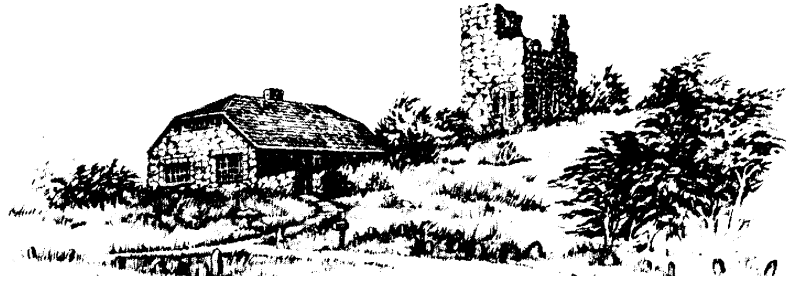


# Tor House Newsletter

Summer 2019



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## POETRY

Poetry is more primitive than prose. It existed before prose and will exist afterward, it is not domesticated, it is wilder and more natural. It belongs out-doors, it has tides as nature has; while prose is a cultured interior thing, prose is of the house, where lamplight abolishes even the tides of day and night, and human caprice rules. The brain can make prose; the whole man, brain and nerves, muscles and entrails, organs of sense and of generation, makes poetry and responds to poetry.

Robinson Jeffers **PREFACE** [*Continent's End* ?]  
[fragment, June 1922] [Hunt, IV, 375]

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The 2019 Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry, an honorarium of \$1,500, is awarded to:

**Sarah Matthes**

Austin, Texas

for her poems

“Wet Body Hot Stone” and “The Seventeen Year Cicadas”

Honorable Mentions, each with an honorarium of \$200, are awarded to:

**Partridge Boswell**

Woodstock, Vermont

for his poem “Thinking of Klimt’s *Stoclet Frieze* during a Two-Hour Delay”

**Marc Harshman**

Wheeling, West Virginia

for his poem “On the Edge of Time”

**James Davis May**

Blairsville, Georgia

for his poem “On the Last Night of the Summer I Wanted to Die”

**Khaty Xiong**

Columbus, Ohio

for her poem “Therefore”

Finalist judge for the 2019 Prize was poet Brenda Hillman.

The annual Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry is established as a living memorial in honor of American poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962). The Prize is underwritten by Tor House Foundation Board member John Varady with additional support from Honorary Board Member Allen Mears and Board Member Lacy Buck. This year we received some 1,060 poems from 43 states, the District of Columbia and one foreign country.

**SAVE THE DATES – Friday, October 4 thru Sunday, October 6, 2019**  
*Robinson Jeffers Fall Festival 2019*  
**Celebrating the Centennial of Tor House**

Sunset Celebration on Friday, October 4, in the Gardens of Tor House  
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Festival Presentations on Saturday, October 5  
 At the Carmel Woman’s Club  
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Annual Jeffers Poetry Walk with Elliot Ruchowitz-Roberts and Simon Hunt  
 At the Carmel River State Beach

*Sign-up forms will be available in the next Newsletter.*

*For additional information, or to get your order in early, consult the website at [www.torhouse.org](http://www.torhouse.org).*

**The Tor House Spring Garden Party on May 5, 2019**  
**A day of poetry, music and fellowship**



**Fellowship in the Garden**



**Music in the East Wing**

**Tea and Tastings in the West Wing**

\*\*\*\*\*

**MUSICAL TOURS AT TOR HOUSE**

This past spring Tor House began a program of once-monthly, two-hour musical tours led by Melinda Coffey Armstead. The tours of garden and tower concluded with an intimate concert in the cottage with live music performed by Robert Armstead. The program is expected to resume in the Fall. For further information, and reservations, consult the website at [www.torhouse.org](http://www.torhouse.org).

