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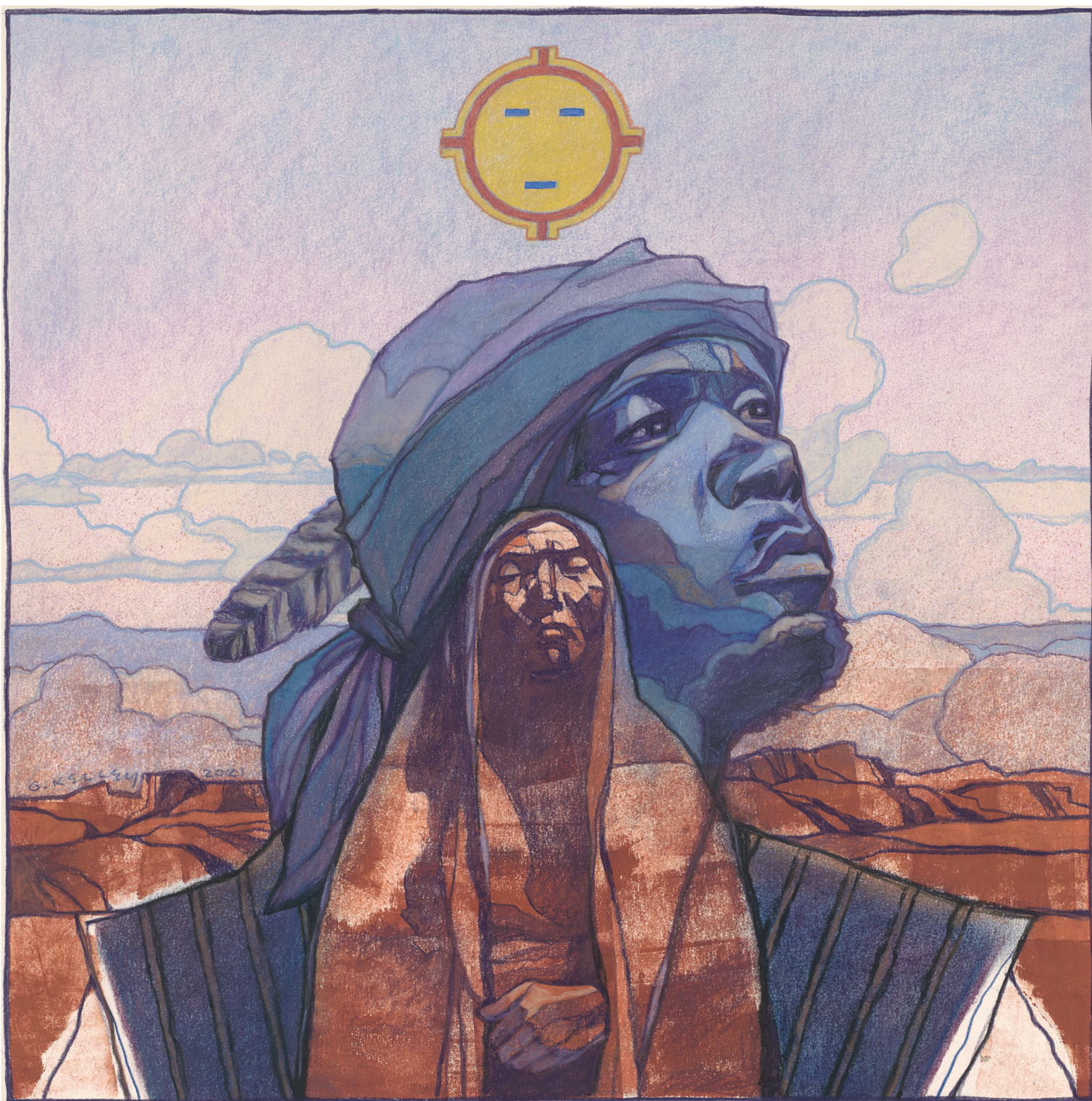
In Defense of the Least Weasel: Poem & Scientific Note

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IN DEFENSE OF THE LEAST WEASEL

By Debra Marquart

world's tiniest carnivore
 eight inches long, two ounces.
 you might think it's cute

but razor teeth, scimitar claws.
 the least weasel steals
 the burrows of rats and moles

lines its nest with the skin of its prey
 aims for the occipital bone,
 the base of the skull

of mice, voles, birds
 or dissects the cervical artery
 in one quick sever of blood flow.

the least weasel stockpiles food
 or, in times of plenty, eats only
 the brains of its vanquished.

preyed on by coyote, fox, owl, hawk,
 the least weasel will hiss, shriek
 and wail in attack. come swift

and true, if you come for the least weasel.
 ask the buzzard who scooped up
 a weasel in its claws, but failed

to execute the fatal puncture.
 the report concludes, the least weasel
 twisted upwards in the vulture's talons

and eviscerated its entrails
 in mid-flight. ask the eagle
 accidentally shot by a hunter.

when authorities examined the eagle's
 fresh-killed carcass to confirm
 the shooting of a protected

species was accidental, they were surprised
 to discover the fossilized skull
 of a least weasel dried down

to nothing, still affixed
 to the eagle's fleshy neck.
 a vestige of some long ago

mortal combat.
 unrelenting lock jaw,
 sun-dried teeth still dug in,

even in death, even after years
 the least weasel still clutching
 the throat of its own killer.



