenly to a point.

²**runneled:** A small channel, a small stream of water.

³**purgatorial:** Removing or purging sin; expiatory; purgatorial rites . Serving to purify of sin; expiatory.

⁴**sabertooth:** Any of several extinct members of the cat family felidae from the Oligocene to Pleistocene epochs, having greatly elongated, saberlike upper canine teeth. Short legs; dog-like feet.

⁵**cellars:** An underground room or story.

⁶**Toledo steel:** Toledo, Spain is known for making swords and sabers that are especially hard and of superior quality.

⁷**serrations:** A series or set of teeth or notches.

⁸**Cretaceous:** From 140 million to 65 million years ago, characterized by the greatest development and subsequent extinction of dinosaurs and the advent of flowering plants and modern insects.

⁹**scapula:** Either of two flat, triangular bones, each forming the back part of a shoulder in humans; shoulder blade.

¹⁰**undetached:** Not attached; separated.

¹¹**mortal:** Deadly or implacable; relentless: causing or liable to cause death; fatal.

¹²**fangs:** One of long, sharp, hollow or grooved teeth of a venomous snake by which poison is injected. A tooth resembling a sabertooth.

¹³**immortally:** Not mortal; not liable or subject to death; undying.

death, ambush, terror, by these, her innocents
whose lives revolved on this, whose brains were formed
only to strike and strike, beget¹⁴ their kind, and go to strike again.

There were the great teeth snarling in the clay, the bony crests
that had once held the muscles for this deed,

perfect as yesterday.

I looked a little while, admiring how

that marvelous weapon had been so designed
in unknown darkness, where the genes¹⁵ create
as if they planned it so.

I wondered why

such perfect fury had been swept away, while man,
wide-roaming dark assassin¹⁶ of his kind,
had sprung up in the wake
of such perfected instruments as these.

They lived long eras¹⁷ out, while we
in all this newborn world of our own violence show
uncertainties¹⁸, and hopes unfostered¹⁹ when
the cat's sheer leap wrenched with his killing skill
his very self from life.

On these lost hills that mark the rise of brain,
I weep perversely²⁰ for the beauty gone.
I weep for man who knows this antique²¹ trace
but is not guiltless,
is not born with fangs,
has doubts,
suppresses them as though he knew
nature had other thoughts, inchoate²², dim²³,
but that the grandeur of great cats attracted him-

¹⁴**beget**: To cause; produce as an effect: to cause to exist or occur; produce.

¹⁵**genes**: The basic physical unit of heredity; a linear sequence of nucleotides along a segment of DNA that provides the coded instructions for synthesis of RNA, which, when translated into protein leads to the expression of hereditary character. A male given name, form of EUGENE. a portion of a DNA molecule that serves as the basic unit of heredity. genes control the characteristics that an offspring will have by transmitting information in the sequence of nucleotides on short sections of DNA.

¹⁶**assassin**: A murderer.

¹⁷**eras**: A period of time marked by distinctive character, events, etc.: a major division of geologic time composed of a number of periods.

¹⁸**uncertainties**: Not for sure, not sure to happen.

¹⁹**unfostered**: Not to bring up, raise or rear, not to care for.

²⁰**perversely**: Willfully determined or disposed to go opposite to what is expected or desired; contrary. Persistent or obstinate in what is wrong. Turned away from or rejecting what is right, good, or proper; wicked or corrupt. Contumacious, disobedient. Stubborn, headstrong. evil, bad, sinful.

²¹**antique**: Of or belonging to the past; not modern. Any work of art, piece of furniture, decorative object, or the like, created or produced in a former period, or according to U.S. customs laws, 100 years before date of purchase.

²²**inchoate**: Not yet completed or fully developed; rudimentary. Just begin; incipient. Not organized; lacking order.

²³**dim**: Lacking in brightness: a dim room. Emitting only a small amount of light; lacking keenness or vigor.

envy, perhaps, by a weak creature²⁴ forced to borrow
tools from the earth, growing, in them, most cunning²⁵
upon an outworn²⁶ path.

I see us still upon that hilltop, gathered like ancient²⁷ men
who, weaponless, detach
from an old weathered skull a blade whose form reshaped in flint²⁸
could lift death up from earth's inanimate²⁹ core
and hurl it at the heart. Whatever else would bring
cold scientists to murmur³⁰ over what they saw?
We are all atavists³¹ and yet sometimes we seem
wrapped in wild innocence like sabertooths, as if we still might seek
a road unchosen³² yet, another dream.

The Innocent Assassins by Loren Eiseley
published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1973.

²⁴**creature:** An animal, the creatures of the woods and fields; an animate being.

²⁵**cunning:** Sly, crafty, deceiving.

²⁶**outworn:** Out of date, outmoded, or obsolete: worn-out, as clothes.

²⁷**ancient:** Dating from a remote period; of great age: a very old or aged person, esp. if venerable or patriarchal.

²⁸**flint:** A hard stone, a form of silica resembling chalcedony but more opaque, less pure, and less lustrous. A chunk of this used as a primitive tool or as the core from which such a tool was struck. A small piece of metal, usually an iron alloy, used to produce a spark to ignite the fuel in a cigarette lighter.

²⁹**inanimate:** Not animate; lifeless.

³⁰**murmur:** A low, continuous sound, as of a brook, the wind, or trees, or of low, indistinct voices. To speak in a low tone or indistinctly.

