

CHARLES PRENTISS

*Building the Tower,
Jeffers and Son, 2017*
Oil on canvas, 72 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

The California Imagination

Dana Gioia interviewed
by Maggie Paul

Maggie Paul: *You are a native Californian who has written about the literary heritage of the state. Did that affect your reaction to being named the tenth California poet laureate, and did the appointment come as a surprise or was it something you were expecting?*

Dana Gioia: I was delighted and surprised to be chosen laureate. It was a great honor to be recognized by my native state. I didn't expect it.

MP: *What have you been doing as laureate?*

DG: The laureate's official duties are minimal—just a few readings a year. I wanted to do something more ambitious in order to reach beyond the urban cultural centers. Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Berkeley dominate our literary scene. Why not visit all of the state's fifty-eight counties, most of which are small and rural? California is immense, almost half the size of Western Europe. I thought it would be fun. So far I've visited thirty-five counties.

We've put together a different event in each county—combining my visit with local talent. We invite the town or county laureates to read with me. We also invite the high school students who have won the local Poetry Out Loud competitions. Sometimes the events get very large. In Ukiah we had six past and present laureates as well as the high school recitation champ. In Lakeport we had five laureates. My visit creates a chance for the local literati to gather.

MP: *Can you tell us how your parents came to settle in California?*

DG: My father arrived in LA in the Depression when his family was wiped out in Detroit. My grandfather packed everyone in an old car and drove west to start over. He liked California because the weather and landscape reminded him of Sicily. They chose Hawthorne because that was a place poor people lived. Eventually his whole clan followed. I had a hundred relations in or around Hawthorne.

My mother, Dorothy Ortiz, was born in Hawthorne. The Mexican side of my family has been in the U.S.