JEFFERS ON POETRY

Science usually takes things to pieces in order to discover them; it dissect and analyzes; poetry puts things together, producing equally valid discovery, and actual creation. Something new is found out, something that the author himself did not know before he wrote it; and something new is made.

Robinson Jeffers. From “Themes in My Poems” [1941] [Hunt, IV, 416]

We are pleased to announce that the 2023 Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry, an honorarium of $1,000, is awarded to:

Daniel Williams
Wawona, California
for his poem
“Songs of the Sangre de Cristos”

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

Dan Grote
Waymart, Pennsylvania
for his poem “Castaway”

Michele Herman
New York, New York
for her poem “Frying Marbles with My Father”

Ari Mokdad
Traverse City, Michigan
for her poem “Kharma”

Valerie Nieman
Reidsville, North Carolina
for her poem “So What?”

FINAL JUDGE FOR THE 2023 PRIZE WAS JUAN FELIPE HERRERA.
The annual Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry was established twenty-seven years ago 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 1,032 poems from 42 states, the District of Columbia and seven foreign countries.
Footdrum and windflute know more about flowers
than highway knows about contours of
A land when land was soft belly and living tissue
of races of people who breathed the
Earth with their lungs who saw with lightning
who heard with thunder whose lives
Were earthlike earthbound whose abundance
sprung from the land beneath their feet
Even as they walked in a day’s time and a day’s
time was enough of a walk to see foxes
Of winter snakes of summer fawns of spring
bears of autumn and everyone spoke in
One tongue the tongue of the earth and it was
enough to speak once then dream mostly
Like coals on hillsides after fires a fine powdery
warmth crackling and popping gone
For a while everything happening underneath
that should happen without thought
Or words but hidden and out of sight like these
corn maidens who dance first in silence
Then a soft strumming of strings and finally to the
raucous blossoming of their own spirits as
Though some being incensed of sage stepped down
from a skeletal stallion to water their hearts

All our tendrils were connected then a people
Their animal gods their place all in one and everything
related to chaparral and the stars the earth
Cleansing itself of every waste with renewal soothing its
people so their circle dance would spin smoothly
On its diurnal course describing flowers of sunlight
marigolds as round blossoms of star fire
When a child died it toddled back to its great parent
an adult’s death meant there was a folding back
Into the great womb like the folds of a wild lily
an incense of sage scorching coals of chamisa
The dead were given gifts even as they had gifted this
world with the vitality of their lives
Then the long sweet song of their absence settled over
everything with pale petals of ash
**Canto II**

*Purple Iris*

for Georgia O’Keeffe

These stony cliff faces of her paintings sit flat and huge roseate gray and yellow under an Acetylene sun scoring its sacred path across blue invisible half-spheres tracking Across the far horizon beyond crystalline shoulders of *La Joya Del Pedregal* her holy place Smoking chipotles roast on coals at day's end in blue canyons of crows crying Thin fillets of elk on green willow sticks drip fat on coals near walls eloquent With shadow stories tracking against darkness all of it the conduit for her praise of *Del Pedregal* her mountain she believed if she could only paint it enough times Merciful gods would allow her to possess it belonging to her alone in spirit even as She owns this trail earth all around littered with her vibrant details everywhere the notes and Staff for the life-songs that were her art talus of bases of cliffs *Horus*-like abutments Table mesas chopped and broken *arroyos* tiny nameless blooms countless brilliancies As common as the purple iris never explored until she painted her way inward with vivid colors Delicate brush strokes whispering clitoral dreams

No possibility overlooked not gray-furred coyote scat not ancestral stone gods or back further yet Deeper into canyons where she painted with no power no light but that which she generated alone Under dark stars as a tiny meteor scratches its way through obsidian night all but lost Except for its perihelion glory as surprising as a turn around on her trail to find in amazement Two ravens floating the lively black one above in a painfully blue sky the shadow one below as a Dark crucifix flowing like water over these hot ochre faces time has affixed upon Georgia’s ravines