IMAGE: Drawing by Thomas Rice

NOTES ON THE LEAST WEASEL

THE IOWA DEPARTMENT of Natural Resources has compiled a “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” report as part of a multi-year strategy for the conservation of wildlife in the state of Iowa. Although the least weasel is not endangered, it is considered vital to the ecosystem of Iowa because of its ability to control mice and vole populations in agricultural fields.

As the poem indicates, the least weasel is considered the world’s tiniest carnivore and is, by all accounts, a ferocious creature. A unique feature of the least weasel is its lack of a black tail tip, an attribute that typically marks stoats and other long-tailed weasels. In larger weasels, the black tail tip is thought to be used for predator deflection—the dark flash of the weasel’s tail tip draws the predator’s eye and talons away from the weasel’s more vulnerable abdomen.

But the tiny least weasel’s lack of a black tail tip hasn’t disadvantaged it in predatory situations. In a controlled study done with weasel decoys and live hawks, the least weasel decoy escaped the death blow more frequently than the larger of its co-species who possessed a black tip on their tails.

The study theorizes that the least weasel has adapted to capitalize on the unpredictability that its anomalous tail presents to predators, who might hesitate, for a micro-second, to assess what type of weasel they are attacking. This small opening offers the least weasel the slight advantage to escape.

Many cultures have myths and lore about the least weasel. Pliny the Elder, a Roman naturalist and philosopher, wrote that the least weasel was the only creature who could kill the basilisk, a mythical serpent king creature that was reputed to kill its prey with a mere glance. Pliny the Elder reports on the role the least weasel played in containing the scourge of the basilisk.

In *Natural History*, Pliny wrote:

The basilisk is found in Cyrenaica and is not more than a foot in length; it is adorned with a bright white spot on its head like a diadem. It puts all snakes to flight by its hissing and does not move forward with many winding coils, like other snakes, but travels along with its middle sticking up. It destroys bushes not only by its touch but also by its breath, and it burns grass and splits rocks. It is believed that once one was killed with a spear by a man on horseback and its destructive power rose through the spear and killed both the rider and his horse. Kings have often wished to see a basilisk once dead beyond a shadow of a doubt.

For such a fantastic creature the venom of weasels is fatal—thus does Nature determine that nothing is without its match. Men throw basilisks into weasel’s dens, which are easily recognized by the putrefaction of the ground. The weasels kill them by their foul smell and then die themselves. Nature’s fight is over.

Across many cultures, least weasels are associated with good omens or portents, and they are especially invoked by warriors seeking additional power in battle. In England, a witch hunter reported that least weasels acted as familiars and helpers to the witches he hunted. In Inuit mythology, a warrior undertaking a valorous task would change himself into a least weasel.

Several Ojibwe tales exist that suggest the least weasel is the only creature that can kill the windigo. The Anishinaabe writer, Kai Minosh Pyle, in their essay, “Autobiography of an Iceheart,” recounts one cultural tale in which the windigo is terrorizing a village. In response, the hero Nanaboozhoo calls on his friend Zhingos, the least weasel, to help.

In Pyle’s retelling of the tale, we learn that the windigo’s formidable power is controlled by its heart, which is made of ice. This frozen solid iceheart is why the windigo is so unstoppable.

The rest of the story, Kai Minosh Pyle warns, is not “one easily told in polite company”:

They [Nanaboozhoo and Zhingos] waited until the windigo was nearby. Just as they expected, it came barreling into the village, looking for humans to devour. It barely noticed the tiny white weasel that scurried up behind it.

Zhingos looked at Nanaboozhoo as if to ask, Are you sure about this? Nanaboozhoo nodded and gave a thumbs-up. And without hesitation, that Zhingos leapt up, grabbed the windigo with its little claws, and crawled his way right up that windigo’s asshole! Yes, up through its intestines he crawled, chewing his way through until finally he reached his ice heart. When he did, he chewed with all his might until the windigo faltered and then—fell.

And so the least weasel stops the unstoppable by eating incessantly. In truth, the least weasel must eat at least half of its body weight daily in order to survive. This small carnivore is renowned for its ability to escape through holes of less than one inch wide.