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DEALING WITH DISTANCE/ATTEMPTS AT NEARNESS

Priscilla Fenton

The grimy unairconditioned tunnels within the University of Pennsylvania library held the precious archives which lured Loren Eiseley with their tales of the exotic expeditions of archaeologists who preceded him. Accounts by Herbert Winlock which describe his adventures in Egypt during the twenties impressed Eiseley, as a graduate student. Winlock was excavating the tomb of Meket-Re at Thebes. This site had suffered from many plunderings and desecrations, so Winlock took on the risk of ridicule for exploring a known-to-be-empty burial ground. He refused to accept his colleagues' conclusions of emptiness and surface indications of valuelessness. Eventually, an expedition crew member noticed voluntary movement of sand: perhaps an opening? In the apparently seamless rock floor, a narrow slit allowed the sand to be pulled into a secret chamber. Matches were lit. (Unwisely since toxic ancient air might poison the curious — or was that the legend Meket-Re planted to keep his special place safe from superstitious thieves?) Soon Winlock, being the scientist, shot a flashlight beam through the sliver of the crack to reveal this vision.

> I was gazing down into the midst of a myriad of brilliantly painted little men going this way and that. A tall slender girl gazed across at me, perfectly composed, a gang of little men with sticks in their upraised hands drove spotted oxen, rowers tugged at their oars on a fleet of boats . . . And all this coming and going was in uncanny silence, as though the distance back over forty centures I looked across was too great for an echo to reach my ears. (Eiseley, 1975, p. 98)

As Eiseley read Winlock's description of these funerary accoutrements, his memories of childhood attempts to commemorate the events of death surfaced.

> . . .I had found a little bottle of liquid gilt my mother used on picture frames. I made some crosses, carefully whittled out of wood, and gilded them till they were gold. Then I placed them over an occasional dead bird I buried. Or, if I read of a tragic, heroic death like those of the war aces, I would put the clipping — I could read by then — into a little box and bury it with a gold cross to mark the spot. One day a mower in the empty lot behind our backyard found the little cemetery and carried away all of my carefully carved crosses. I cried but never told anyone. How could I? I had sought in my own small way to preserve the memory of what always in the end perishes: life and good deeds. (Eiseley, 1975, p. 27)

Although the measurable distance between Eiseley's golden memorials and Meket-Re's miniature celebration of the journey into the next life resists

comparison, they share a magical comfort. Eiseley recognized the similarities between their endeavors. Betweeness emerged and destroyed the surface illusion of distance and difference. Philadelphia in the thirties and far away ancient Egypt melted together to allow a meeting between persons who were not contemporaries. And yet from Eiseley's fullness, fueled with a willingness to understand brought Winlock and Meket-Re into that musty humid alley between columns of book shelves.

> Herbert Winlock convinced me by the power of his own imagination that something did linger in the little carvings, that men had believed in the miniatures they hoarded against the moment of their deaths. Indeed in the instant of discovery Winlock had seen them alive. (Eiseley, 1975, p. 98)

I felt myself nodding my head with affirmation as I read and reread Eiseley's profession of faith. In those moments before the impact of the present, when it reasserts itself and insists on the distance which millenia insert, we hold ourselves suspended, sincerely waiting for a face-to-face encounter. Perhaps a greeting and an acknowledgement of each other's location. And then we drop — weighted by the heaviness of meeting and the acceleration of returning to the present overwhelms us.

Relief from anxieties initiated by geographic distance can be achieved through faceless ways of encounter. Ray Johnson and the New York Correspondence School know how to deal with distance.

> The only way to understand something of my school is to participate in it for some time. It is secret, private and without any rule. (in Poinsat, 1971, p. 143).

Mail something to Ray and the School's importance is revealed. Mailers and receivers make the school meaningful.

Ken Friedman considered participation with the postal system the adventures which happen to him in the mails. In his correspondence with Ben Vautier he offers a way to dispel isolation and change the established meanings of distance.

> . . .Ben Vautier and I exchanged personalities once by mail, he was in Tokyo and Nice at the same time as being in Paris and I was there because he was here in San Diego. Only via the wonderful contrivance of the mails **can we be everywhere at once.** (in Poinsat, 1971, p. 102)

