High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

So what if we're doomed?

Climate chaos, mass extinction, the collapse of civilization: A guide to facing the ecocide.

Brian Calvert | **ESSAY** | **July 24, 2017** | *From the print edition*

In the winter of 2013, I drove up California's Central Valley to Stockton, to interview Cambodian parents who'd lost children in one of the nation's many mass school shootings. A local man named Patrick Purdy had parked his station wagon behind an elementary school, set it on fire with a Molotov cocktail, and, as curious children ran toward him, shot them with an assault rifle. Purdy killed five children and wounded nearly 30. All of the dead were Cambodian or Vietnamese. The parents had survived war, genocide and refugee camps, only to have their children murdered in America.

The shooting took place in 1989, 24 years before I visited, but one mother wept so hard during her interview, it seemed no time had passed for her. I had spent much of my early career as a foreign correspondent, speaking to men, women and children in places torn up by war or political violence. And though I'd left the last of these assignments, in Afghanistan, more than a year earlier, the stark irony of the Stockton shooting brought back a familiar, low-register pain. I wrapped up the interviews and headed back to Orange County, south of Los Angeles, dragging the day behind me like a chain. I had a small apartment near the coast, and in the mornings I would run along the Bolsa Chica wetlands, where a pumpjack groaned in its lonesome, eternal way and a pair of kestrels hunted the brush from a cluster of palm trees. Some mornings, a pair of Blackhawk helicopters would fly by, thundering over the surf. *We're still at war,* they'd whisper. *Do not doubt it.*

In this state of mind, a few days after the Stockton trip, I came across the work of Paul Kingsnorth, a British writer who called himself a "recovering environmentalist." He was one of the founders of The Dark Mountain Project, a movement of philosophers, writers and artists that had emerged from the 2008

economic crisis, and he believed the planet was experiencing an "ecocide that nobody seems able to prevent." Ecocide — the total destruction of our home — seemed inevitable to them, and to me, given the things I'd seen and any number of ongoing catastrophes: mass extinction, climate chaos, flooded coasts, mega-drought; oceans turning to acid, permafrost to muck. We humans are a disastrous species, as bad for the Earth as a meteor strike, and the realization of this had established in me a new kind of sadness, a mixture of guilt and mourning for a loss yet to come. Kingsnorth was one of the few people who seemed to voice a similar pain, and I began following his writing. I eventually moved to Colorado, and, not long after, saw that Kingsnorth was hosting a retreat in the Spanish Pyrenees, for "grief in the age of ecocide." I immediately signed up. Now that my pain had been named, I wanted to understand what to do with it.

SUBLIME: The L.A. River 2, 2015.

Elena Dorfman

THE RETREAT WAS CALLED "SHADOWS IN THE WILD." The idea behind it was to learn meditation methods, eat healthy food, hike — and discuss the ecocide. A short week of this would conclude with a 24-hour solo in the "wilderness." There were about a dozen participants, mostly from Europe: journalists, professors, musicians, programmers, civil servants. On the first day, we hiked to an old stone farmhouse in the Alta Garrotxa, a folding, forested range of steep canyons and limestone crags in the eastern Pyrenees. We pitched our tents among the pine trees surrounding the house, then gathered in the main room to join Kingsnorth and our guides for dinner. A fire roared in the hearth, and we sat around two heavy wooden tables, drinking the last wine we'd see for the week.

[SIDEBAR]

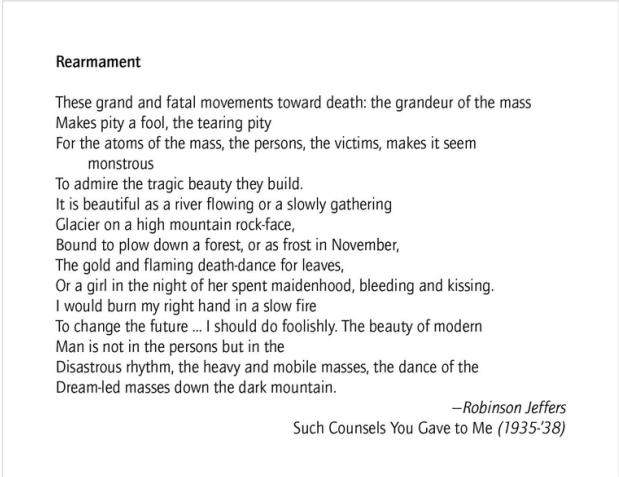
Kingsnorth, then 44, was tall, with shaggy brown hair, ruddy cheeks and a soft-spoken manner, polished no doubt by the numerous gatherings he'd hosted since the inception of the Dark Mountain Project. Over the next few days, he told us, we would engage in a kind of therapy designed for people who believe the end of civilization is upon us. "Simply by paying attention to the darker things in the world — it gives people permission to have a conversation with people that they've been having a hard time having," he said. "Dark Mountain is a rolling conversation about how to live in the age that we're living in without falling into the abyss."