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**Canto III**

*Wild Grape*

for D.H. Lawrence

Here sounds an empty cantilena whose wind-voice leaves no sounds of its singing but for Golden leaves of cottonwoods over water that click and flash with fresh earthen songs Often have I arisen from such desultory musings in a wood heated room behind adobe walls Clackity-clack of an old manual Underwood come to rest have peered out Twelve-light windows at a meadow full of summer as if these log and chinking walls had pushed Their way full of earth like toadstools fist up into sunlight after rain and then have I said *Hora* to my angelic Ponderosa with its wildly arcing branches and boughs a maenad’s Fingertips and arms have said *buenos dias* to my Frieda bowing in oak shadow near the horses to gather Acorns and mast and often have I stood on this porch framed with rusted leaves of wild grape Gazing with awe past green meadow flames to the crest of Mt. Wheeler’s great stone god he who never Moves or speaks but is content to stand and watch Pedro up from San Cristobal to chop wood While Manuelita his wife slaps masa between avid bronze palms then toasts it On a flat stone florid with the fire of *chamisa* coals

Four geese from the yard call out at that time is a river carving its way into the *Parajito* And so good-byes forgotten and without words I return to my floorless room behind Echoing walls where a tendril moves ever deeper to penetrate a webbed dark humus of love Then sings a cantilena of cellos and pure soprano voice a melodic glow from somewhere just within Hearing in counterpoint to a mauve *Villa-Lobos* dusk

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**Daniel Williams**, a poet of the Yosemite region of Northern California, has published his work in many journals and anthologies. He has a master’s degree in English Literature from San Jose State University where he studied poetry under the teaching of Nils Petersen and has taught composition and literature as an adjunct instructor at Metro State in Denver and at Columbia Community College and San Joaquin Delta College in California. As a member of Poets & Writers and PoetsWest in Seattle, The California Federation of Chaparral Poets as well as The Ina Coolbrith Circle in the Bay Area, he has published his poems and read them on radio and in Zoom Meetings for many years. His work has taken prizes in ICC annual poetry contests. He is the author of three chapbooks: *Prince Hamlet National Park* from Cyberwit.net in India; *Lost Language of Mars* and *Angelis Salmonis and a Haunted Coastline* from Moonstone Press in Philadelphia. Mr. Williams has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in Poetry by College of the Redwoods in Arcata, California.
HONORABLE MENTIONS

Castaway

Turns out this whole “free will” thing isn’t all it’s cracked up to be - trapped on an island born of my bad decisions and

Poor choices, left alone to fire off poems from behind this penitentiary wall, stanzas flying like sparrows out over

The razor wire, an encyclopedia of failures, messages left unanswered at the bottom of a bottle that’s been cast out

Into an ocean in which I am no longer welcome, and I’m not looking for anything like a rescue, I’ve simply given up

On that, but I still feel like screaming out into The Nothing, making noise is just a desperate attempt at proof of life, the

Sincerest pleas of a nobody locked inside of himself who just wants somebody, anybody, to know that he’s still here.

Dan Grote is an incarcerated writer whose work has appeared in a wide variety of print and online publications. He is the author of several hold-up notes, a couple of signed confessions, one book of poetry, We Are All Doing Time (Iniquity Press/Vendetta Books, 2023), and one chapbook of poetry, The Sum Total of My Mistakes (Between Shadows Press, 2022).

So What?

I use my grandmother’s quilts to warm my bed. When we make love I hear her fine stitches popping, one two three along fault-lines of fragments cut from old clothes— “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” I’m done with doing without.

Every time I cut meat, the knife mars the old plates. Fragile glassware dulls each time it’s washed. So be it. I’m saving nothing. Goodbye to dishes and coats and quilts reserved “for good”— the sexy dress Mother kept in the closet til it no longer fit.

