

## URSULA O'FARRELL

*Deep Water*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in.



courtesy: Alex Built Gallery

## STEPHEN KESSLER

### A Man Apart

Robinson Jeffers,  
Problematic Patriarch

**W**hen I was twenty and just starting out as a poet, my girlfriend gave me a copy of the big Sierra Club picture book *Not Man Apart* with its gorgeous photos of the Big Sur coast by the likes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston accompanied by lines (and some whole poems) of Robinson Jeffers. As I read the poetry alongside the pictures their combined beauty brought me to tears. I was slightly familiar with Jeffers from his ten poems in Oscar Williams's classic anthology *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, but by that time (1967) Jeffers's stock had fallen precipitously from its pinnacle of the 1920s and '30s, and he was seldom mentioned anymore as one of the major American poets. Eclipsed by his contemporary Modernists (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams among the most prominent) and even by more traditional poets like Robert Frost and neo-Romantics like e. e. cummings, Jeffers had exiled himself from both mainstream and avant-garde American culture through his geophysical isolation on the Central California coast, the unpopular and at times repugnant political attitudes openly expressed in his writings, and his indifference to current artistic and critical trends. He had carved out a singular place for himself in the literary landscape and was content to let Eternity decide what to make of him and his work.

It was only later that I was able to place him in such a historical context. What moved me about his poems, first in the Williams anthology, then in the Sierra Club book, and after that in the 600-page

Random House edition of his *Selected Poetry*, was the irresistible force of his voice, its muscular music, its vivid engagement with the physical world, its rhythmic power, its readily comprehensible language, its acute observation and spiritual exaltation of natural beauty. I was drawn to the shorter lyrics more than to the long narratives, but even in the latter with their disturbing stories there was a propulsive momentum in the writing that I had never encountered before except perhaps in Richmond Lattimore's Homer. The fact that Jeffers was the first great modern poet of California made him, for me as a native Californian, a heavy predecessor to be reckoned with. Even though by then the Beat, Black Mountain, Deep Image and New York School movements were rising to replace the Southern Agrarians, the Confessionalists and the New Critics as the dominant forces in U.S. poetic discourse, I was still reading the English Romantics and could feel intuitively the natural link between Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and the stormy dithyrambs of Jeffers in such books as *Tamar*, *Roan Stallion* and *The Women at Point Sur*.

A few years later, at the tail end of my abortive career as a graduate student in Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I had the good fortune to take a seminar in the History of Consciousness program called Ideas of the Nature of Poetry with Robert Duncan, another important California poet first associated with Kenneth Rexroth and the San Francisco Renaissance, and later with Charles Olson and the Black Mountain school. Duncan, an Oakland native and one-time personal secretary to Anaïs Nin, was an inspiringly anti-academic eminence recruited briefly by Norman O. Brown to teach at UCSC (the Literature faculty would have nothing to do with such a creatively unconventional mind as Duncan's). His assignment for the students in his seminar was to select one poet to study for the term and to explore "the range of consciousness" in the poet's writing. I chose Jeffers.

As it turned out, Jeffers didn't have that much range—certainly not as much as Duncan, whose

thinking and writing spanned centuries and cultures from prehistoric cave art to contemporary television—but rather returned again and again to a few core themes, convictions and obsessions, namely the grandeur and nobility of Nature versus the smallness and depravity of Man. Duncan helped to illuminate Jeffers's poems by explaining that many of his narratives, fraught with violence and murder and sexual transgression, were based at least in part on stories or legends of events that had actually occurred on the Big Sur coast, stories that had helped to form and to reinforce the poet's ideas about human baseness in contrast to the greatness of the rest of God's creation: ocean, mountains, trees, rocks, wild animals. Here we find hints of Jeffers's origins as the son of a Pennsylvania Presbyterian minister and theology professor who instilled in his child the notion of Original Sin. The boy was rigorously educated in the classics and languages and spent three years at schools in Europe before returning to the States to enter college in Pittsburgh at the age of fifteen.

