

The Judgment of the Birds

by Connie Barlow

It was his dependably dark mood that attracted me. For him I would make an exception. He alone would accompany me on this solo camping trip.

I was lucky that I could take such a trip at this time, as there is no faster way to hit bottom and no more certain way to rediscover rungs of gratitude for the climb back up. A cool pool in a creek well upstream of the last trace of human trail is something to be grateful for. So are pine knots, matches, a tarp, and a flannel liner for the sleeping bag. So too is a low canopy of alder leaves and the delicate weavings of spiders.

I knew from the outset that, with the exception of a daily trek to a spring a quarter mile away, I would wander little farther these four days than the distance I could throw a stone. I knew I would just sit and look and think and not think. Communing with Loren would be the spartan exception.

I have darted in and out of his books only for ten years. And just in the past two or three have Loren's stories come to feel like my own. I, too, am the star thrower on the beach, the contemplator of found skulls. I, too, have melted into a watershed and brought home from the field astonishing prizes—only to be even more astonished when the quiescent life bursts into new being.

For this trip, I tossed his first book into the pack; half of the essays had been published in magazines before I was born, and the book itself when I was five. This was Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey*. On this trip I would learn why it had taken me so long to develop a taste for Eiseley and why I needed him now.

For years I thought Annie was enough. I understood that Loren had been an inspiration for her own writing. She was closer to my age, and her epiphanies along a creek, in the company of frogs and muskrats and monarch butterflies, were dark enough to suit my own take on evolution. And, of course, she was a sister for a generation of outdoorsy women who thrilled in the opportunities that became widely available to our sex just when we came of age.

I could have carried Annie with me; but I chose Loren.

On day two, I began at the beginning, savoring the first several essays—his descent into “the slit” that took him a few feet beneath the plains but many millions of years back in time, his conquest of childhood trauma that heretofore had kept him from surrendering to the flow of water. I had to skip the middle essays. Eiseley to me is pensive, science-

studded reveries emerging from the frame of deeply personal stories. The middle essays are strictly didactic; Eiseley's literary skills are present, but not his soul.

I knew I must find a special time to read “The Judgment of the Birds” and that this essay would be the last for this trip. The time came just before dark on my third and final night.

The previous nights I had slept under a tarp tied between tree and deadfall beyond the reach of possible flood. There had been rain or the threat of rain. Thankfully, this evening looked promising for a sleep out on the little gravel beach. I wanted to feel protected this night, and only the flames at my feet, the logjam at my head, and the close canopy of alder would do.

The reason: I had seen a mountain lion that morning. Rationally I knew there was nothing to fear. Our two biggest predators are hunted for sport in this wilderness. More, lions are not attracted to vegetarian fare; camp food is not a lure. If the cat decided there was something here worth eating, that something would only be me, and that decision most likely would have been made when we first fixed eyes.

But the wilderness and solo camping are not conducive to rational thought. Here primal ecstasies are paired with primal fears.

I knew, too, that I could just as easily not have seen the lion. I would not have seen the lion had I not turned my head at precisely the right moment. Had I not seen the lion, I would not have noticed the spot of mud impressed with two clawless toes on the animal trail that passed by camp. I would once again have slept soundly beneath the tarp, sans fire, sans fear.

I would still have read “The Judgment of the Birds” that evening, but I might not have engaged in such an intense and prolonged reverie.

Early that morning I had crossed the creek and walked a few hundred paces to a grassy point encountered the week before on a day hike. At the time of discovery I vowed to return for an extended visit. The best place to sit and look down upon the creek was dolloped with bear shit—last fall and winter's bear shit, full of juniper seeds. Next to the ponderosa pine was a roundish depression in the duff—I intuited, where the bear had more than once come to sleep. Only an unusual number of ants milling in that spot kept me from curling into same.

Just as I had planned to read Eiseley on this trip, I had planned to contemplate predation on Defecation Point. Into my pack I had carefully placed the right mandible of a bear. As with a rosary or prayer beads, I could work thumb and fingertips over the rounded canine and flattened molar.