This body is aging—so what? I don’t need reminders of the ticking heart, the popping hips. If famine’s predicted tomorrow, there’s still a lot in the larder and I’m having it. Strike a match. We’re cooking it all.

Each morning I stretch and crack joints, make room for whatever light arrives— the kiss, the embrace, the invitation to slip into love like a well-made suit that lasts and lasts, becomes unfashionable and then en vogue again. Wear it out? I grab it by the soft lapels and press my face into its bounty.

Valerie Nieman has published three poetry collections, most recently, Leopard Lady: A Life in Verse. Her poems have been chosen for anthologies including You Are the River, Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology, and Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods. Her Southern gothic suspense novel In the Lonely Backwater received the 2022 Sir Walter Raleigh Award for the best fiction by a North Carolina writer. To the Bones, a genre-bending folk horror/thriller about coal country, was a finalist for the 2020 Manly Wade Wellman Award. She is the author of three other novels and a short fiction collection. She has held state and NEA creative writing fellowships. Nieman has degrees from West Virginia University and Queens University of Charlotte and was a reporter and farmer in West Virginia before moving to North Carolina, where she was an editor and a creative writing professor at NC A&T State University.
Frying Marbles with My Father

Five-thirty every weekday
he came back to us, smells
of town and antiseptic
fresh upon his coat.
He came with Polish jokes.
He came with crocheted
scarves and horseradish
root, which was how
his poorest patients paid.
He came with jars
of sour dills. He came
with bubble wrap,
a pogo stick, a Hermes
portable, our wingèd
messenger
in elevator shoes.

I learned to read
his footsteps in the hall.
One day each year
there came no slam
of leather bag
on foyer floor,
which meant a tetanus
shot, a booster dose,
a DPT. I feared
my father’s sting.

He daubed the alcohol,
he slid the needle
deep, he slowly pressed
the plunger down,
then slipped the needle out
and smoothed
the Band-Aid on.
His hands were like
the ones that hold
this pen – blunt, precise,
with well-clipped nails.

A tender father, too,
who climbed the stairs
at night and stood above
my bed and ran a hand
across my cheek and
never spoke a word.
Did he know I was awake?
Of course; there was
nothing that he didn’t know:
Latin roots, the recipe for mayonnaise,
how to represent
himself in court without
a law degree, how to whistle
through his teeth.

He taught me how to fry
a marble and now I need
to bring him back because
I’ve forgotten whether to fry
it wet or dry, whether to bring
a friend along on Sunday afternoon
or keep him to myself.

Let me bring him up
the cellar stairs where he spent
his evenings welding steel,
into the female world.
Let me bring him up
still young, with that eagle eye
that stared
at every object until
he figured out how it
was engineered, let me
bring him up in navy
work clothes, not a suit
that chafed around the swelling
lymph nodes in his neck,
and let him show me how
to fry the marbles
just enough
for them to crack
a thousand crazy ways
but never
fall apart.

Michele Herman is the author of the novel Save the Village (Regal House, 2022), which was a finalist for the 2023 Eric Hoffer Prize, and two chapbooks from Finishing Line Press: Just Another Jack: The Private Lives of Nursery Rhymes (2022) and Victory Boulevard (2018). Her poems and essays have appeared in recent issues of The Sun, Ploughshares, The Hudson Review, Carve and other journals. She spends much of the rest of her time helping other writers write better, as a longtime teacher at The Writers Studio and as a writing coach and developmental editor. She often performs her own prose and verse in the New York cabaret world, sometimes pairing up with her singing husband.
We barely made it; I couldn’t carry the olives’
heavy green-stretched skins in couplets of diaspora

Lebanon was invaded, the land was burned,
the smell of burnt olives turned into diaspora

I’m addressing the loss of an entire culture
never examined in couplets of diaspora

fighting against lost time, no language,
survivor’s guilt in this couplet of diaspora

We carried زيتون and نوتز، hope,
our family’s aid during couplets of diaspora

smuggled through borders, Lebanon to Syria, Jordan,
the way everything burns in couplets of diaspora

There are more Lebanese living outside
of Lebanon from couplets of diaspora

I wondered about the persimmons, the red-orange flesh,
juicy stains of sugar in couplets of diaspora

Would the persimmon trees still grow
if we could not pluck them in years of diaspora?