His outlook had not always been so grim. He grew up wandering England's mountains and moors with his father, "a compulsive long-distance walker." This led him toward environmental activism, as did a formative trip, at the age of 21, to Borneo's rainforest, with its moonlit rivers, fruit bats, hornbills and hooting gibbons. Back home, he saw his society as "atomized" and inward-looking, a place of streetlights and asphalt and advertisements, "screaming for my attention, trying to sell me something, tell me who to be, what to desire and to need." He set out to save "nature from people," first fighting road development in England, then organizing protests against globalization. Over time, though, he became disillusioned. Environmentalism had left the wild behind in favor of "sustainability," he thought, "an entirely human-centered piece of politicking, disguised as concern for 'the planet.' "

"Something inside me broke somehow," he said. "I thought, 'This isn't working. We're totally fucked. The machine will go on until it's killed everything or collapses or both. But the wild world, justice — I still believe in that. What can I do with that?' "

And so he had gone looking for another way of being. He started writing and publishing fiction, poetry and essays. Along the way, he came across the work of a forgotten 20th century poet named Robinson Jeffers, and there found an intellectual mooring. Jeffers thought humans unable to understand themselves as a part of nature, and therefore doomed to destroy it. He wrote from the Northern Coast of California, putting landscape and animals above humans and their delusions, through two world wars and the onslaught of the modern industrial age. His writing had a grim resolve to it that matched Kingsnorth's, a sense of tragedy best captured in the poem from which Dark Mountain draws its name, "Rearmament." Jeffers wrote the poem in 1935, the year Hitler became führer and a windstorm swept 12 million pounds of dirt from the Great Plains into Chicago. Jeffers describes humanity as a slow-moving glacier "bound to plow down a forest," headed for a

future only fools believe they can change: "The beauty of modern / Man is not in the persons but in the / Disastrous rhythm, the heavy and mobile masses, / the dance of the / Dream-led masses down the dark mountain."



Rearmament

These grand and fatal movements toward death: the grandeur of the mass
Makes pity a fool, the tearing pity
For the atoms of the mass, the persons, the victims, makes it seem
monstrous
To admire the tragic beauty they build.
It is beautiful as a river flowing or a slowly gathering
Glacier on a high mountain rock-face,
Bound to plow down a forest, or as frost in November,
The gold and flaming death-dance for leaves,
Or a girl in the night of her spent maidenhood, bleeding and kissing.
I would burn my right hand in a slow fire
To change the future ... I should do foolishly. The beauty of modern
Man is not in the persons but in the
Disastrous rhythm, the heavy and mobile masses, the dance of the
Dream-led masses down the dark mountain.

–Robinson Jeffers
Such Counsels You Gave to Me *(1935-'38)*

Kingsnorth felt a kinship with Jeffers, he said, "standing like a hawk on these wild cliffs, watching a process he clearly thinks is doomed, and just watches it, even though it causes him grief." Relying in part on Jeffers' work, Kingsnorth built an idea he called "dark ecology." In the *Orion* essay where he coined the term, he offered five answers to the ecological crisis, most of them suggestions for reconnecting to the wilder world: preserving nonhuman life; rooting oneself in the work of land or place; insisting that nature has intrinsic value; and "building refuges" where non-human life can flourish. "Withdraw," Kingsnorth advised, "so that you can allow yourself to sit back quietly and feel, intuit, work out what is right for you and what nature might need from you. Withdraw because refusing to help the machine advance — refusing to tighten the ratchet further — is a deeply moral position."

