

LOREN EISELEY AND LOWRY WIMBERLY:

COMPANIONS IN ALIENATION

by

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The biographer and critic Leon Edel once observed that Concord, Massachusetts, was a place where one could hear "a great scratching of pens" during the mid-nineteenth century. At one end of the idyllic New England community lived the handsome, imaginative artist of the Old Manse, Nathaniel Hawthorne; at the other, with rows of stately elms in between, dwelled the craggy, stoop-shouldered Yankee genius, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Almost directly across the road from Emerson lived Bronson Alcott and his precocious daughter, Louisa May, both of whom wrote religiously in their diaries. Several blocks away, Henry David Thoreau was busily filling up the journal that would bring him literary immortality. William Ellery Channing, the poet, and F.B. Sanborn, a teacher, kept records and became the first biographers of Walden's self-appointed poet laureate. Margaret Fuller came and went, and there were perhaps a dozen other salty characters periodically awash in black ink and unlined paper.¹

Ralph Umland, a perceptive writer and one-time University of Nebraska student, described Lincoln in much the same way after the Prairie Schooner was born. "From every nook and cranny in the city poets and storytellers crawled. Scribble, scribble went their busy pens. Tap-tap-tap went the keys of their typewriters. From that single decade (1927-37) came three geniuses and a dozen other writers of books," not to mention countless journalists, essayists, publishers and editors. The geniuses, as Umland saw it, were the irascible novelist and historian, Mari Sandoz, the dispirited, ultimately suicidal poet, Weldon Kees,² and the melancholy literary naturalist, Loren Corey Eiseley.

Umland got his first glimpse of Eiseley while walking across campus one chilly morning with a friend and fellow writer Bill Gaffney, who pointed Loren out. He was standing alone in front of the Temple Theater, bareheaded, wearing a leather jacket, apparently lost in thought. Umland never forgot the impressive brow, "soaring up with a glacial whiteness. There was a quality of bleak aloofness in him and in his poetry you couldn't put your finger on."³

Eiseley was not the only campus persona to whom a certain air of mystery clung like a shroud. Lowry Charles Wimberly trudged the streets of Lincoln in a dark overcoat and black Confederate-type slouch hat, sallow face turned into the wind, a partly-smoked cigar hanging from his thin bloodless lips. Some looked upon him as a tragic, Poelike figure, not only in looks but in thought.

Born on Christmas Day, 1890, in the Mississippi River town of Plaquemine, Louisiana, Wimberly was the son of Charles Perry Williams Wimberly, a Presbyterian minister, and grandson

of C.P.W. Wimberly, Sr., a slave owner, Confederate soldier, and founding member of the Ku Klux Klan. His mother, May Lowry, was a pioneer school teacher whose father, a cotton grower, had also owned slaves and fought for the South in the Civil War, facts which Lowry proudly documented for his biographical entry in the 1928 edition of Who's Who in Lincoln. Though he had spent most of his adolescence and young manhood in the Midwest, he retained something of his aristocratic heritage both in his looks and bearing. Angular to the point of gauntness, the sharp-featured young academic was possessed of a high forehead and deeply knit brow, penetrating yet sad dark eyes, an elongated nose, and pursed lips, which curled outward beneath his brush of a mustache as he spoke. When he laughed it was closer to a snicker, for the burden of being a minister's son had stifled his spontaneity. While Wimberly could be as "common as an old shoe," his humility masked a deep strain of fierce pride and enduring melancholy.

During his witty, incisive lectures, which were occasionally punctuated by the waving of bony hands and flying elbows, Wimberly incited his students to probe more deeply than they ever had before. Yet he sometimes expressed profound disappointment at having worked his way up from the position of desk clerk and general handyman in an insignificant Nebraska hotel. "Intellectuals lose the capacity for happiness," he confided cynically to a friend. "The deeper the mind probes, the less spontaneously it reacts to enjoyment." He didn't believe he had known true happiness after reaching the age of thirty, and had come to detect a hollow ring in his own laughter.⁴

