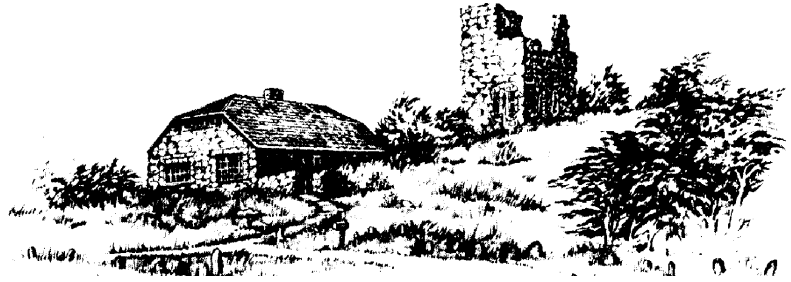


Tor House Newsletter



Summer 2023

JEFFERS ON POETRY

Science usually takes things to pieces in order to discover them; it dissects 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.

THE 2023 AWARD WINNING POEM

Songs of the Sangre de Cristos

Canto I

Dance of the Corn Maidens

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 at
 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

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 fisting up
 into sunlight after rain and then have I said
Hola 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 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

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 un-
answered 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 footfalls 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.

HONORABLE MENTION

Kharma

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 زيت and زيتون, 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.

NEWS AND NOTES

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 to 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!

* * * * *

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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