Jeffers moved with his family to Southern California and graduated at eighteen from Occidental, followed by graduate studies at USC in forestry, medicine, and the sciences. It was there in Los Angeles, on the eve of the First World War, that he met his muse and future wife, Una, who at the time was married to someone else. After a scandalous affair and her divorce, Jeffers and his new bride planned to move to England, but the war intervened, fatefully altering their agenda. On a visit to Carmel in 1914 they found their spot on a coastal bluff and decided to settle there. While Jeffers had self-published a book of verse in 1912, it was a conventional effort in turn-of-the-century lyricism, and it wasn't until about 1919 when he started building a home that he found his own distinctive voice as a poet. Apprenticing himself to a stonemason, Jeffers built his own house, hauling big rocks up from the beach and setting them one upon another. Then, on his own, he constructed an adjacent four-story stone tower for Una and their twin sons. Tor House and Hawk Tower are

now, a century later, surrounded by upscale homes of the Carmel elite, a popular attraction for literary tourists not far from the golf course at Pebble Beach.

Certainly the years of manual labor lifting stones and constructing buildings had a profound effect not only on Jeffers's body, soul, and psyche but on his prosody and practice as a poet. The physical quality of his verse, the muscular authority of his voice, the hardness of his vision of the universe have as much to do with his handling the materials of his family's dwelling as with his stern Protestant upbringing and the wild landscape and seascape he chose as his habitat. You can not only hear a rolling, surflike rhythm in his lines but can feel the weight of the granite he used to build his fortresslike house. Unlike most of his modernist contemporaries Jeffers did not live primarily in his head, and his writing reveals its foundation in the physical world. Like the San Francisco-born Frost, who also resisted the modernist tide from his New Hampshire farm, Jeffers's flinty sensibility and style are informed by bodily work outdoors, away from the library and the writing desk.

While at a first superficial glance Jeffers's expansive lines on the page may resemble those of Walt Whitman, he is in fact the anti-Whitman, marking the end of the Long Island-born poet's optimistic celebration of an America brimming with human promise and vitality, and pronouncing from the opposite end of the continent the nation's inevitable doom—a doom destined not just for the United States but for all of civilization. Gazing out at the Pacific Ocean in its immense wild splendor, observing the birds and beasts of the Santa Lucia Mountains, witnessing or imagining the terrible crimes of the puny humans living in such awesome surroundings, Jeffers took a long view of our time on Earth and the ephemeral nuisance of society. Looking southward down the Big Sur coast rather than more immediately north to his Carmel community of privileged bohemians, artists, and dilettantes, Jeffers engaged his imagination with the wild lands and their human inhabitants prone to

incestuous passions, madness, and violent mayhem. As he writes in the foreword to his *Selected Poetry* of 1938, on the south coast of the Monterey Peninsula he saw “life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will for thousands of years to come.” It is these very cowboys and plowmen and their families who serve as the deranged protagonists of his narratives, not living in harmony with nature but driven mad by its savage beauty and infecting it with their own moral corruption.

This is why Jeffers is such a prophetic voice for the environmental movement: he could foresee, as early as the 1920s, the terrible damage humans would inevitably wreak on their habitat. Surely the general disillusionment following the carnage of World War I contributed to Jeffers's pessimism (and he wasn't the only one; just think of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the emblematic poem of their generation), but his timeless perch on the edge of the Pacific with its sharp-beaked raptors and granite boulders and eternally rocking waters and cosmic weather, combined with his knowledge of the sciences, all contributed to what he came to call his philosophy of “inhumanism,” his de-centering of people from the grander scheme of the universe. But Jeffers was no environmentalist as we understand the term today. He made no active attempt to save the earth and thereby save civilization from itself. He seems instead to have welcomed humanity's eventual self-destruction and to look forward to the planet's inevitable recovery of its natural equilibrium. On a scale of countless millions of years of Creation, the history of mankind is a speck of dust in a blinking eye.

As William S. Burroughs would put it later in a radically different register, Jeffers saw humanity as something like an alien virus plaguing the planet. He anticipates the Deep Ecology concept in his long view of the earth's resilience despite everything transient humans may throw at it. But like Burroughs he also

flirts with nihilism in his indifference to the outcome of World War II (which he gloomily anticipated in his writings all through the 1920s and 30s), regarding Roosevelt and Churchill and Hitler and Stalin as corrupt leaders of equally evil regimes destined to lead the world into nothing but disaster. The atomic bombs over Japan in 1945 only confirmed his dire prophecies, and while his anti-political stance made him for many a persona non grata until his death in 1962, Jeffers was one of the earliest and most eloquent voices warning of the apocalyptic consequences of the century's wars. The poet once praised as the greatest of his time (his face appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1932) spent most of his later years reviled by his contemporaries as some kind of cranky reactionary so far removed from humankind as to be indifferent to the sufferings of actual people.