Beneath his serious and often gloomy exterior, Lowry Wimberly nurtured a creative urge of the first magnitude. For his dissertation, he had chosen to work under the brilliant linguist Louise Pound, sister of Roscoe Pound, Dean of the Harvard Law School, and Hutton Webster, a distinguished professor of anthropology and sociology. He wrote on the subject of death and burial lore in English and Scottish popular ballads. The concept of death had fascinated him ever since childhood, when he first viewed corpses laid out in wooden coffins over which his father had to preach. Especially vivid were his memories of back rooms in hardware stores, where the town undertaker attempted to make the deceased presentable with the use of syringes, wax, and talcum powder. He also remembered shivering when he saw stacks of coffins awaiting their as yet unknown occupants. "Nothing can be proved by argument," he once remarked while thinking back on those macabre days. "Things are as they are. Chance plays a big part. Imagine God to be at play with us as a gamester. Didn't Donne say that?"⁵

A student of coincidence, which he thought was seldom accidental, Wimberly was disdainful of all modern science with the exception of anthropology, which was crucial to his area of scholarly interest and had not been reduced, like physics and chemistry, to a series of passionless laws. Indeed, he believed that scientists were destroying the only things in the world that give life fundamental meaning: myth, religion, folklore, literature, and music. He loved the Lorelei cry of

wild prairie winds, the creak of heavy tree branches, lightning and driving summer rains, the purr of a contented cat resting against his thigh. Hardly less alienated himself, Eiseley was captivated by Wimberly from the moment they first met; the sad-eyed editor of the Prairie Schooner rubbed off on the drifting young poet like lampblack.

The first of Loren's poems accepted by Wimberly had been previously published in The Freshman Scrapbook, a recently defunct little campus magazine sponsored by the English Department. The fourth and final issue, which contained two poems by Loren, was reprinted as a supplement to the July 1927 Schooner, whose editors were desperately in need of quality writing to fill the early issues. The longer of the two works, "There is no Peace," is particularly noteworthy, for it contains many of the themes that were to dominate his later writing--deep snows, wailing wind, deserted roads at midnight, burial places, fleeting time, shadows, tears, and death.

Through the cold light of the moon before me and
 behind me
 Was the fall of tears, the awful sound of time upon
 the wing,
 Cold laughter, and the fall of shadowy feet.
 This is the iron harvest of the years;
There is no peace.⁶

This bleak narrative poem was followed by an equally somber offering called "Cinquains," a series of five-line stanzas bearing the following titles: "Fear," "Despair," and "Night in a Graveyard."

Men die
 Grass crawls over
 Cities and boulders. Why
 Should I be glad a child is born
 Tonight?⁷

By October 1927, when his next three pieces appeared in the Schooner, Loren had joined the staff as an associate editor. The most interesting of these compositions is an impressionistic prose sketch titled "Autumn--A Memory." Almost surely based on a 1925 visit to the Aztec Ruins National Monument in northwest New Mexico, the sketch, like the early poetry, evokes the major concepts and attitudes that informed the author's lifework. And though he was barely twenty, the eloquent literary style, which is suggestive of free-verse, makes it difficult to distinguish Loren's elegiac meditation from the longer essays composed twenty-five or thirty years later.

The round stone pits of the kiva were deserted
 and the walls were crumbling. It is a lonely thing
 to look on men's broken handiwork and muse wide-eyed
 over their disappearance . . . Still, perhaps it was
 their dust that floated in a slight breeze over the
 ruined wall . . .

There may have come a time when the offended
 god turned his face away, when prayers and the gay-
 colored prayer stones and the holy medicine lost

power and men died in gasping heaps . . . Or maybe the harvest burned. Did any live to go . . . ?

Starlight and dust in starlight . . . Does it matter now at all . . . ?⁸

The two Eiseley poems of the same issue appeared under the pennames Eronel Croye, an anagram for Loren Corey, E., and Silas Amon, a ruse first employed by Wimberly to disguise the fact that publishable material was scarce in the beginning. It hardly mattered in this instance, since Croye and Amon were no more optimistic in outlook than the young Eiseley. The former authored a five-line poem titled "Death in Autumn," the latter a somewhat longer piece called "Graveyard Studies."

Meanwhile, Loren drew close enough to Wimberly to begin addressing him by his first name. Together with Bill Gaffney they visited a number of Lincoln's new "spiritual churches," an outgrowth of the resurgent post-war interest in the supernatural. The three quickly determined that most of those connected with the movement were "utter quacks" and "charlatans," which they found quite amusing. Nonetheless, Wimberly refused to be dissuaded, no matter how asinine the performances of certain preachers. "Coincidences aren't meant to be scorned," he was fond of saying. "There is some force putting the patterns together."⁹ As editor of the Schooner, he found it difficult to reject a well-written piece concerned with telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, or any other branch of parapsychology. His own early Schooner stories, "Dispossessed" and "The Red Gentian," were based on certain of these very themes. A decade later, he was still dragging Umland to seances and demonstrations of the powers of hypnosis.

There is no question that Loren was very much interested in the paranormal as well, especially as represented by the more scholarly English school. He purchased many volumes on the subject over the next several years, including Frederic W.H. Meyer's, Human Personality and Survival of Bodily Death; T.C. Lethbridge's, Ghost and Ghoul; J.W. Dunne's, An Experiment With Time; G.N.M. Tyrell's, Apparitions; and Henry James's, Psychical Research.

Allegedly true accounts of death by violent means, the gorier the better, also fascinated Wimberly. He purchased almost every issue of True Detective, Master Detective, Inside Detective, and Startling Detective and conjectured that if Shakespeare, Browning, and DeQuincey were alive they too would be reading the crime magazines. He later authored an essay titled "Crime-Journal Addicts" in which he argued that to know the working of the criminal mind is to know the working of one's own mind. "There, but for the grace of God, go I" could be shouted every time a condemned murderer walks the last mile."¹⁰

The "Doc," as he was affectionately known, was forced to settle for a form of controlled mayhem on Saturday nights. Accompanied by Loren, he attended illegal boxing matches, betting a dollar or two on the outcome of each fight. "They" were the shabby little back street affairs of the depression,

Loren recalled, "generally held in some local garage or something of that kind."¹¹ Men drank illegal hooch from amber-necked bottles wrapped in brown paper, puffed on cheap cigars, and turned ugly and vulgar when the fighters they backed hit the blood-splattered floor and failed to rise. Among the several books Loren purchased during this period was Alexander Johnston's Ten and Out! The Complete Story of the Prize Ring in America (1927). It is inscribed with his name and the address of William and Grace Price, the uncle and aunt with whom he was then living.¹²

Wimberly liked to go about town in threes. Bill Gaffney thought it quite possible that the Doc and Loren were joined at the fights by Preston Holder, a physically rugged youth who rode the rods with reckless abandon and extolled the virtues of the classic boxing lithographs by George Bellows. Preston, a native of Wabash, Indiana, was 19 or 20 when he enrolled as a freshman at the University in 1927. Having crisscrossed the country by freight, he harbored fewer illusions than most young men of his generation. When Bill learned that Preston was also a Robinson Jeffers devotee and had thoughts of becoming a writer, he introduced him to Loren, and the two became good friends. Preston, like Loren, eventually turned to anthropology and rose to become sometime chairman of his department at Nebraska. This mutual interest may well have been stimulated by Wimberly, who had also thought of taking such a turn while writing his dissertation. Perhaps the main reason that he did not do so was his belief that nothing in the world can be fully and definitely proved, including the theory of evolution. While Wimberly and Loren shared a common interest in the weird tale and ghost story, Loren remembered a lengthy discussion they had after attending an English conference in Cleveland. "We drove back home through a blizzard . . . and we argued most of the way on the subject of evolution. Lowry, in spite of his interest in anthropology, retained from his southern ministerial forebears strong prejudices against some aspects of science. Evolution at that time happened to be one of them. . . ."¹³

In the three years that had passed since Loren first enrolled in the University in 1925 he had earned only 61 hours of credit, which meant that he was now a full year behind what would have been his graduating class. What is more, he was losing additional ground fast. He likened himself to a wolf attached to an invisible chain, padding endlessly "around and around the shut doors of knowledge. I learned, but not enough. I ran restlessly from one scent to another."

