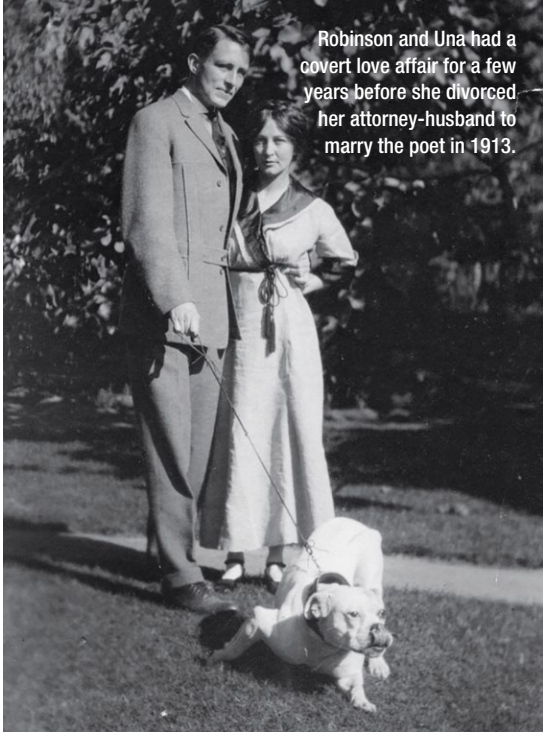
A man of his

The room that inspired poet Robinson Jeffers' *The Bed by the Window* in the Carmel house where he lived and died

BY *Keith Skinner*

Robinson Jeffers wrote almost all of his poetry at the Tor House in the morning and worked on building the Hawk Tower in the afternoon.

word



Robinson and Una had a covert love affair for a few years before she divorced her attorney-husband to marry the poet in 1913.

COURTESY OF TOR HOUSE FOUNDATION

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As we walked into the room, I first noticed the bed — broad, slightly concave, uncomfortable-looking — covered with a thin, antique quilt. But it was the west-facing windows, unusually close to the floor, that caught my attention and brought back the words.

"I chose the bed downstairs by the sea-window for a good death-bed
When we built the house; it is ready waiting,
Unused unless by some guest in a twelvemonth, who hardly suspects
Its latter purpose...."

A chill rippled across my skin as I realized that we were standing in that very room and the bed before me was the subject of the poem — the deathbed in *The Bed by the Window*. Robinson Jeffers had written the poem as a young man shortly after building the house in Carmel, California. Many years later, he had indeed died in the room, thereby fulfilling its destiny.

I had first read the poem while browsing a Jeffers anthology in a bookstore, a volume entitled *The Wild God of the World*. I knew little about the man but kept bumping into him in other writers' work. Noted authors and bohemian celebrities were always dropping in on Jeffers when passing through Carmel. There was often some degree of awe or reverence ascribed to these occasions, but very little mentioned about the man himself.

If Whitman was a Telemann concerto, Jeffers was a melancholy cello solo played mournfully in a dim, candlelit room

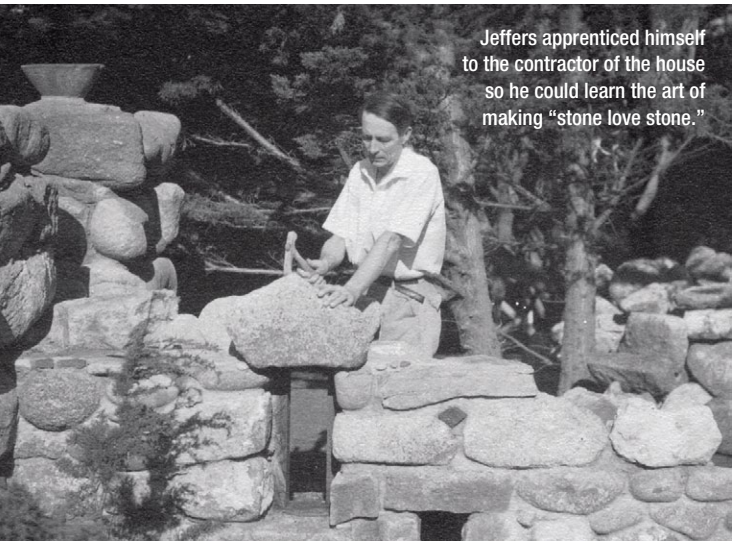
I picked up the book and, by chance, opened it to *The Bed by the Window*. It was an eerie poem. More than eerie, it was downright creepy. It wasn't as though Jeffers had used death in a gratuitous manner; it wasn't a cheap, dramatic device. The bed seemed to be a fetish of sorts for him as he worked through his feelings about his own mortality.

I often regard it, "with neither dislike or desire; rather with both,..."

Still, meditating on death in a poem was one thing; anticipating a lingering death in the distant future while still a young man and building a room in which to die was quite another.