The Bekaa Valley full of kharma, the fruit of the gods,
I bet you never learned that during couplets of diaspora

When we eat the persimmons now, they are soft and jelly-like
shipped across the ocean of diaspora

we never taste the tannin-rich immature fruit with firm skins
and just like the olives, disappear into couplets of diaspora

Ari L Mokdad is a Detroit-born poet, choreographer, dancer, performance artist, and educator. She received three Bachelor of Arts degrees from Grand Valley State University in Dance, English, and Writing. Ari received an MA from Wayne State University in 2017 and an MFA from Warren Wilson College in 2023. She lives with her partner in Northern Michigan on the ancestral and unceded land of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomie people, The People of the Three Fires.
Jim Karman announces that the Addendum to The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers is now available under the “Research Resources” tab of the Robinson Jeffers Association website. The Addendum offers a comprehensive survey of the Collected Letters project. Part 1 lists the public and private repositories where letters are held. Part 2 provides an inventory of all letters archived in each location. A merged, chronological list of published and unpublished letters is contained in Part 3. Letters cited in footnotes, but not otherwise included in the edition, are identified in Part 4. Letters added after the edition was published are presented in Part 5, along with a list of corrections for all three volumes. The Website link is: https://robinsonjeffersassociation.org/bibliography/the-collected-letters-of-robinson-jeffers-with-selected-letters-of-una-jeffers-addendum/

The 2016 PBS documentary, Awakening in Taos: The Mabel Dodge Luhan Story, was recently rebroadcast on some stations and should be available for streaming on the PBS Passport app. Tim Hunt notes that Jeffers flickers by with the barest of mentions, but the program does provide an overview of Luhan's life. The program should be especially interesting as background for the final cantos of this year's Poetry Prize winning poem (See page 3 of this Newsletter.

Tom Rusert, on behalf of the Foundation, wants of express his "Thanks to all for a great TH team effort with the new Monterey Block Party- Art Connecting Community!" The Block Party took place on Saturday April 15. Rusert reports that docents "Elizabeth, Alyssa, Darren supported our combo booth with the Cherry Center. Alan, Deborah, Elliot, Fran, Coral and Melinda hustled to gather all the important new print pieces for this exciting event including the TH 2023 Spring Newsletter, The Garden Party flyer and the hot off the press Tor House brochure and banner. Over three thousand people attended according to the sponsor. Nearly 200 hundred people stopped by the booth over four hours... We mailed out a few dozen TH postcards to 22 states with Elliot's "Poem on a Postcard" contribution! Four old Cherry Center typewriters plucked out poems all day! On the main stage, we presented three The Stone Mason of Tor House to our wonderful high school student poets. Celebrated - National Poetry Month! - It was a sunny, fun day for the sponsor- Monterey Museum of Art and THF and the Cherry Center collaboration!

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THE LAST WORD FROM JEFFERS

SHIVA

There is a hawk that is picking the birds out of our sky.
She killed the pigeons of peace and security,
She has taken honesty and confidence from nations and men,
She is hunting the lonely heron of liberty.
She loads the arts with nonsense, she is very cunning,
Science with dreams and the state with powers to catch them at last.
Nothing will escape her at last, flying nor running.
This is the hawk that picks out the stars' eyes.
This is the only hunter that will ever catch the wild swan;
The prey she will take last is the wild white swan of the beauty of things.
Then she will be alone, pure destruction, achieved and supreme,
Empty darkness under the death-tent wings.
She will build a nest of the swan's bones and hatch a new brood,
Hang new heavens with new birds, all be renewed.

From Such Counsels You Gave to Me (1937) Hunt II, 605.
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Summer 2023

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