

URSULA O'FARRELL

Deep Water, 2012
oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in.



courtesy: Alex Built Gallery

STEPHEN KESSLER

A Man Apart

Robinson Jeffers,
Problematic Patriarch

When I was twenty and just starting out as a poet, my girlfriend gave me a copy of the big Sierra Club picture book *Not Man Apart* with its gorgeous photos of the Big Sur coast by the likes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston accompanied by lines (and some whole poems) of Robinson Jeffers. As I read the poetry alongside the pictures their combined beauty brought me to tears. I was slightly familiar with Jeffers from his ten poems in Oscar Williams's classic anthology *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, but by that time (1967) Jeffers's stock had fallen precipitously from its pinnacle of the 1920s and '30s, and he was seldom mentioned anymore as one of the major American poets. Eclipsed by his contemporary Modernists (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams among the most prominent) and even by more traditional poets like Robert Frost and neo-Romantics like e. e. cummings, Jeffers had exiled himself from both mainstream and avant-garde American culture through his geophysical isolation on the Central California coast, the unpopular and at times repugnant political attitudes openly expressed in his writings, and his indifference to current artistic and critical trends. He had carved out a singular place for himself in the literary landscape and was content to let Eternity decide what to make of him and his work.

It was only later that I was able to place him in such a historical context. What moved me about his poems, first in the Williams anthology, then in the Sierra Club book, and after that in the 600-page

Random House edition of his *Selected Poetry*, was the irresistible force of his voice, its muscular music, its vivid engagement with the physical world, its rhythmic power, its readily comprehensible language, its acute observation and spiritual exaltation of natural beauty. I was drawn to the shorter lyrics more than to the long narratives, but even in the latter with their disturbing stories there was a propulsive momentum in the writing that I had never encountered before except perhaps in Richmond Lattimore's Homer. The fact that Jeffers was the first great modern poet of California made him, for me as a native Californian, a heavy predecessor to be reckoned with. Even though by then the Beat, Black Mountain, Deep Image and New York School movements were rising to replace the Southern Agrarians, the Confessionalists and the New Critics as the dominant forces in U.S. poetic discourse, I was still reading the English Romantics and could feel intuitively the natural link between Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and the stormy dithyrambs of Jeffers in such books as *Tamar*, *Roan Stallion* and *The Women at Point Sur*.

A few years later, at the tail end of my abortive career as a graduate student in Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I had the good fortune to take a seminar in the History of Consciousness program called Ideas of the Nature of Poetry with Robert Duncan, another important California poet first associated with Kenneth Rexroth and the San Francisco Renaissance, and later with Charles Olson and the Black Mountain school. Duncan, an Oakland native and one-time personal secretary to Anaïs Nin, was an inspiringly anti-academic eminence recruited briefly by Norman O. Brown to teach at UCSC (the Literature faculty would have nothing to do with such a creatively unconventional mind as Duncan's). His assignment for the students in his seminar was to select one poet to study for the term and to explore "the range of consciousness" in the poet's writing. I chose Jeffers.

As it turned out, Jeffers didn't have that much range—certainly not as much as Duncan, whose