

"The Purse-Seine" and Related Poems

Robinson Jeffers wrote "The Purse-Seine" the later part of September 1935 and first published it in *Such Counsels You Gave to Me* (1937), then included it in *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (1938). The manuscripts show that it was originally section II of a four-poem sequence with "Blind Horses" and "The Wind-Struck Music" as, respectively, sections III and IV. "The Coast-Road" and "Memoir" were written in this same period and one of them might have been section I. The panel discussion will focus on "The Purse-Seine." The additional material is included as background and as an indication of the original context for the poem. The texts of the poems are drawn from Volume Two of *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. The material appended to the poems is drawn from Volume Five of *The Collected Poetry*.

THE PURSE-SEINE

Our sardine fishermen work at night in the dark of the moon; daylight or moonlight
They could not tell where to spread the net, unable to see the phosphorescence of the shoals of fish.
They work northward from Monterey, coasting Santa Cruz; off New Year's Point or off Pigeon Point
The look-out man will see some lakes of milk-color light on the sea's night-purple; he points, and the helmsman
Turns the dark prow, the motor-boat circles the gleaming shoal and drifts out her seine-net. They close the circle
And purse the bottom of the net, then with great labor haul it in.

I cannot tell you

How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible, then, when the crowded fish
Know they are caught, and wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny the phosphorescent
Water to a pool of flame, each beautiful slender body sheeted with flame, like a live rocket
A comet's tail wake of clear yellow flame; while outside the narrowing
Floats and cordage of the net great sea-lions come up to watch, sighing in the dark; the vast walls of night
Stand erect to the stars.

Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top

On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light: how could I help but recall the seine-net
Gathering the luminous fish? I cannot tell you how beautiful the city appeared, and a little terrible.
I thought, We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great cities; now
There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated
From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent. The circle is closed, and the net
Is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they shine already. The inevitable mass-disasters
Will not come in our time nor in our children's, but we and our children
Must watch the net draw narrower, government take all powers,—or revolution, and the new government
Take more than all, add to kept bodies kept souls,—or anarchy, the mass-disasters.

These things are Progress;

Do you marvel our verse is troubled or frowning, while it keeps its reason? Or it lets go, lets the mood flow
In the manner of the recent young men into mere hysteria, splintered gleams, crackled laughter. But they are quite wrong.
There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that cultures decay, and life's end is death.

BLIND HORSES

The proletariat for your Messiah, the poor and many are to seize power and make the world new.
They cannot even conduct a strike without cunning leaders: if they make a revolution their leaders
Must take the power. The first duty of men in power: to defend their power. What men defend
To-day they will love to-morrow; it becomes theirs, their property. Lenin has served the revolution,
Stalin presently begins to betray it. Why? For the sake of power, the Party's power, the state's
Power, armed power, Stalin's power, Caesarean power.

This is not quite a new world.

The old shepherd has been known before; great and progressive empires have flourished before; powerful bureaucracies
Apportioned food and labor and amusement; men have been massed and moulded, spies have gone here and there,
The old shepherd Caesar his vicious collies, watching the flock. Inevitable? Perhaps, but not new.
The ages like blind horses turning a mill tread their own hoof-marks. Whose corn's ground in that mill?

The original draft and was first titled "III," then "Saviors." The second draft was first titled "Marxian
Parenthesis," then "Karl Marx and his World," and finally "Messiah." He also at some point labeled the poem
"The Proletariat Is Your Messiah." Jeffers added the final line and changed the title to "Blind Horses" when he
proofed it for *Such Counsels*. The manuscript of the unpublished "Why Live In One?" includes a note that this
poem should be placed "After 'The proletariat is your Messiah.'" The "Why Live In One?" manuscript, which
may be only the poem's final section, since the first line on the sheet is slightly indented, thematically
complements "Blind Horses":

As certain also of your own poets have said

From Paris, London, New York, from Jules Laforgue Baudelaire down to the last imitator of an imitator

Of the human[?] Waste Land: in all these songs there is one voice, crying, that it is not possible

To live ~~nobly~~ with integrity nor even sanely in a great modern city. Then ask them, "Why live in one?"

I suppose they answer, "We must belong to our time, share its distortions, sympathize with its

Amazing fatalities, how else can we be its poets?"...It is possible they imagine that time runs only

In the great cities; or that mere mass of lives and common fantastic multitude make a time's mind.

It is possible they think that Jesus found his light in Jerusalem; Theocrites[?] his poems in the cosmopolitan

Work-shops and lecture-halls of Alexandria. Or else they mistake decay for what is called Progress? "We must be

True slaves of Progress. I will love Him although He slay me. Though He dry my heart like a dead nut-kernel..." Oh [] ones!

THE WIND-STRUCK MUSIC

Ed Stiles and old Tom Birnam went up to their cattle on the bare hills
Above Mal Paso; they'd ridden under the stars' white death, when they reached the ridge the huge tiger-lily
Of a certain cloud-lapped astonishing autumn sunrise opened all its petals. Ed Stiles pulled in his horse,
That flashy palamino he rode—cream-color, heavy white mane, white tail, his pride—and said
"Look, Tom. My God. Ain't that a beautiful sunrise?" Birnam drew down his mouth, set the hard old chin,
And whined: "Now, Ed: listen here: I haven't an ounce of poetry in all my body. It's cows we're after."
Ed laughed and followed; they began to sort the heifers out of the herd. One red little deer-legged creature
Rolled her wild eyes and ran away down the hill, the old man hard after her. She ran through a deep-cut gully,
And Birnam's piebald would have made a clean jump but the clay lip
Crumbled under his take-off, he slipped and
Spilled in the pit, flailed with four hooves and came out scrambling. Stiles saw them vanish,
Then the pawing horse and the flapping stirrups. He rode and looked down and saw the old man in the gully-bottom
Flat on his back, most grimly gazing up at the sky. He saw the earth banks, the sparse white grass,
The strong dark sea a thousand feet down below, red with reflections of clouds. He said "My God
Tom are you hurt?" Who answered slowly, "No, Ed.
I'm only lying here thinking o' my four sons"—biting the words
Carefully between his lips—"big handsome men, at present lolling in bed in their...silk...pyjamas...
And why the devil I keep on working?" He stood up slowly and wiped the dirt from his cheek, groaned, spat,
And climbed up the clay bank. Stiles laughed: "Tom, I can't tell you: I guess you like to. By God I guess
You like the sunrises." The old man growled in his throat and said
"Catch me my horse."

