

JOSEPH STROUD

Letter to
Robinson Jeffers,
Big Sur Coast,
Winter, 2005

*I will go down to the lovely Sur Rivers
And dip my arms in them up to the shoulders*

I will touch things and things and no more thoughts
—Robinson Jeffers

Robin,

It's a storm driven day of light and clouds
and wind and sea and scurling waves.
Tor House still stands, and Hawk Tower,
and the surf still slams the headlands
as when you first came to this wild coast,
as it did ten thousand years ago.

Our century of perpetual war and genocide
has ended at last — now the Nightmare
of the future as relentless as the surge
of the sea is gathering around us.
As you predicted, governments rearm,
the age of tyrants returns, and America
has thickened to Empire. It is *our* sword
raised over the smaller nations of the world.

This morning at Tor House I looked out
the window of your death room
to the sea as ever there as it was for you,
all things in the great ebb and flow,
in the tide pulse of waves
that make shape of time. I confess
I sought your ghost in the rooms
you made of stone, conjured your shade
in the narrow hall and winding stair
of Hawk Tower. From there Una
would watch you stalk the shore in storms
and return drenched, return to the pull
of words you sought to make a dwelling of,
as lasting, as carefully placed as the granite
of Tor House and Hawk Tower.

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves.
How else to see the unhuman beauty of things.
Some say we will not outlive this new century.
A cunning, rapacious cancer, we will consume ourselves.
And bring down everything. Nothing will be spared.
We are attending the death of a world, it is said.
No longer will hawks hover in thermals over Big Sur,

the great whales with their songs will disappear,
and over all this wild coast, over Point Lobos,
over Tor House and Pico Blanco, the waters
of the world will rise, and your Tower, Robin,
will be nothing but a heap of stones crumbling
in the green ghost rooms of a vacant, dead sea.

It's winter here.
The wind blows spumes from wave crests.
Heraclitus said all is process, all
is fire, is rock, sky, and sea, each life
its own singularity — sea spit, sea foam,
the emerald fires of waves breaking on rocks.
To stand on these headlands is to witness
great forces, what you called an inhuman beauty.
I have walked these coastal mountains
looking for the glade where the deer lay down
their bones, that secret place of refuge you found.
Once up Sobranes Creek I came across
the skeleton of a deer in the limbs of an oak,
dragged there by a cougar years before,
the bones polished clean by storms and sea winds,
white ribs like columns of a temple, the tower
beyond tragedy thrown down by the savage god
of the world.

Below these cliffs
cormorants hunt like wolves,
the silver fish flash like knives
in the green undersea light,
hawks wheel over the plunging cliffs,
a kestrel cries *kree kree kree*
and all the song birds hush.

I think of the storm-struck music
your bones were molded to be the harp for,
a Lear on the outcrops of Big Sur, mad
in the mad wind, harping of what is
and what will be the end.
In this place as an old man you once
lay down to rest, and saw through
half shut eyes a vulture circling over you,
and you imagined how it might be
to be the feast of a buzzard, that ugly bird,
eater of the dead — what honorable work,
you said, and lucky the man to have his bones
picked clean, to be alchemized in that wild blood,
and rise into the sky toward the sun.

They call you unbeliever, Robin.
True enough, you had no faith in humanity,
no trust in abstractions or the shams of dogma.
Your hatred was hard and clear and cold.
Rock and hawk were your totems.
But you did believe in a god,
a wild god who *is* this world, this universe.
Only one light is left us, you said, the beauty
of things, not men, the immense beauty
of this world, a transhuman intrinsic glory.
Here the sun goes out over the sea,
and night builds its kingdom, more vast
than seasons, builds its black terraces,
its high throne of stars. Our atoms
were forged in the engines of stars,
in the core of suns. So then, Robin,
we *are* creatures of light, and in the end
are driven like stars into the night.

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