

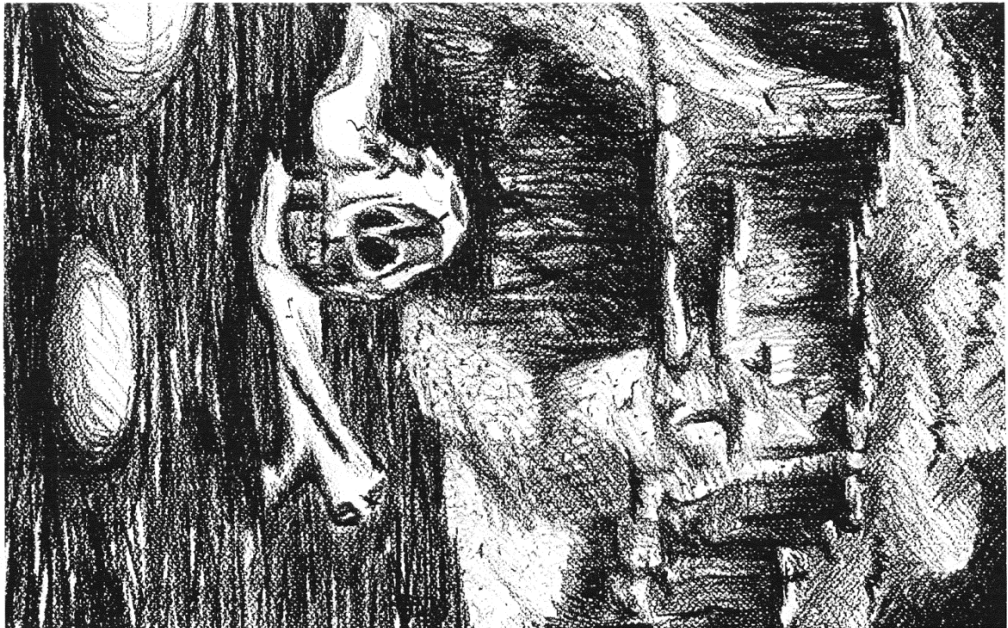
Innocent Assassins *By Loren Eiseley*

Graphic and poem

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Transcript

4



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Innocent Assassins



Once in the sun-fierce badlands of the west in that strange country of volcanic ash and cones, runneled by rains, cut into purgatorial shapes, where nothing grows, no seeds spring, no beast moves, we found a sabertooth, most ancient cat, far down in all those cellars of dead time. What was it made the mystery there? We dug until the full length of the striking saber showed beautiful as Toledo steel, the fine serrations still present along the blade, a masterpiece of murderous art conceived by those same forces that heaved mountains up from the flat bottoms of Cretaceous 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 scapula hung on the mighty saver undetached; two beasts had died in mortal combat, for the bone had never been released; there was no chance this cat had ever used it fangs 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.

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Pure nature had devised such weapons, struck
 deep in the night, endured immortally
 death, ambush, terror, by these, her innocents
 whose lives revolved on this, whose brains were formed
 only to strike and strike, begot 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 genes create
 as if they planned it so.

I wondered why

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

They lived long eras out, while we
 in all newborn world of our own violence show
 uncertainties, and hopes unfostered 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 perversely for the beauty gone.

I weep for man who knows this antique trade
 but is not guiltless
 is not born with fangs

has doubts,

suppresses them as though he knew
 nature had other thoughts, inchoate, dim,
 but that the grandeur of great cats attracted him-
 eny, perhaps, by a weak creature forced to borrow
 tools from the earth, growing, in them, most cunning
 upon an outworn path.

I see us still upon that hilltop, gathered like ancient men
 who, weaponless, detach

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from an old weathered skull a blade whose form reshaped in flint
 could lift death up from earth's inanimate core
 and hurl it at the heart. Whatever else would bring
 cold scientist to murmur over what they saw?
 We are all atavists and yet sometimes we seem
 wrapped in wild innocence like sabertooths, as if we still might seek
 a road unchosen yet, another dream.

Courtesy Loren Eiseley Society
<http://eiseley.org>

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