Sometimes we read nature writers to enter their world. Sometimes we read them to enhance an appreciation for where we ourselves have ventured—as I was doing on this trip. But there are times when nature contrives to offer up experiences so profound that intrusion by anyone would be travesty. I came upon the bear mandible at just such a time. Were this my only Eiseleyesque experience, I would not feel shortchanged.

It was a few months after my 45th birthday. The approach of menopause could no longer be ignored. I knew I had to come to terms with aging, to let go of youth. But on that trip into the wilderness I received an even greater gift; I was granted a place to die—if not actually, then at least in my imagination when the moment arrives. This, after all, was where the bear of a particular little canyon had come to die, on a shelf above a slither of water, a shelf I discovered during a solo day. The previous day I had concluded that no bear claimed the canyon. My mate and I had come upon bushes of lushly ripe raspberries. In this sparse landscape, the berries would not otherwise have gone uneaten.

The disarticulated skeleton presented its bones almost in proper order. But the skull and right mandible had fallen from the shelf into the rivulet, resting atop a tumble of branches and pine needles. Thunder signaling the first full monsoonal rain of the summer was just beginning to rumble and the sky churned clouds. There was nothing to do but enter the darkness: to become the bear and weep; to learn how it feels to be old and mortal. Sitting alongside the skeleton, I clutched the mandible to my own and rocked, feeling with hand and heart the years of wear. As true as any truth, I knew this animal to have been a she-bear, one who over the course of seventeen years had tended every berry bush and climbed every oak in this canyon.

Gusts of wind had now joined the thunder. There was little time remaining. The catharsis over, I knew the mandible was mine to keep. But I knew too that I must do one thing for the bear.

I picked up the skull for the first time, tied one of my own white hairs onto the right orbit, and began to search for an alcove in the canyon wall. I found one, placed the skull with a view upstream, and returned to my pack and poncho just as the storm hit. An hour later the rain and hail subsided, but the rivulet had become a torrent, all flotsam swept away.

Three years have passed. Rarely have I thought of the bear, and the mandible mostly remains in its cloth. But something has shifted. I no longer dream of bears. I no longer dream of bears ripping through cabin walls, claws reaching for the rafter I cling to, or the high cupboard into which I have curled. I used to dream of bears a lot, and the dreams were never pleasant. Was the bear my fear of death?

I do know that the experience with the gentle skeleton grounded me to help, to truly help, with my mother's death one year later. There is no better helper than one who can launch herself into the death project with as much conviction and equanimity as the dying. Could I have done that without the bear?

It was not my mother's death, nor my own, that I needed to come to terms with the night beneath the alder. Rather, it was a death that for thirty-four years had been ever so expertly avoided—a great gaping hole in my memory, a numbing blackness. This was the death of my father.

Quickly I made the calculation. Just as I was a week short of the second anniversary of my mother's death, I was also a week short of attaining the age my father would forever remain.

A second revelation followed: now I knew why I had chosen Loren as my companion, and why his *Immense Journey*. This was the book our minister had given me the day before my father's funeral, the day before my fourteenth birthday.

My sister and I had just completed confirmation classes at our Congregational church. I recall Dr. Read explaining how, like a watch, a creation requires a creator. I was almost convinced that day that believing in God was warranted.

An hour must have passed as Betsy and I stood outside the church waiting for Mom to pick us up. A neighbor finally came in her stead, and then the rest is just blank. I do remember Reverend Read sitting by my bed and offering the little book with its tangerine cover and black-lined fishes.

I don't believe I ever opened it.

The book I had with me now was blue, a silhouette of a fork-tailed tern at its center.

Every hour or so I added another pine knot to the fire. When the moon finally looked into the canyon, the fuel was gone, and it was time to sleep.

Mid morning I returned to Defecation Point and began to record my thoughts. I wrote about my vow to contemplate predation on this point. I wrote about how the canyon had complied—not just the lion visitation, but more: the birds.