Withdraw? I could almost hear the groans from activists around the world — protesters, lobbyists, lawyers, half of California, every editor at *Grist*. Indeed, writing for *Grist* in 2012, Wen Stephenson warned against Kingsnorth's "defeatist" approach, saying that without serious action to address climate change, "the consequences will be a whole lot more 'unthinkable' than darning socks and growing carrots," especially for "those non-rich, non-Western folks Kingsnorth cares about." He had a fair point, but not a helpful one. Without concerted action, the world was probably headed for a new Dark Age, one of heat and hurricanes and sun-blasted barbarism. I simply wasn't convinced humans could prevent it. Spain, then, was a way to examine that belief, to figure out what to do with it.

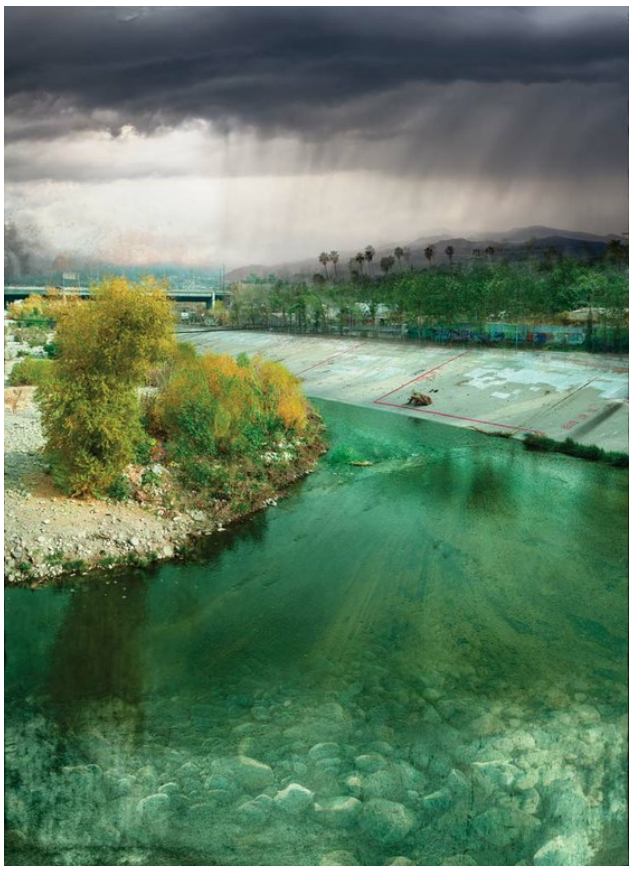
Later that night, I walked out of the farmhouse and into the darkness, following the beam of my headlamp along a stone wall and down a dirt path to my tent. The air had a spring bite, and my breath came in puffs that drifted through the trees. I paused to watch the stars. Some of what Kingsnorth said made sense, but I found it hard to reconcile the idea of withdrawing with simultaneously seeking justice. His message articulated a kind of common despair, or resignation, as though the human race were a cancer patient given six months to live. But that kind of thinking can only assuage grief, not turn it into something useful.

Perhaps there were more answers in Jeffers' work, beyond Dark Mountain doom and catharsis. After all, the poet profoundly influenced environmental thought throughout the 20th century. Ansel Adams was a friend, whose famous black-and-white landscapes bear Jeffers' metaphysical fingerprints. John Steinbeck would pore over his poems alongside his friends, Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, and Ed Ricketts, a marine ecologist. David Brower, the former head of the Sierra Club, called Jeffers' relationship to the California Coast, "one of the most uncanny and complete relationships between a man and his natural background known in literature." Edward Abbey has conversations with Jeffers throughout *Desert Solitaire*, though he never mentions his name. In a poem called "Hurt Hawks," Jeffers describes a wounded redtail that he must put down. "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk," he writes. Abbey's version: "I'd rather kill a man than a snake."

These men were drawn to Jeffers' work in part because of his philosophy of "inhumanism" — a deliberate attack on the human exceptionalism that Kingsnorth so derides. At its center is a perspective of deep time and humanity's insignificance in the cosmos. And yet Jeffers also saw humans as an integral part of an interconnected whole: "There is not an atom in all the universes / But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagnetism, light, heat, and the other / Flamings, the nerves in the night's black flesh, flow them together; the stars, the winds and the people: one energy, One existence, one music, one organism, one life, one God: star-fire and rock-strength, the sea's cold flow / And man's dark soul."

