

PREFACE

When Robinson and Una Jeffers first committed themselves to a life together, Jeffers hoped—promised—to become a successful poet. “I have just three ideas in my head,” he tells Una in a letter written December 12, 1912, “—you are the first: —the second is to write as good verse as possible: —and the third, to make money—I mean, plentiful money, —in our chosen profession.” Reiterating his pledge to meet all three goals, he says “I shall keep your love, star-of-hope, till the end of my life—and yours”; “I shall write, with you to help me, as good verse as any-one’s living now”; and, finally, “we’re going to have all the prosperity we shall need.” “Keep this prophecy, Una—most-beautiful,” Jeffers adds with youthful bravado, “Ten years from now we’ll read it . . . and say, ‘How true!’”

As this passage indicates, Jeffers saw his future career as a joint endeavor. “With you to help me,” he tells Una, he hoped for success in “our chosen profession.” At the end of 1928, having achieved international fame with *Tamar* (1924), *Roan Stallion*, *Tamar and Other Poems* (1925), *The Women at Point Sur* (1927), and *Cawdor* (1928), Jeffers acknowledged Una’s influence. In response to a query about her in a lengthy questionnaire, Jeffers quotes a line by William Wordsworth about his sister Dorothy: “‘She gave me eyes, she gave me ears —’ and arranged my life.” Expanding upon this response, Una provides more lines from Wordsworth’s poem, “The Sparrow’s Nest”:

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
And humble cares, and delicate fears;
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
 And love, and thought, and joy.

Una also identifies two traits that, without her influence, might have kept Jeffers from writing steadily: a “*laissez faire* policy” about his career and an inveterate rootlessness. By encouraging him to write for a reading public, not just

for himself, and by urging him to sink deep roots into the granite coast of Carmel, Una helped Jeffers become the artist he was destined to be. "I have great driving force and energy of concentrated effort," Una adds, "—That has influenced him" (*Collected Letters* 1: 769–770, 778).

With Una's help and inspiration, Jeffers' career continued to flourish. *Dear Judas* (1929) was followed by *Descent to the Dead* (1931), and then *Thurso's Landing* (1932). Interest in the latter book was so great that a photograph of Jeffers by Edward Weston appeared on the cover of the April 4, 1932 issue of *Time* magazine. The accompanying review and biographical essay cited the widespread opinion that Jeffers was "the most impressive poet the U. S. has yet produced." When his publisher, Horace Liveright, filed for bankruptcy in 1933, Jeffers was besieged with contract offers from America's leading firms. He signed with Bennett Cerf of Random House, who also pursued another prominent Liveright artist, Eugene O'Neill. As the 1930s progressed, Jeffers added four new titles to his list of books: *Give Your Heart to the Hawks* (1933), *Solstice* (1935), *Such Counsels You Gave to Me* (1937), and *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (1938).

Selected Poetry contains a brief foreword in which Jeffers again mentions Una's contribution to his work. After discussing the principles that guided his life as an artist, he identifies the fateful accidents that shaped him. "The first of these accidents," he says in an often-quoted passage,

was my meeting with the woman to whom this book is dedicated, and her influence, constant since that time. My nature is cold and indiscriminating; she excited and focused it, gave it eyes and nerves and sympathies. She never saw any of my poems until they were finished and typed, yet by her presence and conversation she has co-authored every one of them. Sometimes I think there must be some value in them, if only for that reason. She is more like a woman in a Scotch ballad, passionate, untamed and rather heroic—or like a falcon—than like any ordinary person.

In *Hungerfield*, written late in life, after Una died, Jeffers recalls her last days. "You were still beautiful," he says, "But not—as you'd been—a falcon." At the end of the poem, he returns to the image. "You were more beautiful," he tells Una, "Than a hawk flying." And in another late poem, "Salvage," Jeffers again declares his Wordsworthian indebtedness to Una, "whose eyes made life." As

for me, he says, reflecting on his passive and her active personality, “I have to consider and take thought / Before I can feel the beautiful secret / In places and stars and stones, to her it came freely.”

Jeffers’ “cold and indiscriminating” nature, his need to “consider and take thought,” were part of what he regarded as a granite-like temperament—one that could shed “pleasure and pain like hailstones” (“Soliloquy”) and endure the vicissitudes of existence with stoic indifference. At the same time, however, he associated the artistic side of his life with raptors. In a late poem about his ongoing search for poetic subject matter, he refers to himself as an “old half blinded hawk” hunting for prey. By referring to Una as a hawk as well, Jeffers identified her as the feminine embodiment of his own creative spirit—and thus, in psychological terms, his anima ideal. The balance he experienced, and depended upon, between himself and Una finds an echo in “Rock and Hawk,” a poem written in the mid-1930s. Seeing a lone hawk perched upon a headland stone, Jeffers notes the conjunction of “bright power” and “dark peace,” of “fierce consciousness” with “final disinterestedness.” Together, Jeffers says, the two ways of being create an image of integrated awareness, with “the falcon’s / Realist eyes and act / Married to the massive / Mysticism of stone.”

