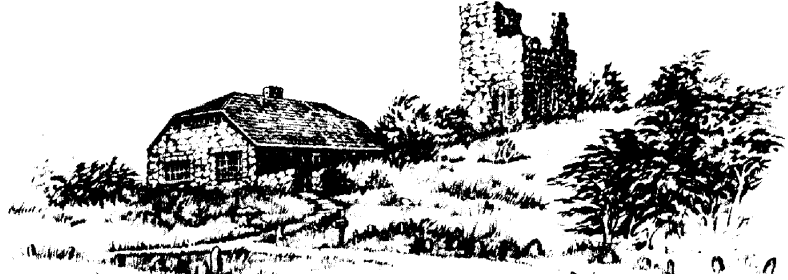


Tor House Newsletter

Summer 2020



POETRY

Poetry has been regarded as a refuge from life, where dreams may heal the wounds of reality; and as an ornament of life; and as a diversion, mere troubadour amusement; and poetry has been in fact refuge and ornament and diversion, but poetry in its higher condition is none of these; not a refuge but an intensification, not an ornament but essential, not a diversion but an incitement.

Robinson Jeffers **PREFACE** [*Tamar*]
[1921] [Hunt, IV, 379]

We are pleased to announce that the 2020 Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry, an honorarium of \$1,000, is awarded to:

Jerl Surratt
Hudson, New York
for his poem
“Twilight Time”

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

Joanne M. Clarkson
Port Townsend, Washington
for her poem “When Grief is Animal”

Lesléa Newman
Northampton, Massachusetts
for her poem “The First Time We Visit”

Ellen Romano
Hayward, California
for her poem “Walking”

Jess Skyleson
Rehoboth, Massachusetts
for their poem “Clearing”

Final judge for the 2020 Prize was poet Marie Howe.

The annual Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry was established twenty-four 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 some 1,200 poems from 49 states, the District of Columbia, Canada and Qatar.

**2020 ROBINSON JEFFERS TOR HOUSE PRIZE FOR POETRY
AWARD WINNING POEM**

Twilight Time

by Jerl Surratt

One bee stepping sideways around
 one ripened cone of an echinacea, burying
its head repeatedly in miniscule florets,
 is the main attraction in the garden tonight
and as such my reward for planting out that bed.

I count from this chair in the shade fifty-two
 purpurea heads in flower. To one bee.
And it's bee season. Two more of its kind
 about ten feet away are surveying
and landing, supping, lifting and landing again

on buds that have opened since yesterday
 in one of three African Blue basils.
Last year, my journal says, I counted eight
 to nine big bees in each of the three Blue basils
in that bed at about this hour (it's after six).

There's no plague of purple martins,
 no orchard or meadow nearby more enticing
that what I'm growing this year for the bees I enjoy
 feeding and watching as a way to wish them well
for the rest of their short lives. Everywhere

these days I'm forced to concede, despite not
 wanting to, that I may have the bees with me
at the threshold of my personal nonexistence,
 that already vast-enough catastrophe,
and with us there as well the earth entire.

Jerl Surratt's poems have been published in *Dash Literary*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *The New Republic*, *Podium*, several other journals and an anthology. A native of Electra, Texas, he now lives and works in Hudson, New York, after many years' work in New York City as a writer for and advisor to progressive nonprofit organizations. He is the author of *A Blind Bit of Notice* (2017); a second collection of poems is nearing completion.

2020 ROBINSON JEFFERS TOR HOUSE HONORABLE MENTION

When Grief is Animal

for D.

by Joanne M. Clarkson

She didn't get out of bed for a month
after she hit the deer. Her mind
replaying the curve over
and over. The distraction of rain.

When you live near mountains
there is always shadow. Where the narrow
seam took decades to reach
the sea. Coyote country. Cougar kingdom.

The leap was an instant. The impact
endless. She sat in the middle
of the misted road, doe's muzzle
in her lap. The stiff, soft fur. The occasional
spasm of half-life. Last year
her sister. A decade ago, her
mother. The one child
she imagined she could keep.

A deputy arrived and lifted her up.
Some other arms carried her home.
To heal means to dream
until the world is forgiven. ■

She didn't drive for a year and never
that road again. Some nights she senses
a flank against her skin, rising
and fading in familiar animal rhythms:
her sister, fresh from nightmare,
climbing into her bed.
The shadow of a daughter
breathing for an hour
under her penitent hands.

Joanne M. Clarkson's poetry collection, *The Fates* won the Bright Hill Press annual contest and was published in 2017. Her chapbook, *Believing the Body* (Gribble Press) came out in 2014. Her poems have been published in *Nimrod*, *American Journal of Nursing*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Alaska Quarterly Review* and other journals. Clarkson has Master's Degrees in English and Library Science, and has taught and worked as a professional librarian. After caring for her mother through a long illness, she re-careered as a Registered Nurse specializing in Home Health and Hospice Care. She lives with her husband in Port Townsend, WA. See more at www.JoanneClarkson.com.

2020 ROBINSON JEFFERS TOR HOUSE HONORABLE MENTION
THE FIRST TIME WE VISIT by Lesléa Newman

the neurologist, he gives us
exactly 7 minutes of his time.
“What’s 8 plus 15?”

he asks my father who gives me
a look I know all too well:
What is this guy, an imbecile?

“8 plus 15 is 23.” My father speaks
loudly as if the doctor hears
worse than he does. “C’mon, ask

me a real question.” My father puts
up his dukes and punches the air
eager for a good fight.

“8 times 15 is 120.
120 times 15 is 1,800.
1,800 times 15 is 27,000.”

The poor neurologist
has no way of knowing what
a math whiz my father is,

how he’d entertain us on long car
rides by barking out math problems
or better yet dare me to challenge

him. “Dad, what’s 11,327
plus 10,695?” I’d ask.
“22,022,” he’d say in a second,

waiting for me to work it out
in my notebook. He was always
right. “Dad, what’s a million

plus a trillion?” I’d ask, searching
my brain for the biggest number
in the universe. “A million trillion,”

he’d answer. “Dad, what’s
a million trillion plus
a million trillion?”

“A ba-a-a-zill-ll-llion,”
he’d say, shaking his head so fast
his cheeks turned to rubber

and I’d crack up. If only
we were laughing now
but the neurologist is not

amused. He leans forward
to study this puzzle of a patient.
“Where were you born?”

“Brooklyn, naturally,”
my father says as if the doctor
should know that anyone who is

anyone was born in Brooklyn.
“What did you do for a living?”
My father sits up a little taller.

“I’m an attorney. Still practicing.”
The neurologist looks to me
to confirm that either this is true

or that my father has gone bananas.
“Yep,” I say, hoping to convey
that this is a real problem.

The neurologist does not catch on.
“Who’s running for president?” he asks
my father who is now convinced

that the doctor is completely bonkers.
“Hillary and that son of a bitch,”
he bellows, causing the two

receptionists out front to break
into peals of squealing laughter.
“He’s fine.” The doctor leans back

and glances up at the clock
to let me know I’ve wasted
enough of his time. “He’s great.

Take him home.” My father is already
out of his seat. “But what about
his delusions?” I ask, “the men

singing in his head, the little boy
at the foot of his bed?”
The neurologist shrugs.

“Old people have delusions,”
he says, pulling open his file
cabinet’s top drawer

clearly done with me
and my father, who is already
out in the waiting room

waving my coat by the shoulders
like a matador taunting a bull
then hustling me down the hallway

c’mon let’s go, shake a leg
we have more important things
to do than deal with this nonsense

and this doctor who I know
my father thinks is a real nut job
and will never again agree to see

not next week
not next month
not in a bazillion years

Lesléa Newman is the creator of 75 books for readers of all ages including the poetry collections *Still Life with Buddy*, *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (a novel-in-verse), and *I Carry My Mother*. Her literary awards include poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. From 2008 - 2010 she served as the poet laureate of Northampton, MA. “The First Time We Visit” is from her poetry collection, *I Wish My Father*, which will be published in January 2021. www.lesleanewman.com

2020 ROBINSON JEFFERS TOR HOUSE HONORABLE MENTION

Walking

by Ellen Romano

In the school our children once attended,
where I spent so many years of our marriage
teaching other people's children,
I walked the halls with my eyes closed.
Alert to the subtle signs I was passing a window,
the light that penetrates the darkness.

Counting out my steps,
I seldom got past twenty before I opened my eyes
for a quick peek, a readjustment.
It was peaceful once to walk in self-imposed blindness
early in the morning before the children arrived,
or in the sudden quiet at the end of the day.
I would imagine myself walking over
the footsteps my children made
in this place where I first came as a young mother
then walked into old age.

Now I move only toward your remembered image
and I know what I was practicing for all these years.
You are meeting me for lunch with sandwiches and drinks.
Am I getting closer?
You will only stay until I open my eyes.
I am counting my steps,
twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three.

Ellen Romano graduated from San Jose State University and has spent 30 years in public education. She lives in Hayward, CA and is currently sheltering in place with her two sons and her dog. This is her first major publication.



Lee Jeffers' Rose Garden, Tor House (June 2020)

2020 ROBINSON JEFFERS TOR HOUSE HONORABLE MENTION

Clearing

by Jess Skyleson

I awaken to discover the driveway gone:
its tall stand of pine trees now stooped,
branches twisted down

and the front yard looming
with hunched, misshapen masses—
our familiar rocks and bushes

rendered suddenly alien,
their features erased
by an early season snow.

I cross this shrouded expanse, steps timed
to the rhythmic scrape of my shovel,
square strips of blacktop appearing

like my shorn head, on that last day
before the first chemo

(do you remember how we laughed

in fear, saying I finally looked
like a Buddhist monk—the one that,
without you, I would have become—

and then, later, when my eyebrows
and eyelashes fell out, too,
how you comforted me, whispering

that I gleamed at night, like moonlight
reflecting on the snow?)

But now it is the driveway that gleams

like a bare chalkboard, washed clean
of yesterday's lessons,
and I can feel the strength

in my back, my arms,
stripping away the words,
breaking through the ice that formed

over our lives, and brushing off
the last traces of snow from my gloves.

The driveway cleared, I put away my shovel,

thinking, "There, now that is done."

Going back inside, I feel the sting
of cold flakes caught in my brows,

dampening my lashes,
as they slowly melt
into my skin.

Jess Skyleson is a former aerospace and mechanical engineer who began writing poetry after being diagnosed with stage IV cancer at age 39, subsequently achieving remission after extensive treatment. They will begin pursuing an MFA in Poetry at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, this September. Their poems have previously been published in the online journals *Evocations* and *Nixes Mate Review*, and will be included in the upcoming Wickford Art Association's 2020 *Poetry & Art* book and exhibit.

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 2020 issue of the Newsletter (available in September 2020).

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 issues are on the web.

News and Notes:

Two announcements sure to be of interest to every enthusiast of Tor House and of Robinson Jeffers.

First, a step forward in recognition of Jeffers' place in the Central Coast:

Jeffers Plaza at the Monterey Conference Center in downtown Monterey, is the future home of two bronze Robinson Jeffers sculptures created by local artists Carol Courtney and Karl Schaefer. The two installations will include a phrase of Jeffers poetry, a red-tailed hawk, and Jeffers signature. More details in the Fall newsletter about this important tribute made possible through the generosity of our donors.

And then good news that we have been hoping for in these troubled times

Tours of the Tor House Gardens are now available. Conducted by expert docents, the outdoor tours, as mandated by health authorities, will be open for 2 to 6 guests from a single household. Health and safety precautions will be required. As will reservations. For further details check the website or call the office.



Tor House Quail Awaits a Garden Tour
Photo by Melinda Manlin

The Last Word from Jeffers

THE SHEARS

A great dawn-color rose widening the petals around her gold eye
Peers day and night in the window. She watches us
Lighting lamps, talking, reading, and the children playing, and the dogs by the fire,
She watches earnestly, uncomprehending,
As we stare into the world of trees and roses uncomprehending,
There is a great gulf fixed. But even while
I gaze, and the rose at me, my little flower-greedy daughter-in-law
Walks with shears, very blonde and housewifely,
Through the small garden, and suddenly the rose finds herself rootless in-doors.
Now she is part of the life she watched.
So we: death comes and plucks us: we become part of the living earth
And wind and water we so loved. We are they.

From *The Beginning and the End* (1962) [Hunt III, 412]



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

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Summer 2020

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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:

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

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