I crawled into my sleeping bag, as an owl hooted somewhere in the woods. There was a clear connection between Jeffers and the environmental movement — a bright shining line of well-meaning white guys that stretches from Abbey to Muir to Thoreau and on back to the Romantics. Their influence runs now through slick REI ads and "cabin porn" websites, and I must admit the fantasy tempts me: drop off the grid, chop wood in warm flannel, ease back each night by the fire with a couple of

tuckered dogs, a book and a shimmering tumbler of whiskey. But even if it were realistic, could that actually be a morally defensible position? What about everyone else?



SUBLIME: The L.A. River 3, 2015.

Elena Dorfman

THE NEXT DAY, WE HEADED OUT FOR A HIKE and an exercise in storytelling. The hills behind the farmhouse were steep, like everything in the Alta Garrotxa, which was wilder than I'd expected. We marched single-file up the trail, through holm oak and beech, past vines and brambles and patches of earth churned by wild pigs. I stepped over a salamander, bright yellow and black, as an Australian named John, a professional gambler, hiked ahead of me. John, a lanky, buzz-cut 40-something, had come to see most people around him as wasteful and oblivious. He'd look out from his place in the city and see offices empty, lights on, row after row, and despair. "I'm a person who has lost almost all hope," he told us. Now, though, John took the lead, his long legs carrying him at a brisk pace. I felt lighter, too, in this strange column of dark-mountaineers. At the end of an arduous section of trail, we stopped to catch our breath. John was smiling now, sweating. "I think we're doing something right," he said. "I think so," I replied.

At a clearing, we separated into smaller groups. Our guide, a bright-smiling German named Korbi, told us to hike into the woods alone, find objects that spoke to us, and assemble them in a way that would answer the question: "What brought you here?" I followed a game trail through a thicket of holly, where an ancient dead pine stood. It was massive and gray and twisted, and reminded me of trees I climbed as a boy. After a sheepish look around, I heaved myself up, settled into its branches, and thought about home.

I grew up in Pinedale, Wyoming, a ranch town divided by Pine Creek, the outlet of Fremont Lake, named for an "explorer" and carved by glaciers. My family's trailer wasn't far from the creek, which was flanked on each side by woods — pine, aspen and willow. As children, my sister and I spent most of our time there. Carrie and I were born 13 months apart, "Irish twins" and best friends, and when the creek ran high from snowmelt, we would strip to our underwear and float it through town. The water and woods were our summer home, which we shared with duck and moose, marten and osprey, fox and deer.

One afternoon, I went to the creek alone, exploring the bottomlands until I found a rise of sagebrush and potentilla I'd never noticed. As I started to cross, a killdeer appeared, shrieking and feigning a broken wing. She kept up her dance until I backed away. I chose another angle to walk, noting again when she began to feign injury. We had this conversation until I triangulated where her nest must be. I scanned the ground, inch by inch, until I found it, three speckled eggs in a tight grass bowl. It was a moment of communion: the mountains, ground by glaciers, flowed into the lake, whose water built my bones, and these eggs and the chicks within — all of us connected, the peaks, the lake, the creek, the birds, the boy. A feeling of great responsibility came over me. Their secret uncovered, the fate of the eggs was up to me. I rose and left them safely hidden. This is one of my last good memories of childhood.

Pinedale sits in the basin of the Upper Green River Basin, once rich in beaver and mink. In the late 1800s, it was a gathering place for trappers and bands of Shoshone, who would come out of their mountain hideaways each summer to revel and trade. For many years, Pinedale celebrated this "Rendezvous" with an annual pageant, billing it as "a must-see" reenactment of "the most romantic era of Wyoming history." It included a fur trader wagon train; a pipe ceremony; a sun priest and pony dancers; the purchase of a Shoshone woman named Sweetgrass; and a horse race for blankets. Rendezvous weekend meant a lot of tourists, and a lot of drinking at the three bars in town, which all drew their names from our more cattled history: the Corral, the Cowboy and Stockman's.