This old man died last winter, having lived eighty-one years under open sky,
Concerned with cattle, horses and hunting, no thought nor emotion that all his ancestors since the ice-age
Could not have comprehended. I call that a good life; narrow, but vastly better than most
Men's lives, and beyond comparison more beautiful; the wind-struck music man's bones were moulded to be the harp for.

The original draft, first titled "IV," then "Tom Birnam," includes workings for an abandoned approach to the final
verse paragraph that would have opened, "Tom Birnam died last year at eighty and the mountains miss him ~~if they~~
~~miss anyone~~." This is followed by a series of alternates that explore and seem to try to integrate two impulses, one
characterized by

Fiercely in earnest—he could have carried the powers and souls of several true poets in his little finger.
and the other by

Whether or not he cared for sunrises, he had seen many. I have known true poets

The actual ending (written using a different pencil on a different sheet) was apparently added later.

THE COAST-ROAD

A horseman high alone as an eagle on the spur of the mountain over Mirmas Canyon draws rein, looks down
At the bridge-builders, men, trucks, the power-shovels, the teeming end of the new coast-road at the mountain's base.
He sees the loops of the road go northward, headland beyond headland, into gray mist over Fraser's Point,
He shakes his fist and makes the gesture of wringing a chicken's neck, scowls and rides higher.

I too

Believe that the life of men who ride horses, herders of cattle on the mountain pasture, plowers of remote
Rock-narrowed farms in poverty and freedom, is a good life. At the far end of those loops of road
Is what will come and destroy it, a rich and vulgar and bewildered civilization dying at the core,
A world that is feverishly preparing new wars, peculiarly vicious ones, and heavier tyrannies, a strangely
Missionary world, road-builder, wind-rider, educator, printer and picture-maker and broad-caster,
So eager, like an old drunken whore, pathetically eager to impose the seduction of her fled charms
On all that through ignorance or isolation might have escaped them. I hope the weathered horseman up yonder
Will die before he knows what this eager world will do to his children. More tough-minded men
Can repulse an old whore, or cynically accept her drunken kindnesses for what they are worth,
But the innocent and credulous are soon corrupted.

Where is our consolation? Beautiful beyond belief

The heights glimmer in the sliding cloud, the great bronze gorge-cut sides of the mountain tower up invincibly,
Not the least hurt by this ribbon of road carved on their sea-foot.

In shaping the final version, Jeffers dropped the final lines of the original draft, which may have been a separate
verse paragraph:

And this is the long future; long after
Stones and rock-slides have killed the road the beautiful sea-wall mountains will stand and will not have noticed it.
The streams will run and the creek's voices go up the canyons, and men will return and herd cattle here.

MEMOIR

I saw the laboratory animals: throat-bandaged dogs cowering in cages, still obsessed with the pitiful
Love that dogs feel, longing to lick the hand of their devil; and the sick monkeys, dying rats, all sacrificed
To human inquisitiveness, pedantry and vanity, or at best the hope
Of helping hopeless invalids live long and hopelessly.

I left that great light room where pain was the air
And found my friends dehorning cattle in the field above Rio Piedras Canyon. (The buyers require it now,
So many horned beasts have injured each other in the gorged trucks
And crowded cattle-cars up to Calvary.) I watched the two Vasquez boys, great riders, drive the scared steers
Into the frame that clamps them and holds them helpless. Bill Flodden with a long-handled tool like pruning-shears
Crushed off the horns and the blood spouted; Ed Stiles, our knower of bawdy stories, the good-natured man,
Stands by to cake the blood-fountains with burning alum. These fellows are fit for life, sane men, well-buttoned
In their own skins; rarely feel pain outside their own skins: whilst I like a dowser go here and there
With skinless pity for the dipping hazel-fork.

Blank rises the limestone
Mountain Pico Blanco, blue runs the sea. No life here but some gray bushes, lupine and sage,
No creditor of pity, sage and satisfied plants, for it rained this morning. Here in the sanctuary
I need not think beyond the west water, that a million persons
Are presently dying of hunger in the provinces of China. I need not think of the Russian labor-camps, the German
Prison-camps, nor any of those other centers
That make the earth shine like a star with cruelty for light. I need not think of the tyrannies, that make the tyrants
Ignoble and their victims contemptible. I need not think of the probable wars, tyranny and pain
Made world-wide; I need not...know that this is our world, where only fool or drunkard makes happy songs.

The poem developed from two notes on the back of a page of the ams. The first reads:

I watched them dehorning cattle up at Wilson's place.
The buyers require it now, too may horned animals having injured each other in the trucks and cattle-cars.

The second, immediately below, seems to be prose with various phrases interpolated into it:

Gelding, branding, dehorning—laboratory animals, bandaged dogs moaning in cages, sacrificed to make many
invalids live long and hopelessly—tyranny in Russia in Germany—the prisons and prison-camps, incredible
brutality, systems of torture—war, the horrors of field-hospitals, the horrors of poison-gas—
This is our world, where only a fool can make happy songs.