As I read through several more poems, the voice, at times, seemed almost feral. The ruggedness of the language, the starkness of the imagery — Jeffers prowled like a lone wolf or, more accurately, a rangy coyote skirting the edge of civilization: hungry, suspicious and angry. He seemed dark and self-absorbed. If Whitman was a Telemann concerto, full of trumpets and bright brass celebrating the world, it seemed to me that Jeffers was a melancholy cello solo played mournfully in a dim, candlelit room. For some unexplained reason, I felt compelled to buy the book, though it wasn't long before it was abandoned on a bookshelf and I had put Jeffers out of my mind.

Several days before I found myself standing in Jeffers' bedroom, and nearly a year after I had bought the anthology, I was staying in Big Sur and came across an article in a local magazine about the building of Tor House, Jeffers' home. I knew the house was in Carmel, but knew little of its history.



Jeffers apprenticed himself to the contractor of the house so he could learn the art of making "stone love stone."

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The article recounted how Jeffers had purchased an uninhabited plot of land on Carmel Point and had hired a stonemason to build a house for him. He apprenticed himself to the builder so he could learn how to set stone himself. Once the house was finished, Jeffers spent nearly four years building a 12-metre-high tower on the property, hauling boulders from a nearby beach and hoisting them into place by himself using only a block and tackle.

The story about the tower was as provocative and unsettling as the deathbed poem. Who was this guy? He had rolled boulders, some weighing as much as 180 kilograms, several hundred yards uphill, through coastal scrub, and then had set each one by hand — alone. This only confirmed my suspicions that the man was obsessive and unpredictable if not outright stubborn. But he had somehow gotten under my skin. I decided to stop in Carmel on my way home to visit Tor House, to see his mad man's tower, and to try to unravel the Jeffers riddle that kept resurfacing.

Our small tour group was still huddled around Jeffers' bed as if gathered to say our final goodbyes while the docent recited the deathbed poem. It was a sober moment for everyone. I looked out through the sea-window with its simple curtains and wooden window seat, across the grey-green mat of garden sprinkled with drifts of May flowers, to the gun metal surf churning in the distance. It was a stormy day and dark clouds were furrowed along the horizon. I wondered what had gone through Jeffers' mind as he lay dying, his head turned toward the window, gazing at a similar scene.

What I had expected to be an ordinary tour had become something more profound. As we filed into the living room, a latent energy seemed to linger in the house, as if the family had gone out for a walk together and, at any minute, the two boys would come bursting in through the door with a dog at their heels. This sensation was due, in part, to the way our docent had made the home come alive for us. He told stories about each room that portrayed the fierce love affair between Jeffers and his wife Una, and of a family life that was often insular, but very closely knit.

If the house seemed infused with the warmth of family life, the world outside, at least on this day, was more typical of Jeffers' flinty demeanor. I zipped up my jacket and cinched the hood tightly around my face as we crossed the small yard.

When Robinson and Una discovered Carmel-by-the-Sea in 1914, they called it their "inevitable place" and built Tor House on Carmel Point.

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Hawk Tower was an odd structure, simultaneously squat and gangly. Una had long admired the medieval towers found throughout Ireland and Jeffers had tried to replicate the style. But the structure in front of me looked nothing like those I had seen in Ireland, other than ruins where the ramparts had either been breached or severely ravaged by time.

There were two ways to move about within the structure: the wider, external staircase or the "secret" interior passageway that Jeffers had built for his sons. We were warned that the passageway was dark and extremely narrow in places and the steps, unusually steep. I chose the passageway because Jeffers often used it himself and I had a hunch the other members of my group would take the stairs. I would be alone with Jeffers and the dark, cold stone.

"Old but still strong I climb the stone
Climb the steep rough steps alone,"

I climbed past the first landing that served as a play area for the two boys and up to Una's stronghold. Over a small fireplace in the corner, Jeffers had carved a wooden mantle with a line of Latin from Virgil that roughly translated to "lovers fashion their own dreams." It seemed to describe Tor House so precisely. The stone buildings, the keepsakes everywhere, the wildness of their surroundings — the Jeffers had carefully created a world, a dream, solely for themselves. Robin and Una required only each other's company and the promontory overlooking the ocean; the rest of the world could be damned.

I continued up to the outside parapet at the top of the tower, carefully navigating the steep, wet steps and pulling myself up by the hefty anchor chain that served as a handrail. The wind had picked up and gusts of rain stung my face the higher I climbed. I turned southward and scanned the jagged coast, the tree-lined shore that stretched into the distance and wrapped around the bay to join Point Lobos.

"White-maned, wide-throated, the heavy-shouldered children of the wind leap at the sea-cliff."

I imagined Jeffers standing in this very spot in a squall, pensive and content as he took in the surrounding natural world that, at the time, laid claim to Carmel Point. Up on this perch, he would become hawk-like: calm, watchful and uncomplicated, comforted by the elements and the power of wind and ocean.

Jeffers may have built the tower for Una, but it was more than a simple material gift he had given her. It was himself, his blustery spirit, his wild god heart embodied in granite, each stone placed as carefully as the words he arranged upon a page.

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