In the pageant, Carrie and I played Shoshone children, our hair spray-painted black, our skin colored a burnt umber. No one could do anything about our eyes, however, so those stayed bright blue behind the paint. Our job was to play around the teepees, where our mother and other women, similarly costumed, scraped hides in the sun. My mother's new husband, Dave, played a mountain man. Dave was a short-tempered veteran of the Vietnam War, a chest-poker unamused by stepchildren. He took his trapper role seriously, grew his beard and hair out, wore beaded buckskin

and a fur hat, carried a muzzleloader, a hatchet and a jug of whiskey. He rode through town wild-eyed on a dun horse, awesome and frightening, a man stuck in a myth. At the end of one of those drunken Rendezvous nights, Dave came home late to the trailer, stumbled down the hall — and turned into the room where Carrie slept.

SUBLIME: The L.A. River 4, 2015.

Elena Dorfman

I COME FROM A CULTURE OF TAKERS. No white male, certainly not from the American West, can claim otherwise. The takers flowed out of the Bronze Age, from riders of the Carpathian steppes of Eastern Europe, who put together the unbeatable combination of horse and wheel, who buried their warriors with their steeds, their chariots and their javelins. The takers spread as far as India, Europe and Scandinavia, to Vikings and the "Northmen" of what is now France. In 1066, these Normans invaded England and usurped the Anglo-Saxons, raiders named for their swords, who had ousted the Celts.

One sleepless night, I found online an old reference to my family name, from 1203 — a knight of the Norman Conquest. The first Calvert to settle in America sailed from England with two ships full of Catholics to found the state of Maryland, in 1634. He planted a cross and claimed the land in the name of his father, Lord Baltimore. When their descendent, my great-great-grandfather, came to Wyoming as a scout for the Army and the Union Pacific Railroad, he was the sharpened tip of that culture of conquest, the same culture that colonized and subjugated places I found myself in, decades later, as a journalist.

These takers are Marlow's "conquerors" in *Heart of Darkness*: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Indigenous people of South America call them "termites." In

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates calls them Dreamers: "Once, the Dreamers' parameters were caged by technology and by the limits of horsepower and wind. But the Dreamers have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion, a plunder with no known precedent."

Carrie's abuse lasted years, until she left home, at the age of 14. Our family fell apart, a splintering that took decades to mend. Determined to become a different kind of man, I ran as far away as I could — to Cambodia and wars and sorrow that echoed my own. Carrie eventually made peace with things, but I held onto a deep sense of shame and anger.

What brought you here? This culture, these takers. My life's history is tied to their system of plunder and its superstructure: a culture of greed and power; locomotives, interstates and Manifest Destiny; pavement and parking lots; extirpation and extinction; genocide, slavery, racism; combustion, warheads, oligarchs. The takers' mentality runs through the environmental debate, too, and now we face the prospect of their bright-green vision, a dying world where humans have mastered, godlike, the technologies of dominion: massive solar arrays, geo-engineered shade, gleaming hydroponic cities and sweeping fields of mono-cultured soy — the output of a cultural algorithm that has been running thousands of years, a system of consumption and motion that will do anything to keep its wheels turning.

I descended the pine tree, saddened. But then I noticed the fresh green needles of the younger pines, which seemed to be the progeny of the giant. I picked up a dead branch, stripped a living one, bound them together with a sprig of holly, and returned to the group. I'm here, I told them, because I want to find a way to bring all that I've seen to bear on the ecological crisis. I just don't know how.

ON THE THIRD MORNING of the retreat, we gathered on a grassy terrace below the farmhouse for a lesson in qigong. Qigong is a practice of movement and meditation that comes through Taoism and includes ideas of balance for well-being, between opposites, as symbolized by yin and yang, or between five elements: fire, earth, metal, water, wood. I had seen many practitioners of qigong over the years, in Beijing's parks or along the Phnom Penh riverfront, as I stumbled home from a night of drinking. I had never tried it, the idea of power meridians and chakras being too much for me. Here in the mountains, though, barefoot on the dewy grass, sweeping my arms from side to side, I felt the pain of the previous day dissipate, replaced with calm.