And it wasn't just his politics that critics objected to. Kenneth Rexroth, who shared with Jeffers an affinity for the natural terrain and skies of California and a principled objection to war of any kind, dismissed the older poet's “cowgirl tragedies” as a vulgarization of their Greek models. From Rexroth's perspective it's easy to see Jeffers's tormented narratives as melodramatic soap operas rather than dramas equal to their archetypes—a perspective possibly reinforced by Jeffers's successful translation of Eurypides's *Medea* for the stage in 1946, the spare economy of the Greek text making the translator's original poems look windy and baggy by comparison.

Yvor Winters of Stanford, perhaps his most hostile critic, noted as early as 1932 that the “violent monotony of movement” in Jeffers's poetry “may have a hypnotic effect. . . much as does the jolting of a railroad coach over a bad roadbed.” If such a nasty assessment had any effect on its subject, he didn't show it but just kept right on driving his locomotive. Winters died in 1968 after a long tenure as Stanford's doctrinaire and domineering resident poet and critic but the Bard of Carmel, who had predeceased him, had the last posthumous laugh when, around the turn of this century,

*A great poet is one who is hit by lightning maybe a couple of dozen times, and by this measure Jeffers can hold his own against almost anyone in the twentieth century.*

Stanford University Press began issuing huge volumes of his collected works. Winters, who was even more reactionary than Jeffers, is largely forgotten or ignored today as a poet or critic, while Jeffers, for all the insults hurled at him by irate humanists, continues to weather well, especially in the shorter lyric poems for which he is now best known. (These are best represented in *Rock and Hawk*, the 1987 selection edited by Robert Hass on the occasion of the poet's centennial, and in the Vintage paperback *Selected Poems*.)

Randall Jarrell, another prominent mid-century critic and poet, famously observed that a poet is someone who, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, manages to be struck by lightning five or six times. As a corollary to this formula I would add that a great poet is one who is hit by lightning maybe a couple of dozen times, and by this measure Jeffers can hold his own against almost anyone in the twentieth century. Just the ten poems in that 1954 Oscar Williams anthology (a book that holds up exceptionally well more than half a century since)—“The Eye,” “To the Stone-cutters,” “Night,” “Boats in a Fog,” “Phenomena,” “Haunted Country,” “Science,” “Apology for Bad Dreams,” “Summer Holiday” and “I Shall Laugh Purely”—are enough to establish the author's permanent place in any canon of American poetry. If

he buried his best work, in these and similar poems penned through his long career, under a mountain of lesser diatribes, jeremiads, sermons, speeches, and psychodramas, the fact is that most prolific poets, starting with Whitman in this country, seldom leave more than a handful of truly enduring works, and it is on these that their reputations rest.

Today there are so many canons and counter-canons, so many poets scattered all over the map thanks in large part to the “creative writing” industry and its MFA programs, so many different identities being defended, so many theories promulgated, that it's anyone's guess what or who will be remembered fifty much less one hundred years from now. Still, there is a gravity and durability in Jeffers—as in the stoutness of his hand-built house—that I think will outlast much of what passes for the finest poetry of today. Because he focused on the timelessness of what he could see and feel from his granite aerie, and at best invoked and evoked it in language that still sings to anyone open-hearted enough to hear, he can't be dismissed so easily as Rexroth and Winters tried to dismiss him, each no doubt for his own rivalrous reasons.

Even Czeslaw Milosz, transplanted from Poland to UC Berkeley for a long stay capped by a Nobel Prize in 1980, had a beef with Jeffers for his proclamation of “an inhuman thing” in the face of the real-life human tragedies that Milosz had witnessed in Europe. And more recently, the Santa Cruz transplant Adrienne Rich condemned Jeffers for his self-isolation in the face of so many social injustices and for the depiction in his poems of such unsympathetic and degraded women. There is certainly something to these complaints, and I agree that Jeffers, as represented in his writings, is not an especially likeable person and not a candidate to be the guru or role model for any aspiring humanist. Yet for all his misanthropy (he was equally contemptuous of men as of women) there is something indelible in his work—a quality of vision eloquently examined in William Everson's landmark cultural-historical study, *Archetype West: The Pacific*

*Coast as a Literary Region*—that must be engaged with by subsequent generations, especially of California poets. Everson himself, modeling his poetry on that of Jeffers with a rogue-Catholic twist on his kinky sexual obsessions, allowed his own poetics to be overwhelmed by those of his forebear, and so became a pale shadow of his hero, his voice drowned out by Jeffers's stronger music.