## 2019 PRIZE FOR POETRY AWARD WINNER

Poems by Sarah Mattes

### Wet Body Hot Stone

In everything, I see only myself—  
no need to paint irises on stones  
Dark fish gasp across rapids,  
and my lungs and stomach gather  
in a tight bouquet to spice the blood  
I cut my finger—the skin grows back  
strong, and smooth  
A new bright brick in my barricade  
Then comes the night  
and there are no stilted tree tops  
to make into my fingers, no nape of neck  
pressed into this ditch of clay  
Night eats the liver  
out of the river's stunned pools  
There must be more left than my mind  
Universe, please  
Send me the ghost  
of the one I love  
The old woman made a nightmare  
who sits on my chest—even she  
has her bad dreams  
My life has been the wet imprint  
of someone else's body  
as they rise from a wide, hot stone  
and take to the river to rinse again  
When I die free me from parallel  
Let me feed every tree

### The Seventeen Year Cicadas

We dared each other to eat them  
A dollar for a hollow husk  
Two for the living ones

Some bodies are warmer than others  
Some sweat is so sweet  
Wading ankle-deep  
The dead crisp foliage of wings  
I got to touch you  
Brushing one off your neck  
Pinky skimming the hot cotton of your summer shirt  
The flinch of your body, the tightening skin  
You lit up  
Either your chest beating forward or  
your shoulders cringing away  
That distinction making all the difference in my world  
And I was unsure, and I was ashamed  
And then I went around touching everyone for years  
Blaming cicadas  
Can you imagine it  
Standing young and shoeless in a purple dusk  
The field so empty, the trees so still  
Wondering *where did all their bodies go*  
They were just here, right here  
The sound still humming in your memory like a grooved  
tinnitus  
Can you discern it  
The difference between what you loved  
and what was there  
The trees so empty, the field so still  
Like the living room the morning after a party  
when you wander downstairs to find everyone  
has rolled away their sleeping bags  
and gone to the lake without you

**Sarah Matthes** is a poet from central New Jersey. She received her MFA from the Michener Center for Writers, where she won the Gutow prize and was a finalist for the Fania Kruger Fellowship for Poetry of Social Vision. She has received support for her work from the Yiddish Book Center and the Juniper Summer Writing Institute. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming at *The Iowa Review Online*, *The Feminist Utopia Project*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Inkwell Literary Magazine*, *Prodigal*, and *poets.org*. She serves as the managing editor for *Bat City Review* in Austin, TX.

## HONORABLE MENTION

### Thinking of Klimt's *Stoclet Frieze* during a Two-Hour Delay

*I think I'm on the planet Mars!*

--Belgian architect upon touring Palais Stoclet

by Partridge Boswell

The tree glows leafless but alive, its spiraling tendrils frozen as it twines from floor to ceiling of the Palais dining room. A degree warmer and this would all be

melted and we'd be on our way to school. A degree colder and the curling branches would not be crazed, the roads lightly dusted with snow, not slicked with ice.

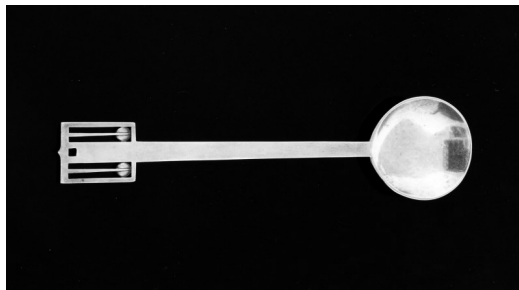
A degree or two and we'd be happy and warm inside and out, not shivering before the storm speculating if forecasts are real or fake, straddling the threshold

in liminal jaundiced light, Expectation's gaze fixed on Fulfillment's embrace. Life/death heaven/earth intertwine suspended in space. A fist-sized hole

in the wall would be a hole, an absence of plaster and paint, not the grief you walk around all day and at night fall into. You'd be sitting at the table

wielding a Wiener Werkstätte spoon over a bowl of warm fiddlehead soup, eating your meal in peace while trees are growing over you instead of cities.

**Partridge Boswell** is the author of *Some Far Country*, winner of the Grolier Poetry Prize. His poems have recently received the Edna St. Vincent Millay, Red Wheelbarrow and Lascaux Poetry Prizes, and have surfaced in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Salmagundi*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Plume*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Rattle*, *Smartish Pace*, *The Literary Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Moth* and *Forklift*, *Ohio*. Co-founder of Bookstock Literary Festival and the poetry/music group Los Lorcás, Boswell teaches at the Burlington Writers Workshop and lives with his family in Vermont.



## ON THE EDGE OF TIME

after Pierre Reverdy

by Marc Harshman

The trees stranded beyond the white river  
have penetrated the clouds  
with their spindly arms:  
frail scaffolding for a sky  
intent on widening.

Here, below my feet, the busy gossip  
of crocus pretending  
they know the hour.

I find only words circling a dial,  
a rooster crowing under a bridge,  
a ruined wall flowering toadflax.

I study a field

where an animal without feathers  
sings to its shadows.

I determine this to mean someone  
will lay before me a tolerable path  
with middling weather  
and a few wild beasts.

You hold me to your breasts  
and I relearn the sound  
of breath.

I look in your eyes for the space  
where song, like a strong forest,  
fills with leaves.

**Marc Harshman's** collection of poems, *Woman in Red Anorak*, won the 2017 Blue Lynx Prize and was just published by Lynx House/University of Washington Press. His fourteenth children's book, *Fallingwater*, co-written with Anna Smucker, was published by Roaring Brook/Macmillan in 2017. His poetry collection, *Believe What you Can*, published in 2016 by West Virginia University Press, won the Weatherford Award from the Appalachian Studies Association. His poetry has appeared in *The Chariton Review*, *Salamander*, *Gargoyle*, *Shenandoah*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review* as well as in anthologies by Kent State University, the University of Iowa, University of Georgia, and the University of Arizona. He has just been named co-winner of the 2019 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award. Appointed in 2012, he is the seventh poet laureate of West Virginia.

## ON THE LAST NIGHT OF THE SUMMER I WANTED TO DIE

by James Davis May

I spread the blanket over the driveway  
that still remembered the afternoon's sun,  
and scanned the darkness that was too much  
for the light from our mountain town to matter.  
It would be too easy to say it was the falling stars.  
Too easy to say it was the thrill of seeing some  
seem to come so close they made me flinch,  
too easy to say that they brought the realization  
that I did not want them, or anything else, to kill me,  
though a month earlier I'd sat through a storm alone  
hoping the wind would rip off the roof  
and take me with it.

No, it was what happened  
after I went back inside and came out again—  
my daughter's head, still half in dreams I woke her from,  
resting against my chest, my wife on the other side,  
how we all pointed to each brief and ridiculous splendor  
of this unasked for show, how I loved their laughter,  
how I wanted to stay alive to remember it longer.

**James Davis May** lives in GA and is Writer-in-Residence at Mercer University. His first poetry collection, *Unquiet Things*, was published by Louisiana State University Press in 2016 and was a finalist for the Poets' Prize.

## HONORABLE MENTION

### THEREFORE

by Khaty Xiong

In a dream I lay beside my dead brother.  
We are grinning, absolving our hearts in wide orbit.  
But in dreams there is no such thing as forgiveness.  
We extend this news to our father who is currently living  
in the highest tower. When the news reaches him  
he brings down every corner of the house.  
We come to be loyal exactly like this.

Swelling above the eyelids  
we let our gods see us. We are the meat of their foundation,  
the wells of their drinks, so why can't I still my mouth?  
Opening and forgiving, terms too young  
to be songs but I feel them plotting. How revolting.  
We let them see us small though we mean ill.  
Even the trees, dirt, and waters pray for us.  
For a time our clothes bubbled with thick silver coins,  
our ears heavy with acetylene rocks. Mild curses  
giving us the impression we are well.  
My brother reminds me gently of a tale long forgotten,  
our father reenacting in a game of charades.

In the Scene of a Great House he stands on  
an imaginary rock, his arms stretched heavenward,  
his mighty palms bulbous, arthritic, and touching.  
He completes the roof by looking chin up.  
We guess and guess the name of the ancestor.