SUBLIME: The L.A. River 5, 2015.

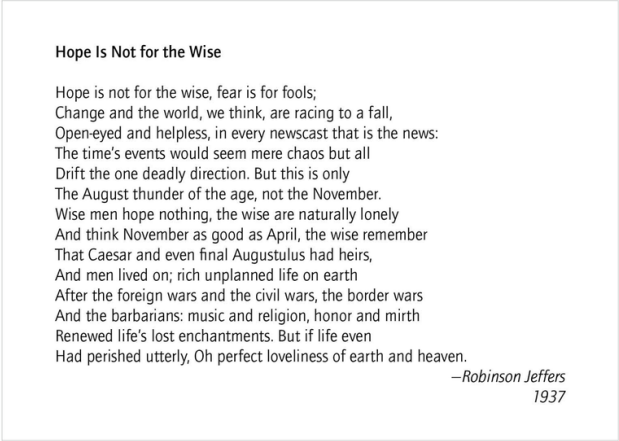
Elena Dorfman

There was something in the way the week was going, with its emphasis on quiet and connection, that I found helpful. But I was still having a hard time squaring my thoughts with Kingsnorth's message and the Dark Mountain rationale. It wasn't that I thought they were wrong; it just seemed like they were missing something, especially in Jeffers. A few weeks earlier, I'd called a Jeffers scholar at Minot State in North Dakota, ShaunAnne Tangney, who also studies the American West and apocalyptic literature. "I don't see a good 'but' in the Dark Mountain Project, quite frankly," she told me. "Jeffers played with the rise and fall of cultures, but there's always something else that comes after for him. Humanity will fall, but nature is still here. From beginning to end, earliest to last, Jeffers has one constant, and that's beauty."

That thought stuck to me like a bur, all the way to Spain. If I was initially intrigued by the darkness in Jeffers' poetry, I was coming around to his ideas on beauty. Helpful now, following my pine-tree reveries, was the realization that Jeffers' art was a product of grief.

Jeffers had watched both his newborn daughter and his father die in 1914, the same year the Great War began. Not long after, he and his wife, Una, moved from Los Angeles to Northern California. In 1919, the couple bought land near Carmel, a place of pine and fog north of the roaring coast of Big Sur. They lived first in a drafty cabin, where they cut and burned eucalyptus and oak, redwood and pine, and which they filled with books on flowers, shells, birds and stars. The Jeffers liked their promontory, where cormorants and pelicans kept them company, along with the hawks that would become a central symbol in Jeffers' work — marsh- and sparrow-, redtail, Cooper's.

Despite the idyllic setting and the birth of twin boys in 1916, Jeffers remained in a state of despair. His poetry, he thought, was unoriginal, "doomed to go on imitating dead men," even as a new movement of writers seemed to be "divorcing poetry from reason and ideas." At the birth of the Modern Age, Jeffers was contemplating suicide.



Hope Is Not for the Wise

Hope is not for the wise, fear is for fools;
Change and the world, we think, are racing to a fall,
Open-eyed and helpless, in every newscast that is the news:
The time's events would seem mere chaos but all
Drift the one deadly direction. But this is only
The August thunder of the age, not the November.
Wise men hope nothing, the wise are naturally lonely
And think November as good as April, the wise remember
That Caesar and even final Augustulus had heirs,
And men lived on; rich unplanned life on earth
After the foreign wars and the civil wars, the border wars
And the barbarians: music and religion, honor and mirth
Renewed life's lost enchantments. But if life even
Had perished utterly, Oh perfect loveliness of earth and heaven.

—Robinson Jeffers
1937

The couple, meanwhile, had plans for a house made of granite and hired a stonemason to build it. A despairing Jeffers offered to help. Day by day, he hauled stones from the oceanfront and mixed mortar, slowly learning to fit each piece together. He found solace in the stones, in the waves and tides, in the work. At night, he walked to watch the stars. His younger brother, Hamilton, was an astronomer at the nearby Lick Observatory, and Jeffers liked to think about the earth and sea amid the swells of deep time, a universe of moons and planets, galaxies and novas.

By the time the house was done, along with a tower Jeffers built himself, he had transformed into an original artist and thinker. With the California Coast as a backdrop, