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Robinson Jeffers: Appalachian, Californian, Poet

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April’s holidays celebrate the renewal of life: Easter (when it falls in April) signals both literal and metaphorical rebirth; Earth Day (April 22) spreads awareness of Earth’s ecology and the necessity of living well on Earth (ekos is Greek for household); and Arbor Day (the last Friday in April) honors trees. Even April Fool’s Day can be seen as life-affirming—it’s pranks traditionally stem from feelings of playfulness brought about by the victory of spring over winter.

April is also National Poetry Month, and this column will focus on an April-themed poem—not one of the many April poems evincing sincere religiosity or forced sentimentality, and not that famous poem that cynically asserts that “April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land.” I’d like to focus on Robinson Jeffers and his fine if forgotten “Gale in April,” a poem infused with the power and passion associated with life’s seasonal resurgence. Instead of evoking flowers or other conventional symbols of springtime, Jeffers in that poem evokes the stark beauty he witnessed one April day while living on the rugged Pacific coast near Carmel, California.

**Gale in April**

Intense and terrible beauty, how has our race with the frail naked nerves,
So little a craft swum down from its far launching?
Why now, only because the northwest blows and the headed grass billows,
Great seas jagging the west and on the granite
Blanching, the vessel is brimmed, this dancing play of the world is too much passion.
A gale in April so overfilling the spirit,
Though his ribs were thick as the earth’s, arches of mountain, how shall one dare to live,
Though his blood were like the earth’s rivers and his flesh iron,
How shall one dare to live? One is born strong, how do the weak endure it?
The strong lean upon death as on a lock,
After eighty years there is shelter and the naked nerves shall be covered with deep quietness.
O beauty of things, go on, go on, O torture
Of intense joy, I have lasted out my time, I have thanked God and finished,
Roots of millennial trees fold me in the darkness,
Northwest winds shake their tops, not to the root, not to the root, I have passed
From beauty to the other beauty, peace, the night splendor.

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Born and reared in western Pennsylvania, he wrote his first poem at age 10, about a snake he ‘saw in his parents’ garden in a Pittsburgh suburb. His father, a theologian, sent his son to schools in Europe, then relocated the family to southern California, and Jeffers, a brilliant but restless student, vacillated between observing conventional career paths (medicine, forestry) and finding his own way. Freedom excited him more than security, and he and the woman he married in 1913—Una Call Kuster, who fled an unfulfilling marriage with a prominent L.A. lawyer to live with an aspiring poet—traveled north in 1914 to explore California’s coastal wilds.

As the poet later wrote, “When the stagecoach topped the hill from Monterey and we looked down through pines and sea fog on Carmel Bay, it was evident that we had come without knowing it to our inevitable place.”

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Hawk Tower, Tor House, Carmel, CA. 
Photo: Jessica Malikowski