Two robins, a rufous towhee, and a canyon wren had been scolding a predator as I approached the point the previous day. The target of their protests was concealed in a tangle of green directly across the creek. In addition to the racket, something else was different about this spot from the way it had been the week before. Near the bear shit was a fresh lion scrape—a magnified version of what a housecat will do in a garden.

I gathered some palm-size rocks and reshaped a patch of ground into a comfortable seat, a juniper trunk for my back. I was tense, but the canyon wren occasionally elicited a

smile. Its nasal alarm call was fitting for the purpose at hand, but periodically some switch flipped in its brain. A lovely descending melody, the anthem of southwestern canyons, played instead.

That evening I would open the blue cover and read: “It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush.”

In my case, the protests continued all day, though after the first hour or so only the robin pair maintained the vigil. The penetrating single chirrup was posted incessantly, every few seconds, for hours and hours, even as thunder at last drove me back to camp, mystery unsolved.

I have seen a fox curled and restful even as jays did their best to dislodge the intruder. This predator could indeed have been no more ferocious than a fox. But I had seen a lion.

Not long after encountering the scrape and settling into watchful solidarity with the birds, an urge came to look left. There on the low rim of the opposing cliff was a great tawny creature, head down and lost in the grasses. The animal had a remarkable shoulder hump. For some crazy reason, dire wolf—extinct at the end of the Ice Age—was my first thought. I knew it could not be one of the newly reintroduced Mexican gray wolves; those wolves all wore ghastly orange collars, both for keeping track of their wanderings (by radio) and to ensure that no gun could mistake one for a coyote. Finally, the creature lifted its head, a head improbably small: lion. Although the distance was too great and the ridge too shaded for me to make out the eyes, the head was pointed in my direction and remained there for a time I cannot honestly estimate. A decision apparently was made, and the animal casually resumed its upslope journey. A long tail emerged from behind a bush, the end jauntily tipped up.

Birds! my mind screamed. Birds! Wake up! There's a lion over there. That's the animal you ought to be scolding!

But no. The staccato protests maintained in the thicket straight ahead.

Soon, the most frightening event of the day occurred. A pair of Stellar's jays had added their harsh voices to the din, and now one flew from the jungle to a low branch on my side of the creek, a few paces directly ahead. The jay kept scolding, but here is the horror: the bird's back was to me.

How stories burrow into the brain! Reading the bird essay the evening beneath the alder, I was amazed to find within it several more of Eiseley's revelatory experiences in nature. These I had misremembered as framing distinct essays of their own, so vivid the images. One was the story of the orb-weaving spider, its gargantuan shadow cast by a streetlight on a cold autumn night.

“I stood over her a moment longer,” Eiseley had written of the shadow, “comprehending somewhat reluctantly that her adventure against the great blind forces of winter, her seizure of this warming globe of light, would come to nothing and was hopeless. Nevertheless it brought the birds back into my mind, and that faraway song which had traveled with growing strength around a forest clearing years ago—a kind of heroism, a world where even a spider refuses to lie down and die if a rope can still be spun on to a star.”

At dusk on that third night and just after closing *The Immense Journey*, I moved to a spot on the gravel beach where I had grown accustomed to watching the sky darken and the stars begin to appear. There she was again, amid a certain gape in the alder leaves, reweaving in the evening calm a blotch of strands that the sun-driven breeze had destroyed by day. I knew she was a she; the previous evening a smaller spider had pounced upon her in the center of the web, and the two remained locked in unmoving embrace even as I quit my post. This evening, she spun and waited unmolested.

The next morning I was curious whether my fire had singed any of the low-hanging leaves. This, from my journal:

“The leaves were fine—much to my relief. But there were the black strings of spider webs. Everywhere amid the branches over the fire. Decorated with ash. Sadly useless. Most were the tangled masses and bridges of the long-legged spider variety. But there was also one small orb, gleaming black, black pearls, bejeweled in the morning light. And there, too, a few white threads, where one spider or another had begun to rebuild a life.”