*Tus Nyuj. Tus Zaj. Tus Noog.*

When we run out of guesses father spins his grief  
into a ball. A metal hide, olive, sealed with a pin.  
We bring our mouths to this hive and promise it life.  
But we are always in a hurry. My brother shaking.  
My father catching fire to light us through.

**Khaty Xiong** is the author of *Poor Anima* (Apogee Press, 2015), which holds the distinction of being the first full-length collection of poetry to be published by a Hmong American woman in the United States. She's held the Nadya Aisenberg Fellowship at The MacDowell Colony and an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council. Her work has been published in *Poetry*, the *New York Times*, *How Do I Begin?: A Hmong American Literary Anthology*, and elsewhere.

*Please note: Reader input is always welcome. For publication consideration, please address Jeffers-related submissions of poetry, criticism, and commentary to the "Newsletter Editor." Because of space limitations in this issue, Contributor and Membership acknowledgements will appear in the Fall 2019 issue of the Newsletter (available in September 2019).*

*The Tor House Newsletter is available on our website as well as in hard copy. If you would prefer to receive the Newsletter only in electronic form, please e-mail your preference to the Newsletter Editor at [fdv528@comcast.net](mailto:fdv528@comcast.net). We will then notify you as soon as any future issue is available on the web.*

#### **News and Notes:**

The Foundation notes with great sadness the passing of **Denis van Dam** on March 11, 2019. A teacher of literature, he shared his admiration for Jeffers as a longtime Docent at Tor House. He will also be remembered for his participation in the 2015 Fall Festival. A gentle person, Denis was beloved by all who knew him.

**Jennifer Hendrickson**, Tor House Docent and Archivist, is working on a History/Chronology of the Tor House Foundation. "It is slow-going," she reports. But she is making progress assembling relevant documents. She is interested, also, in compiling an oral history of the Foundation, and she welcomes both those who might want to assist her, and, to be sure, any who might be willing to contribute their own memories of the early days of the Foundation. Your queries can be emailed to [fdv528@comcast.net](mailto:fdv528@comcast.net), and your editor will forward your correspondence to Jennie. Thank you, in advance, for enriching the Foundation's communal memory.

#### **The Last Word from Jeffers**

*[The world population in 2019 is estimated to be 7.7 billion. In the early 1950s when Jeffers wrote "Passenger Pigeons," a fragment of which is reproduced below, the world population was 3 billion.]*

from **PASSENGER PIGEONS**

Slowly the passenger pigeons increased, then suddenly their numbers  
Became enormous, they would flatten ten miles of forest  
When they flew down to roost, and the cloud of their rising  
Eclipsed the dawns. They became too many, they are all dead,  
Not one remains.

And the American bison: their hordes  
Would hide a prairie from horizon to horizon, great heads and storm-cloud shoulders, a torrent of life—  
How many are left? For a time, for a few years, their bones  
Turned the dark prairies white.

You, Death, you watch for these things,  
These explosions of life: they are your food,  
They make your feasts.

But turn your great rolling eyes away from humanity,  
Those grossly craving black eyes. It is true we increase.  
A man from Britain landing in Gaul when Rome had fallen,  
He journeyed fourteen days inland through that beautiful  
Rich land, the orchards and rivers and the looted villas: he reports that he saw  
No living man. But now we fill up the gaps,  
In spite of wars, famines and pestilences we are quite suddenly  
Three billion people: our bones, ours too, would make  
Wide prairies white, a beautiful snow of unburied bones:

The poem in its entirety can be found in Hunt, Vol. 3, pp 435-437.

It was first published, posthumously, in *The Beginning and the End*, 1963, pp.13-16.



**Robinson Jeffers**  
**Tor House Foundation**  
 P.O. Box 2713 • CARMEL, CA 93921

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**Summer 2019**

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 Or join on-line at [www.torhouse.org/giving](http://www.torhouse.org/giving)

Your contribution assists in the preservation of the unique home of the poet, Robinson Jeffers, and in community outreach programs.

**Membership benefits include:**

- ◆ Free tours of Tor House
- ◆ 10% discount on merchandise
- ◆ Advance invitations to coming events
- ◆ Quarterly newsletter

**ROBINSON JEFFERS**  
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