Loren Eiseley

THE IMMENSE JOURNEY



VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE
New York

aturalist, to look at Nature
e of his eye. He must look

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

dium of revelation, no par-
. . ."

WILLIAM TEMPLE

THE SLIT

Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time. Some are torn, ravaged and convulsed like the features of profane old age. Rocks are wrenched up and exposed to view; black pits receive the sun but give back no light.

It was to such a land I rode, but I rode to it across a sunlit, timeless prairie over which nothing passed but antelope or a wandering bird. On the verge where that prairie halted before a great wall of naked sandstone and clay, I came upon the Slit. A narrow crack worn by some descending torrent had begun secretly, far

? interestingly said, but will it work?

confused by strange beasts or
r sights of abortive men, these are
s saw or my mind conceived. On
are all castaways, so that what is
n be dark or obscure to another.

THE FLOW OF THE RIVER

If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water. Its least stir even, as now in a rain pond on a flat roof opposite my office, is enough to bring me searching to the window. A wind ripple may be translating itself into life. I have a constant feeling that some time I may witness that momentous miracle on a city roof, see life veritably and suddenly boiling out of a heap of rusted pipes and old television aerials. I marvel at how suddenly a water beetle has come and is submarining there in a spatter of green algae. Thin vapors, rust, wet tar and sun are an alembic remarkably like the mind; they throw off odorous shadows that threaten to take real shape when no one is looking.

with E.P.'s reflection photograph.

to wander. The vagaries of the
ng, however; it is thus we torture

in the night sky. Men, troubled
ıey build, may toss in their sleep
, or lie awake while the meteors
ead. But nowhere in all space or
will there be men to share our
be wisdom; there may be power;
e great instruments, handled by
organs, may stare vainly at our
their owners yearning as we
ı the nature of life and in the
we have had our answer. Of
ond, there will be none forever.

Eiseley

THE JUDGMENT OF THE BIRDS

It is a commonplace of all religious thought, even the most primitive, that the man seeking visions and insight must go apart from his fellows and live for a time in the wilderness. If he is of the proper sort, he will return with a message. It may not be a message from the god he set out to seek, but even if he has failed in that particular, he will have had a vision or seen a marvel, and these are always worth listening to and thinking about.

The world, I have come to believe, is a very queer place, but we have been part of this queerness for so long that we tend to take it for granted. We rush to

Thoreau?

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The world is queer to be observed than used.

and fro like Mad Hatters upon our peculiar errands, all the time imagining our surroundings to be dull and ourselves quite ordinary creatures. Actually, there is nothing in the world to encourage this idea, but such is the mind of man, and this is why he finds it necessary from time to time to send emissaries into the wilderness in the hope of learning of great events, or plans in store for him, that will resuscitate his waning taste for life. His great news services, his world-wide radio network, he knows with a last remnant of healthy distrust will be of no use to him in this matter. No miracle can withstand a radio broadcast, and it is certain that it would be no miracle if it could. One must seek, then, what only the solitary approach can give—a natural revelation.

Let it be understood that I am not the sort of man to whom is entrusted direct knowledge of great events or prophecies. A naturalist, however, spends much of his life alone, and my life is no exception. Even in New York City there are patches of wilderness, and a man by himself is bound to undergo certain experiences falling into the class of which I speak. I set mine down, therefore: a matter of pigeons, a flight of chemicals, and a judgment of birds, in the hope that they will come to the eye of those who have retained a true taste for the marvelous, and who are capable of discerning in the flow of ordinary events the point at which the mundane world gives way to quite another dimension.

New York is not, on the whole, the
joy the downright miraculous nature
There are, I do not doubt, many rema
be heard there and many strange sights
to grasp a marvel fully it must be savo
pects. This cannot be done while one
and hustled along a crowded street.
any city there are true wildernesses w
be alone. It can happen in a hotel room
roofs at dawn.

One night on the twentieth floor of
I awoke in the dark and grew restless.
I climbed upon the broad old-fashion
opened the curtains and peered out. It
before dawn, the hour when men sig
or, if awake, strive to focus their w
upon a world emerging from the shado
sleepily through the open window.
depths, but not the sight I saw.

I found I was looking down from t
into a series of curious cupolas or lofts
barely make out in the darkness. As I
lines of these lofts became more disti
light was being reflected from the w
who, in utter silence, were beginning
upon the city. In and out through the
cupolas passed the white-winged bird
terious errands. At this hour the city

luminous store of experience, shining for a moment in the fogbound reaches of my brain.

The mind, it came to me as I slowly descended the ladder, is a very remarkable thing; it has gotten itself a kind of courage by looking at a spider in a street lamp. Here was something that ought to be passed on to those who will fight our final freezing battle with the void. I thought of setting it down carefully as a message to the future: *In the days of the frost seek a minor sun.*

But as I hesitated, it became plain that something was wrong. The marvel was escaping—a sense of bigness beyond man's power to grasp, the essence of life in its great dealings with the universe. It was better, I decided, for the emissaries returning from the wilderness, even if they were merely descending from a stepladder, to record their marvel, not to define its meaning. In that way it would go echoing on through the minds of men, each grasping at that beyond out of which the miracles emerge, and which, once defined, ceases to satisfy the human need for symbols.

In the end I merely made a mental note: One specimen of Epeira observed building a web in a street light. Late autumn and cold for spiders. Cold for men, too. I shivered and left the lamp glowing there in my mind. The last I saw of Epeira she was hauling steadily on a cable. I stepped carefully over her shadow as I walked away.

THE BIRD AND THE MAC

I suppose their little bones have among the stones and winds of th tures. I suppose their feathers blev piles of tumbleweed beneath the st and rotted there in the mountain dead steers and all the other things in the corners of the wire. I do no should be thinking of birds over th at breakfast, particularly the birds continent away. It is a funny thing do with memories and how it wil finally bring them into odd juxta