

PETER LOFTUS

Coast Near Lucia, 2008
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in



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PATRICE VECCHIONE

Where Music Takes Its Sound from Sun and Stars and Wind and Waves

The Monterey Jazz
Festival Artist
in Residency

Let the rich life run to the roots again.

—Robinson Jeffers, from “Return”

Could it be only ten miles south, down the coast from the chichi village of Carmel and a few miles east, up through the redwoods, that another world exists, an entirely rural one, a world to put the daily rush and grind at such a distance that the responsibilities of everyday life seem to disappear, if only for a little while?

Palo Colorado Road is an uphill turn off ocean-side Highway 1. Quickly the way becomes dark and thickly forested; in some places the road is wide enough only for a single car to get by. Tiny fairyland cabins perch on the hillsides. About four curvy miles up, at the ridge top, there's a nearly nine-hundred-acre property. A former gentleman's ranch, Glen Deven was owned by Dr. Sealy and Virginia Mudd, and following their deaths, was left to the Big Sur Land Trust.

The open-faced land holds several buildings, including the home of its former owners. Past those structures it's raw, unfettered Big Sur territory—hillsides wholly exposed to the elements, dramatic ridges that appear to have been cut into the sky, and deep below, dark canyons and creeks. Moths, butterflies, lizards, and lions inhabit this place.

Sitting on the ground across from a mountain's flank does something to a person; it rights any misplaced sense of self-importance, brings one to level, and gives a day ballast. Walking on land absent of human traffic untangles the mind's cobwebs, relaxes car-weary joints. For an artist, such placement can do even more; the imagination, like the feet, is free to wander.

As part of their bequest, the Mudds stipulated that Glen Deven serve artists. Virginia Mudd was a writer. She held parties for the Bach Festival musicians at her home. When musician and composer Bill Frisell was invited to Glen Deven for ten days in 2012 as part of the artist-in-residence program, a collaboration between the Big Sur Land Trust and the Monterey Jazz Festival, he produced some of his finest compositions. According to Tim Jackson, artistic director of the Monterey Jazz Festival, “Each year an artist is commissioned to write a piece for the festival. We look for innovative music. Bill is always doing interesting, eclectic work.”

Frisell loved the idea of going to Big Sur. Jackson said, “It was Easter Sunday when Bill arrived. His flight had been delayed, and it was late when he got in and raining really

hard. We met him at Carmel Valley Road, and he followed us down the coast out to the ranch, and we left him there.”

Glen Deven is nothing if not remote-feeling. There were no city lights and no corner stores to mute the pervasive rainy darkness that Frisell entered, nothing to mitigate the magical sense of inhabiting the faraway. Jackson said, “I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d called me the next day to say ‘Get me out of here.’” But no such call came. Frisell was made for Glen Deven. “When morning came, it blew my mind,” he said. “You’re surrounded by redwood forest, and there’s a trail that you can walk to the bluff’s end, where the land drops off and you see the whole panorama of the coast and the Pacific Ocean.” In fact, Jackson didn’t hear from Frisell until days later, when he’d left the ranch to get groceries and called to say that everything was going just fine.

The natural world can serve an artist like nowhere else. Inspiration is everywhere—in the clean air, the hilltop vistas, the burble of creek water. During his stay, Frisell didn’t write just a single piece of music; he composed an entire suite made up of nineteen pieces that later became an album. Tim Jackson said, “From both a critical and sales standpoint, *Big Sur* is one of Frisell’s best.”

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Though just about the only recorded music I’d been listening to for some time was *Big Sur*, I’d sadly missed the premiere of this work at the Monterey Jazz Festival, so on a January night, I went to the San Francisco Jazz Center to catch it live.

Guitarist Frisell was joined onstage by the other members of his Big Sur Quintet, comprising Eyvind Kang on viola, Hank Roberts on cello, Rudy Royston on drums, and Jenny Scheinman on violin. I closed my eyes. Frisell’s guitar was the first thing I heard before the other musicians took their parts. His composition is a portrait of a place; it conveys a physical and spiritual sense of Big Sur. The music entered my body. It took me back to my own times along that stretch of coast, the wild and ragged ones, the contemplative and solitary ones. There’s a distinct melodic connection between one song and the next; it’s symphonic in that way. The music embodies its composer, giving the listener a singular sense of Bill Frisell.

The suite is full of gesture. Nature is never still, and

that perpetual movement, a reaching out, a bending into, is apparent in each song, but there are plenty of pauses, too, as the breeze catches her breath, as the rabbit freezes, pretending to be a rock. In the music, just as on the earth, there’s a lot of call and response. At Glen Deven the jays and owls do it, as well as many other birds. Once, when I was out walking, a buck bent his head to the ground and stomped his feet repeatedly. That too was a call, a warning, a drumbeat call to other deer that danger was afoot. Wind rushed at the trees, and the pine needles trembled in response.