Some of the black marks on his lengthening transcript were the product of indifference; others were spawned by the very suspicion and fear of the world shown by his deaf mother, Daisy. When Loren's fellow students found themselves in the wrong course or were faced down by the occasional hostile professor, they went through the proper channels and dropped the class. "I simply walked away and there the record stands. Bureaucracy intimidated me."¹⁴ While his academic advisor was "a good man," he was unable to reconcile Loren's seemingly contradictory interests in the sciences and literature. "I was brought up in a different time, when you more or less made your own way up or down by what you did and not by the IQ test

figures that somebody wrenched out of you."¹⁵ An admitted under-achiever, he would one day admonish his fellow educators: "I feel it so necessary not to lose sight of those later-maturing, sometimes painfully abstracted youths who may represent the Darwins, Thoreaus, and Hawthornes of the next generation." The good teacher should never grow indifferent to their possibility--"not, at least, if there is evidence even in the face of failure in some subjects, of high motivation and intelligence in some specific field."¹⁶ Loren had looked back into time's mirror and had seen his own reflection in the visages of his nineteenth-century intellectual heroes.

For the moment, and for a long time to come, his self-image remained terribly distorted. Only his writing and the enduring confidence of a few friends and professors like Wimberly kept him from dropping out of the University for good. His poetry continued to reflect the tortured thoughts of an alienated young man overlooking a bleak prospect. In the spring of 1928 the Schooner carried what was the longest of the Eiseley poems to date, a haunting work titled "Spiders." These hairy, poisonous, secretive creatures are old; they watch from dark corners while wills are made; they are ghouls that live hidden lives in graveyards. Moreover,

Time is a spider
 the world is a fly
 caught in the invisible, stranded web of space.
 It sways and turns aimlessly
 in the winds, blowing up from the void.
 Slowly it desiccates . . . crumbles . . .
 the stars weave over it.
 It hangs . . .
 forgotten.¹⁷

The young author of "Spiders," who never sounds young, had only recently purchased the new English translation of Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West. Loren's entry into this world of Germanic thought could have done nothing but strengthen his developing sense that mankind is part of a pattern of events and behavior independent of anyone's control--a hurtling process that submerges the earth, the solar system, galaxy, and universe itself in cosmic change whose lines may well have been fixed from the very moment of creation. Lowry Wimberly put the matter less philoaphically but more succinctly one day while gazing out his office window. He saw a bleak-faced Loren in the distance, plodding stoop-shouldered across campus. "Poor devil!" the Doc muttered, "He looks just as if he has been kicked off a freight train."¹⁸

NOTES

1. Leon Edel, Henry D. Thoreau, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 10 (Minneapolis, 1970), 14.
2. Rudolph Umland, "Looking Back at the Wimberly Years," unpublished manuscript, Bennett Martin Library (Lincoln), 32-33.
3. Rudolph Umland, "Lowry Wimberly and Others: Recollections of a Beerdrinker," Prairie Schooner, LI, no. 1 (Spring 1977), 27.
4. Rudolph Umland, "The Ghost of Lowry Wimberly," Prairie Schooner, XLI, no. 3 (Fall 1967), 329.
5. Umland, "Looking Back at the Wimberly Years," 5-6.
6. Loren C. Eiseley, "There is no Peace," The Freshman Yearbook, I, no. 4, (July 1927), 11 (emphasis Eiseley's). The only surviving issues of this publication are in the University of Nebraska Archives (Lincoln). Also see Prairie Schooner, I, no. 3 (July 1927), supplement, unpaginated.
7. *Ibid.*, 32.
8. Loren C. Eiseley, "Autumn--A Memory," Prairie Schooner, no. 4 (October 1927), 238-39 (ellipses Eiseley's).
9. Umland, "Looking Back at the Wimberly Years," p. 17; Interview with Wilbur "Bill" Gaffney, 21 May 1984.
10. Rudolph Umland, "More Beerdrinking With Wimberly," unpublished manuscript, Bennett Martin Library (Lincoln), 14.
11. Loren Eiseley to Rudolph Umland, 26 January 1967 (courtesy of R.U.).
12. Heritage Room, Bennett Martin Library (Lincoln).
13. Loren Eiseley to Rudolph Umland, 26 January 1967.
14. Loren Eiseley, All the Strange Hours: The Excavation of a Life (New York, 1975), 49.
15. "An Interview with Loren Eiseley," Exploration 1974, 9.
16. Loren Eiseley, The Mind as Nature (New York, 1962), 40-41.
17. Loren C. Eiseley, "Spiders," Prairie Schooner, II, no. 2 (Spring 1928), 92.
18. Rudolph Umland to Pamela Gossin, 24 May 1982, Bennett Martin Library (Lincoln).

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