Of all California poets Gary Snyder is probably the one who has most fruitfully advanced Jeffers's acute attention to wild nature into a distinctive style of his own whose human elements, while not always benevolent, at least suggest a certain compassion in the poet, and a desire to rescue civilization from his own excesses. Though Snyder has long lived on a homestead in the Sierra Nevada foothills, he has devoted his life to teaching as well as preaching, and has thus maintained his stake in some human community. Similarly Lawrence Ferlinghetti, when he writes of “freeways fifty lanes wide / on a concrete continent” where people drive “painted cars” whose engines “devour America,” is echoing Jeffers but with an ironic lightness that lifts his tone beyond the merely accusatory.

Perhaps the most unlikely avatar of Jeffers is Charles Bukowski, who as a Los Angeles native and longtime chronicler of life in that sprawling city, is emblematic of the kind of squalid decadence Jeffers was above condemning, seeing all the great cities as cancers on the landscape that would consume themselves soon enough. Yet Bukowski admired Jeffers and emulated his unshakeable integrity, his hardness toward the world's cruelties, his indifference to literary opinion, and the life-and-death seriousness of his writings. Bukowski's compassion for his fellow losers in L.A.'s human landscape and his relentlessly prolific transformation of his own experience into something more than the sum of its miserable parts make him in some way a greater soul than Jeffers, because despite people's many failings, individually and collectively, he refuses to reject the species to which he belongs.

---

## Harder than Granite

It is a pity the shock-waves  
Of the present population-explosion must push  
in here too.  
They will certainly within a century  
Eat up the old woods I planted and throw down  
my stonework: Only the little tower,  
Four-foot-thick-walled and useless may stand  
for a time.  
That and some verses. It is curious that  
flower-soft verse  
Is sometimes harder than granite, tougher than  
a steel cable, more alive than life.

—Robinson Jeffers

---

Contrary to his tough-guy persona, at heart Bukowski is a big softie, and it makes him a better writer than he would be otherwise.

Henry Miller, a California transplant from Brooklyn by way of Paris, who lived in Big Sur for many years before ending up in Pacific Palisades, found Jeffers not only “wonderful to look at” with a face like one of his beloved hawks, “a trembling rock” of a wounded soul whose presence commanded respect and sensitivity, but a writer who—with Faulkner, Twain, and Whitman—in Miller's words, gives “the real American feeling.” Miller too, in his groundbreaking *Tropic of Cancer* (1934, though not published in the States until 1962), both illustrates precisely the cultural decline that Jeffers held himself above, and salvages the human capacity to absorb and transform such sordid conditions into something worth celebrating—if only the human comedy itself and the potential for individual transcendence.

As a descendant of all these writers, a California

native and a poet of the Central Coast, I have long since abandoned Jeffers as a model of either personal or poetic conduct. His inhumanism (which is really more like antihumanism) wielded as an ideological bludgeon diminishes much of his writing, just as Rich's genderism and Pablo Neruda's communism often compromise their imaginations with canned political formulas, rhetorical evidence of righteousness but tedious and redundant as art. Yet Jeffers, as Pound called Whitman (and like the insufferable Pound himself), is "a pigheaded father" who despite his faults has much to teach. I've learned from him to ignore current trends and hold to my own vision of what must be written; to trust my own voice (as Duncan advised) and to take seriously the truth of my own experience; to attend to the reality of the physical world and attempt to embody it in my writing; to have no patience with vanity and ego (including mine) and to beware of poetic presumptuousness and frivolousness alike. The words "beauty" and "beautiful" appear repeatedly in Jeffers's verse, and in their recurrence reveal that Beauty—mostly in the form of his coastal landscape and the constantly changing ocean and their creatures—is what he values above everything and what serves as evidence and embodiment of a trans-human divinity. Even for a non- or anti-religious poet, the mystery of creation is an inexhaustible subject, and Jeffers at his best opens a big window on a realm of limitless wonder.