The whoosh of waves at a distance and the patter of gently falling oak leaves touching the ground slipped into my ears through the *Big Sur* suite, but not in the form of recorded nature sounds, rather through authentic integration and imaginative interpretation choreographed and developed by a startling talent. If the trees could sing in a guitar’s voice or in the voice of a viola or violin, might this be their tune? If the rocks spoke melody along with their rhythm of rolling, falling, and colliding, might these drums be what we’d hear? Does the night sky play cello to the stars? Do the condors gently brush their wings along the treetops? I could have sat there listening all night. Here was lighthearted surf music, Irish ballad, lullaby, and lament.

In the album’s first song, “The Music of Glen Deven Ranch,” violin, drum, and guitar play against a pattern of sound made by the viola. In “Sing Together Like a Family,” the drum keeps time, holds steady. And then some yearning comes in, wistful like a grief that one leans into and backs away from—literally. The many times I’ve listened, I can’t hold entirely still but find myself swaying from side to side to just the point where I’m about to lose balance, and then that violin or the guitar pulls me back to the center again. And right before the song’s conclusion is the sound of someone’s approach—not a human someone though.

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Not being a state park or a regional park, Glen Deven isn’t easily accessible to the public; I’d never been there, but was welcomed by the Big Sur Land Trust and given the gate code in order to get in. An early June morning was the perfect time to find out what the music was all about.

Jim, the caretaker, led me to where the trail began and offered vague directions, my favorite kind. The wide dirt

road skirts the hilltop before dropping down, step by step, into the canyon and beyond. Settling low in the sky, the morning fog drifted in off the ocean in perfect cloudlets, but the sun was warm, waiting just behind.

Big Sur, especially as a result of California’s severe drought, is dry and arid, even with the ocean right there. This isn’t a place where I’d want to get lost for long. One water bottle wouldn’t do; thirst out in this country would set in fast. The downward walk was so inviting I forgot about the afternoon return trip when the sun would be hot. A vulture circled high overhead, and hawks leaned their flight into the mountains.

The quails whose business I had disturbed skittered into the wall of brush as though a door had opened just wide enough for their entrance then firmly shut behind. From out of the wild mustard, a spring-loud chorus of bees rose. Some hundred bees were clustered, rambling among and hunkering down into the flowerets, having a mealtime conversation—the shared joy of feasting and satiation. Up from the Pacific, the cool wind came in layers and progressions like song. Heading down and down toward the canyon floor, the farther I got from the ridge top there came another sound, more pronounced with each step—the indisputable melody of traveling water. And beyond, was it possible, did I hear the rippling, distant roar of ocean waves?

Walking alone in a natural place for the first time is the best way to experience it. For some of us, that’s one of the finest things life has to offer. It’s odd how being in a spot on the earth with which I am unacquainted can provide an uncanny sense of return. In that way time in nature has a quality of *pentimento*—modern life may have painted over the original work and our primary relationship with it, but go back to the land, for even a little while, and it’s evident we’re returning to the place that, once upon a time, all people knew best. Is that, too, what I hear in Frisell? Might that be why I keep returning to the album, for that odd blending of new and old, familiar and unfamiliar, all of it welcoming, infusing my imagination?

At the canyon’s very bottom there is no farther down to go unless one were to slip into the creek or burrow earthward as snakes and gophers do. Considering the uphill walk of more than an hour in the hot sun that was ahead of me, a dip in cool water sounded good but, sadly, it was too shallow for that. In place of down, however, there is along, and that’s

the way I walked. Keeping the creek on my left, I proceeded eastward, sheltered from the warming day by the canopy of redwood and eucalyptus trees, until the allure of a rest on the rickety bridge got the best of me. I rested, wrote in my notebook, and gave my attention to the creek talk, the smooth rocks made shiny by the flowing water. As when listening to music, while in nature ordinary time is suspended. It was a relief to feel my life held in abeyance, at a distance, and a luxury to be consumed by this here and now.

In my book *Step into Nature: Nurturing Imagination and Spirit in Everyday Life*, I wrote about the experience of being out walking on the earth and feeling pulled ahead by something other than myself—the call of the land, my spirit’s adherence to it? Maybe. I can walk past where I even want to, as though an invisible hand were at my back pushing me ahead. But just when I’m about to go past the point from which I’d be able to return, I force myself to turn around, my heart rapid in its beat. That’s what happened when I was out at Glen Deven. I wanted to continue onward indefinitely eastward, to discover what I’d never encountered before, but talked myself into going home.