Just as Jeffers’ poetry resulted from the interpenetration of these two modes of existence, his life worked best when they—and when he and Una—were in balance. In the 1930s, however, balance was difficult to achieve. Several factors disrupted Jeffers’ equilibrium, with increasing force as the decade wore on.

One such factor was the gathering storm of war. Although Jeffers did not serve in the military during World War I, he was horrified by the destructiveness of that debacle, and he foresaw a greater catastrophe yet to come. In the mid-1930s he observed the “grand and fatal movements toward death” shaping the destinies of nations (“Rearmament”) and “far fires and dim degradation / Under the war planes” already lighting the horizon (“Air-Raid Rehearsals”). He could see quite clearly what lay ahead: “Tyranny for freedom, horror for happiness, famine for bread, carrion for children” (*Contemplation of the Sword*).

Another factor involved dissatisfaction with contemporary Americans, who seemed willing to surrender freedom to a powerful state (“Shine, Republic” and “Ave Caesar”) and sell their souls for nothing more than “Toys: motors,

music-boxes, / Paper, fine clothes, leisure, diversion" ("The Trap"). In California, where most people saw progress in the new bridges, dams, and highways that were altering the landscape, Jeffers saw evidence of "a rich and vulgar and bewildered civilization dying at the core" ("The Coast-Road").

Jeffers was also unsettled by changes in Carmel. What once was a small village inhabited by artists and independent spirits had become a busy tourist attraction and vacation-home resort. One reporter, writing in the June 25, 1937 issue of the *Carmel Pine Cone*, described the situation around Tor House: "As everyone knows, building activities in Carmel are at an all-time high. Carmel Point is particularly growing up, with literally dozens of new houses constructed in the past year."

Even life in Tor House was fraught with difficulties: a sometimes hectic social life, the demands of friendship with Mabel Dodge Luhan, a scandal of sorts involving one of Jeffers' early girlfriends, Garth and Donnan growing up and leaving for college, the death of the family dog Haig, and the grief occasioned by the deaths of many friends. The worst of these difficulties occurred in the summer of 1938, when Una tried to kill herself in Taos, New Mexico as a result of Jeffers' interest in another woman. The cumulative effect of these and other factors, led Jeffers—and Una—to the brink of despair.

A symptom of Jeffers' distress was a mounting feeling of restiveness, especially in regard to social gatherings. Having become a public figure, he wished to be left alone. Writing to Mabel Dodge Luhan July 13, 1932, Una says "I've had—am having a really frantic summer so many people and so much to do in various ways—that community theatre and boys' vacation—and then by devious ways trying to make Robin believe that there is no one about." A March 30, 1934 letter from Una to Phoebe Barkan contains a similar complaint: "The thing is, Carmel has been such a crossroads lately, —so many people have made Robin difficult. He can't feel happy here unless I make regular business of keeping him so, and whenever I get him fixed and leave him—I come back to find him moody. Then he says he must leave this place & go make a home in a wilder one, that gives me a horrible sinking feeling inside." In a letter to Luhan dated February 18, 1938, Una mentions Jeffers' intractability again: "Robin has suddenly decided not to go out any more. Says it distracts

his mind, that its pleasant enough but not nourishing, etc. & I guess he's right. Also that I am to go as much as I like & come home & tell him—& that all those years when he didnt go & I did was much better for his work—easier for him. O dear I wish things could be easy & simple but they cant."

In claiming that an earlier, less socially active, style of life was better for his work, Jeffers implicitly asserted that present circumstances were less favorable. In saying this, he identified another symptom of distress: a growing inability to write. At first, the problem seems to have been confined to letter writing, a task he never enjoyed overmuch. "I am a wretched zero as a correspondent," he tells Edgar Lee Masters in a letter dated February 1933, "but I think of you often and affectionately. The unlucky habit of writing verses takes my mornings, and paralyzes me against any other kind of writing for the rest of the day, and the days pass with amazing velocity." In a September 27, 1935 letter to Robin Lampson, Jeffers refers to his "ridiculous inability to write a letter, at least until the occasion for it is long past!" and writing to Sara Bard Field November 24, 1936 he says "It is becoming more than ever impossible for me to write letters." Eventually, the paralysis spread to his work as an artist, even as the 1930s found him writing some of his best and most familiar poems—such as "Return," "Gray Weather," "The Purse-Seine," and "Oh Lovely Rock."