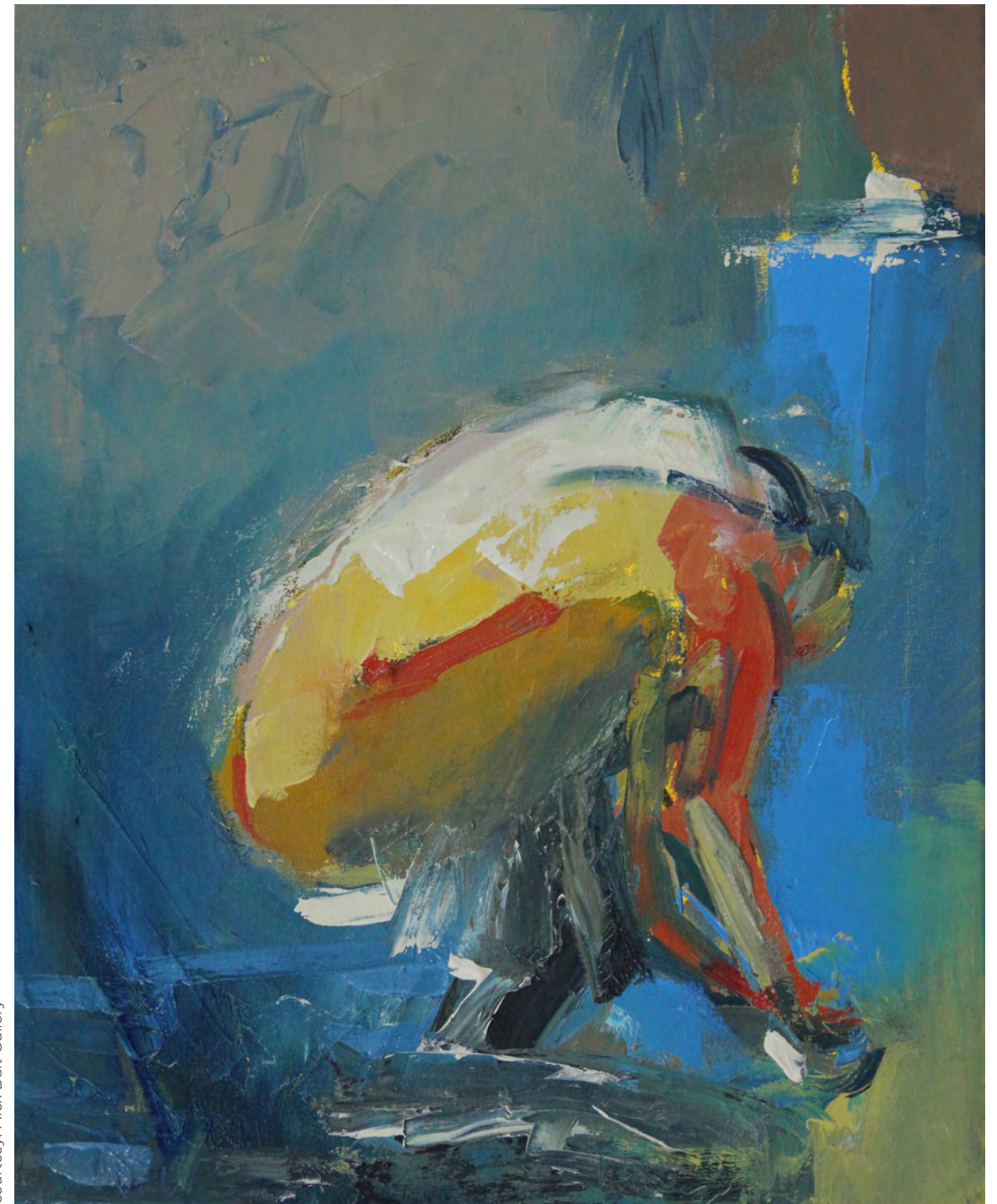
### Further Reading

- Melba Berry Bennett, *The Stone Mason of Tor House: The Life and Works of Robinson Jeffers*
- Charles Bukowski, *Selected Letters Volume 4: 1987–1994*
- T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*
- William Everson, *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region*
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind*
- Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*
- Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore
- Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age*
- Robinson Jeffers, *The Beginning and the End*
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Not Man Apart*
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Rock and Hawk*, edited by Robert Hass
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Selected Poems*
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Women at Point Sur and Other Poems*
- James Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*
- Stanley Kunitz, *A Kind of Order, A Kind of Folly: Essays and Interviews*
- Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*
- Henry Miller and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*
- Czeslaw Milosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*
- Kenneth Rexroth, *Assays*
- Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*
- Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life*
- Oscar Williams (editor), *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*
- Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason*
- William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*

**Stephen Kessler** is a poet, prose writer, award-winning translator, and the editor of *The Redwood Coast Review*. His recent books include *The Tolstoy of the Zulus* (essays), *The Sonnets* by Jorge Luis Borges (as editor and principal translator), *The Mental Traveler* (novel), and *Burning Daylight* (poems).

## URSULA O'FARRELL

*Paradise Revisted*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.



courtesy: Alex Bult Gallery