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, June1922] [Hunt, IV, 375]

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
*****
Festival Presentations on Saturday, October 5
At the Carmel Woman’s Club
*****
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.

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

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.
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 stilting 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 Mattes 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.

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

Membership benefits include:
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