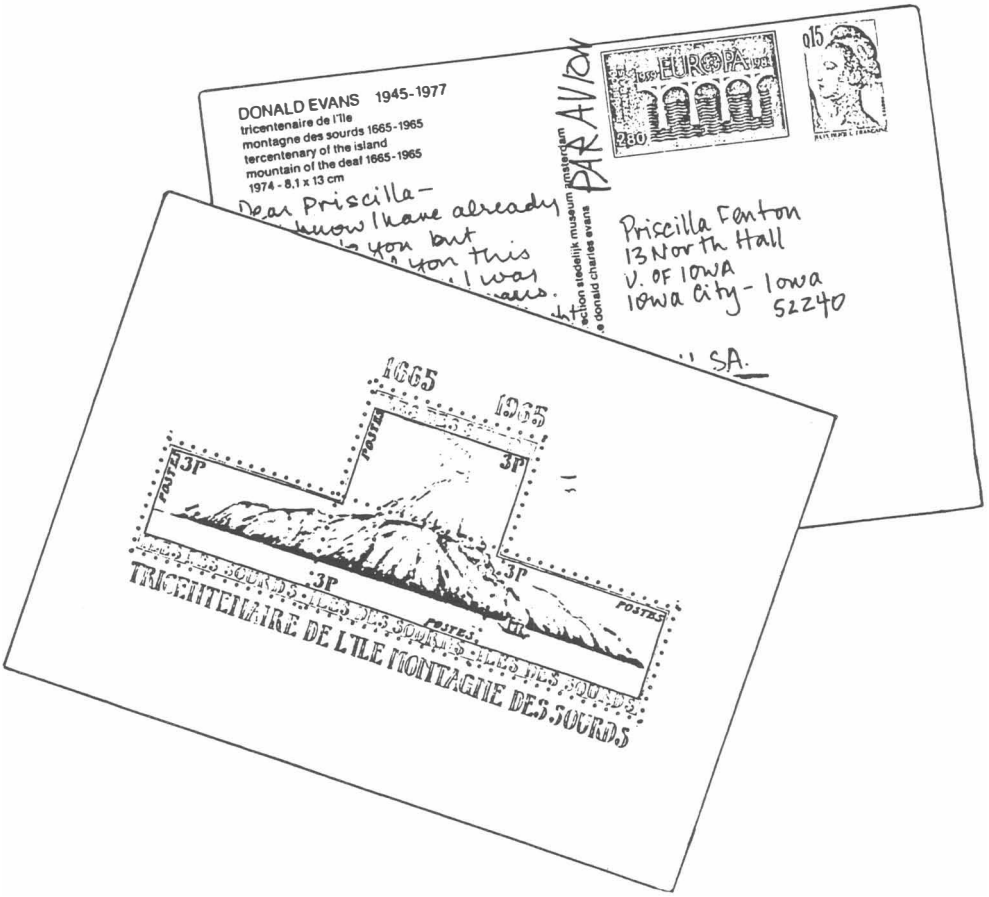
During the high school art workshop at The University of Iowa last summer, I conducted the sessions which focused on historical as well as current aspects of art. During our explorations in the art library I introduced the students to Donald Evans and his work. Willy Eisenhart (1980) wrote in his biographical preface about the importance of postage stamps.

> Donald Evans was an artist and he painted postage stamps, thousands of them. He made these miniature watercolors as

> a child in his parent's house and as an adult traveling the world. On little paper rectangles he painted precise transcriptions of his life. He commemorated everything that was special to him, disguised in a code of stamps from his own imaginary countries —– each detailed with its own history, geography, climate, currency and customs -- all of it representative of the real world but, like real stamps, apart from it in calm tranquility. (p. 10)

Considerations of distance and endorsement of correspondence: stamps and cancellation marks made things move through the world. Donald Evans was only one of the persons whom we met last summer.

In early March, summer seemed very far away until a postcard arrived and June's warmth recommenced. In my morning office mail I found something with foreign stamps on it. A postcard which held an image of Donald Evan's **Mountain of the Deaf** stamp block. One of the workshop students happened upon this card at the Centre du Pompidou in Paris. Suddenly, as I held her card in my hands, she stood before me speaking very quickly with excitement about Paris, the art she had seen and next summer. I was catapulted to Paris and watched her discover the postcard, scrambling to get stamps and to find my address. Donald Evans reintroduced us. Distance was employed to bring about reconnection while correspondence emerged.



Since I commute to school my awareness of geographic distance has become quite concrete. The traffic and asphalt of the east-west axis of Interstate 80 between Des Moines and Iowa City insists that I pay attention to where I am. My need for a book which was left behind; my longing for a phone conversation with a friend in New York; my desire to watch my niece understand her second birthday in Ohio will not allow me to deny the geographic distance. With Eiseley's vivid recollection, Johnson's participatory understanding and Friedman's unabashed everywhereness, I conjure up courage to celebrate the distance as I collaborate with other persons in the world. We make the distance our vehicle as we pull each other closer. We insure our omnipresence with these things which pass through the past. This arrangement brings a solitude we know because the distance beween us gives us a chance to think about how it feels when we are with each other.

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