Getting lost is as much a part of the artist’s life as it is the nature walker’s. It can also be a part of the experience of being an audience member or a viewer of art. Stand in front of a favorite painting long enough and one can be wholly transported, feel invited beyond any familiar locale. The landscape of Frisell’s Big Sur music does this to me. The earth says, “Come hither”; the music says, “This way.” Ah, and then the refrain returns the listener, enriched and deepened from the journey that only an artist like Frisell can take us on.

Some of the Big Sur pieces sound otherworldly, and that may have to do with the expansive, otherworldliness of Glen Deven. In an interview about his experience at the ranch, Frisell said, “When you’re alone, you put the idea out into the air, and in the beginning I was in a panic to think of something else right away—just the silence was deafening. Now, I’m actually beginning to enjoy it.” Emily Dickinson said, “Nature is a haunted house—but Art—a house that tries to be haunted.” Frisell’s music, however, doesn’t have to try.

Art is also a conversation. The act of making—dance, painting, sculpture—isn’t the conversation’s initiation. Making art is always in response to something or someone.

When we begin creating a new piece, we're continuing a conversation. Later, the listener or the viewer extends it further. In this case, Frisell's conversation is with place, the elements of that place, with himself and music, and, onstage, with the other musicians in his band.

My Glen Deven walk back up was a lot slower than the going down; returning home always is. The day's heat was coming on, causing this walker to lollygag, to stare open-mouthed at resting moths and flitting butterflies, glad to be engrossed not by something on my screen but by the earth's somebodies.

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At the 2015 Monterey Jazz Festival, a new piece of music will premiere, one that's still being written. The young marvel, trumpeter, composer, and bandleader Ambrose Akinmusire spent ten days at Glen Deven this past April. He and I recently chatted about his time there and his music. The land began working quickly on him. Akinmusire said, "The first day I was getting used to it. By the second, I felt cleansed. I found I had to change the title of the piece I'd been commissioned to write to 'The Forgotten Place' because I felt I was getting back in touch with this place inside myself, solitude. It's a place we all have inside. Before I went there, I'd started writing but I had to trash all that."

In solitude, many of us are better able to receive what's coming forward creatively and otherwise. In nature, that solitude has a greater platform, a more secure landing place. It's easier to listen—simultaneously within and without—when we're not being predictably and unpredictably interrupted. Akinmusire noted another, important attribute of solitude in general and solitude in nature in particular: "Those days were a luxury. It's a place of privilege. I know so many people who will never get to experience this kind of beauty, like those in the community of Oakland where I grew up. I wondered what would it be like for them to be here. A lot of my ancestors never had that chance. What if they had?"

While at Glen Deven, Akinmusire kept a journal and took notes. He worked on the melody. During our conversation, his voice got quiet and a bit distant for a moment; I could almost hear him contemplating in that silence. "While there and since, I've thought a lot about what it took for my ancestors in order for me to have this experience."

His comment made me think of my time in nature in a new and important way, as privilege. Akinmusire added, "After ten days I felt like I'd been there for a month."

When I asked for details about his new composition, *The Forgotten Place*, he declined, saying, "I can't talk about it because I want to be open to it changing. But I can say my band is composed of ten musicians. We've got cello, which is woody, and Irish harp, that's like birds and it's angelic. I wanted nothing sharp or brassy, nothing harsh."

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Nature and art have a shared essence; they're both acts of creation—the human's creativity on a relatively small scale, the earth's on an unequivocally large one. The land and the sky and the sea are all makers, doers, and inventors of the first kind. For generations some have tried to deny and abolish our innate knowing of this link to the lineage of our nascent impetus to create. The further away from nature we get, the easier this may be to do. But what better teacher is there to remind us that for those inclined to do so, making art, and creating, is our birthright? At Glen Deven and in other protected enclaves, wild, asphalt-free places, even small parks within cities, the call of our inspired endeavors can become undeniable.

Did the air enter Frisell's guitar through its open mouth as it, and the sun and the sky, entered Frisell himself, so that his writing and playing were transformed? It sounds that way. Listening to the Big Sur Quintet, you can hear the wind lift off the Pacific and slip through the trees. And you might picture deer grazing as they hold their brown shoulders against that wind.

—This essay is an expanded adaptation from Patrice Vecchione's most recent book, *Step into Nature: Nurturing Imagination and Spirit in Everyday Life* (Beyond Words/Simon & Schuster, Atria Books, 2015).

Patrice Vecchione (patricevecchione.com) is the author of *Step into Nature: Nurturing Imagination and Spirit in Everyday Life* and *Writing and the Spiritual Life: Finding Your Voice by Looking Within*, as well as two collections of poetry. She has also edited many poetry anthologies for adults and young people. She teaches creative writing and nature writing workshops.

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North From Pfeiffer Burns, 2008
Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in



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