

"The Rope"

by Loren Eiseley

(From *Notes of an Alchemist*)

I used to carry a frayed rope in my hand
upon the speaker's rostrum,
try to tell
my students this:
that there was a similar rope
as loosely frayed
that bound them to the past,
a rope that somewhere ran
to an old salt-oozing eye
in the deep sea,
and that strange eye
still stared from underneath their brows
full at me,
just as the interlocked vertebrae of their dextrous spines
was long ago
a fish's gift,
just as
their lungs had labored gasping in a swamp
to serve a fish's needs,
and these frayed strands
of the rope I held
ran back and back
to individual and diverse times
in sea and swamp and forest,
twisted finally
into our living substance, hidden in ourselves
that code of DNA,
that secret spiral ladder
made up of bits and pieces of
the past that never dies
but lives entwined in us,
our spines up-tilted in a forest attic;
our foot, so tendon-bound
and twisted over,
a re-engineered bent
climbing pad
renewed to walk on grass;
our fingers quick
with stones;
our brains
dreaming lost ancient dreams
as well as throwing
ropes in the air as though to catch
what is uncatchable -
the future.
We can ask only the question
nor can we be

answered save through signs.

By many primitive fires around the world
man has
employed the rope trick of the Indian fakirs,
striven to climb
out of himself to heaven,
forever scaled
the giant beanstalk of himself,
been cast
forever down,
arose and climbed again.
Here holding
before a scientific audience
a plain, unmagical ordinary rope of hemp
I suddenly find
that, having made ascent, by weeping eye, salt-crusted fin,
and wriggings learned
piercing the downpour of a continent
to reach this trembling platform,
it is my intent
to stay and cast
the wondrous rope still farther.
Fakir, mystic I may be, but this,
this is the way we came, the way
of the invisible rope
in the beginning cast
somewhere in the Devonian darkness
or below:
this is what instructed seers enact,
unknowing the precise sense
in which they cast but casting rope or thread
always above them
by dimly smoking fires
or using
an old, old symbolism
and climbing
before an audience
the ever-growing tree
up which there run
animals in pursuit.

This is a heavy time to cast my rope.
I stand unmagical
knowing only
the trick was done far back and must be done again.

I let the cord fall and I climb on words,
swaying, ascending,
desperate as man
in the black dark has always swung and climbed
toward some far sky lord he has never seen,
assembling along the ever-lengthening rope

his own dismantled self, the eye that weeps
salt tears
reborn,
the mind
cleansed of its treason and foul unbelief.
Believe, oh do believe;
look up,
the rope is there
lent by that devious double agent, night.
Oh now we know
the rope is hidden in ourselves to climb.