At the beginning of the decade, Una could happily tell friends that Jeffers worked every morning, as usual. "Robin is writing busily" she cheerfully informs Bennett Cerf in a January 20, 1931 letter. By the middle of the decade, however, Jeffers was struggling. In an August 25, 1936 letter to Cerf, Una provides a guarded report: "He is writing but cant promise anything for a definite time." By the end of the following year, Jeffers' condition had worsened. Una had hoped that an extended trip abroad might release creative energy, but, as she tells Lawrence Clark Powell in a December 26, 1937 letter, "Robin wrote only a few lines over in the British Isles." To this she adds, first with cautious optimism and then with honest concern, "I think [he] is much refreshed by his travels" and "I hope he will proceed on his way now." But the blockage persisted. Expressing frustration with his work in a letter to William van Wyck dated January 3, 1938, Jeffers says, "My own attempts don't amount to much at present—trifling things, and unlucky beginnings." Perhaps, he confides, a

period of withdrawal from the world would restore his creativity: "I'd like to be buried for six years under deep forest by a waterside, not think, not remember, know nothing, see nothing but darkness, hear nothing but the river running for six years and the long roots growing, and then be resurrected. How fresh things would look." Ten months later, Jeffers experienced a brief flicker of creative activity. Writing to Melba Berry Bennett October 24, 1938, Una says "Robin is writing again after a considerable hiatus"—but the paralysis soon returned. "I CAN'T WRITE," Jeffers exclaims in a note to Una in the fall of 1939. "I feel completely half-witted (not to diagnose the case) and 'writing'—during the past 30 years—has become one of the conditions of life for me. You see how morbid!"

On previous occasions, Una helped Robinson with his writing by making sure his daily life was conducive to work. "Life has been going smoothly here," she tells Phoebe Barkan in a May 27, 1934 letter, "— me sitting on the lid! We have gone off for one whole day by ourselves in the hills every week and walked for two hours late afternoons almost every day & Robin has been content." Such stratagems enabled Una to create "an illusion of a wilder, more rural home." In the midst of their marital crisis of 1938, when Jeffers' torment was nearing its peak, Una tried another tack. Writing to her friend Blanche Matthias August 8, she asked if Jeffers could use a guest house on Blanche's property in the Carmel Highlands. Jeffers was working on a new poem, she tells her, and a change of setting might do him good. "After all," Una says, "he has worked at the same table now for twenty years. He sometimes feels that a change of position might be useful & visualized a bare room with nothing in it but a table & chair & bare walls, where he could be quiet {& hidden} & unseen."

While Una could not help Jeffers write his poetry, except through her influence and attention to his needs, she could help him write his letters—and thereby relieve a portion of his strain. Ample evidence of her assistance during the 1930s is found in letters that begin with phrases such as "Writing for Robinson Jeffers," "Robin says," or "My husband wishes me to say." Sometimes Una adds a brief explanation, such as "Writing for my husband who is too absorbed in some work for letters just now" or "I am still serving my husband as letter-writer, you see." Occasionally she describes the situation in greater de-

tail. "Robinson Jeffers never writes letters," she tells Fred B. Millett in a letter dated March 2, 1937, "I do them for him. If you will ask direct questions about him—I will endeavor to answer them and in case its a theory involved, *extract* an answer from him and write it down for you. I am sorry he has this disability about letters but have to face it." Sometimes, in facing the problem together, Jeffers told Una what she should say on his behalf, in a process similar to dictation; other times he drafted a handwritten response (referring to himself in the third person) that Una recopied and sent as if the message were her own; most often, however, he simply let Una handle his correspondence as she thought best, knowing she fully understood what he would want to say. All such letters should be regarded as having come, via Una's pen, from Jeffers himself.

This last point bears repeating. As this edition amply illustrates, Jeffers depended on Una—perhaps to his and her detriment at times—to balance his life, manage his contact with others, and deepen his experience of external reality. Twenty-five years after he compared Una to Dorothy Wordsworth, Jeffers reaffirmed her influence. Responding in October 1953 to a request from his publisher for biographical information, Jeffers says of Una that "she was in many ways a mediator between me and the world." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Jeffers' correspondence, where Una regularly speaks his mind.

Accordingly, in addition to the letters Jeffers wrote on his own, this volume contains a considerable number of letters written by Una for him, as well as a generous selection of Una's personal correspondence. Together, the three kinds of documents open the door to Robinson and Una's world, revealing lives that were more crowded with acquaintances and activities, more tormented at times, and more quietly exultant than anyone might have guessed.



The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers is a three-volume edition arranged in chronological order. Volume one contains four sections not repeated in volumes two and three: "Acknowledgments," "The Life and Work of Robinson Jeffers: An Introduction," "Methodology," and "Guide to Collections." Also, except in rare instances for the purpose of clarification, footnote material is not repeated subsequently. Readers should rely on index

entries to locate information in the edition as a whole. Whenever possible, minor errors are corrected at the first opportunity in a following volume. If, for instance, ongoing research uncovers a discrepancy in the birth or death year provided for a person in volume one, the correct date is given in a note appended to the person's first appearance in volume two; in such cases, the latter entry supersedes the former one. A list of substantive changes, corrections, and additions will be provided in volume three.