³¹**atavists:** The reappearance in an individual of characteristics of some remote ancestor that have been absent in intervening generations. Reversion to an earlier type; throwback.

³²**unchosen:** Not chosen. Not picked.

The Innocent Assassins (Preface)

As is readily observable, these are the poems of a bone hunter and a naturalist, or at least those themes are predominant in the book. Some have called me Gothic in my tastes. Others have chosen to regard me as a Platonist, a mystic, a concealed Christian, a midnight optimist. Like most poets I am probably all these things by turns, or such speculations are read into me by those who are pursuing some night path of their own.

As the spokesman in the poem, "Deep in the Grotto," I merely answer that I have been many things. One observation I may perhaps be permitted, Robert Louis Stevenson once remarked that some landscapes cry out for a story. W. H. Hudson found it so of the South American pampas. Though he immigrated in his young manhood to London, his best work continued to revolve about South American themes, Charles Dickens, though he achieved wealth and comfort, was haunted by "the cold, wet, shelterless streets of London." Thoreau never escaped the canopy of the great eastern forest.

I, by contrast, was born on the Great Plains and was drawn almost mesmerically³³ into its rougher margins, the Wild Cat Hills and the Badlands, where bone hunting was a way of life. Few outside the profession of paleontology³⁴ realize that the eroded areas called "Mauvaises Terres"³⁵ on the maps of the old voyageurs³⁶ contain the finest Tertiary³⁷ fossil beds to be found anywhere in the world. Most of our knowledge of the successive American faunas³⁸ is derived from excavations³⁹ in those sterile⁴⁰, sun-washed regions. As a young man engaged in such work, my mind was imprinted⁴¹ by the visible evidence of time and change of enormous magnitude⁴². To me time was never a textbook abstraction⁴³. Its remnants lay openly about me in arroyos⁴⁴, in the teetering⁴⁵, eroded pinnacles⁴⁶ of Toadstool Park, or farther north in the dinosaur⁴⁷ beds of Wyoming. Finally, through some strange mental osmosis⁴⁸ these extinct, fragmented⁴⁹ creatures merged with and became part of my own identity.

³³**mesmerically**: Compelling; fascinating.

³⁴**paleontology**: The science of the forms of life existing in former geologic periods, as represented by their fossils.

³⁵**"Mauvaises Terres"**: The "Bad Land" in French. This ground has many deep canyons and bluffs so it is bad to travel over.

³⁶**voyageurs**: A person who is an expert woodsman, boatman, and guide in remote regions, esp. one employed by fur companies to transport supplies to and from their distant stations.

³⁷**Tertiary**: Noting or pertaining to the period forming the earlier part of the Cenozoic era, occurring from 65 million to 2 million years ago. Characterized by the development and proliferation of mammals.

³⁸**faunas**: The animals of a given region or period considered as a whole. A treatise on the animals of a given region or period.

³⁹**excavations**: To make a hole, to dig out of a earth.

⁴⁰**sterile**: Free from living germs or microorganisms; aseptic: incapable of producing offspring; not reproducing offspring. Barren; not producing vegetation: noting a plant in which reproductive structures fail to develop.

⁴¹**imprinted**: A mark made by pressure; a mark or figure impressed or printed on something. Any impression or impressed effect.

⁴²**magnitude**: Size; extent; dimensions: greatness of size or amount. Moral greatness.

⁴³**abstraction**: An impractical idea; something visionary and unrealistic. Absent-mindedness; inattention.

⁴⁴**arroyos**: A small steep-sided watercourse or or gulch with a nearly flat floor; usually dry except after heavy rains.

⁴⁵**teetering**: To move unsteadily. To ride a seesaw; teeter totter. A seesaw; motion; wobble.

⁴⁶**pinnacles**: A lofty peak. Any pointed, towering part or formation, as of rock.

⁴⁷**dinosaur**: Any chiefly terrestrial, herbivorous or carnivorous reptile of the extinct orders saurischia and ornithischia, from the Mesozoic era, certain species of which are the largest known land animals.

⁴⁸**osmosis**: The diffusion of fluids through membranes or porous partitions.

Certainly in body and mind we have been many things, but the story is not fantasy. It lies written in exposed rock and strewn across old tablelands. To me, who, through the vicissitudes of youth, was drawn early into that haunted country, it was impossible not to leave a personal record beyond what was shipped and, for all I know, may still be lying in its stone matrix in museum basements. I was one of the bone hunters, but I was also something else, a fugitive assuming the animal masks of many ages. How this occurred I am not sufficiently articulate to explain. Perhaps I came closest to doing so in my previous book, *Notes of an Alchemist*, when I said:

The wind has stolen my coat away,
my thoughts are becoming animals.
In this suddenly absurd landscape I find myself
laughing, laughing.

An alienated creature does not laugh, but a midnight optimist, even a fugitive, might; nor does a complete melancholic say, "the earth pleases me." This, too, is part of the record.

LOREN EISELEY

Credits:

***The Innocent Assassins* by Loren Eiseley**

published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1973

republished by NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY April 1997

Preface by Loren Eiseley

pp. 11-12 from *The Innocent Assassins*

Annotation by Steven J. Eggerling

Definitions and footnotes courtesy of:

- Ray and Ann Boice
- Penny Businga (ESU 13)
- Dictionary.com

⁴⁹**fragmented:** A broken part, off or detached.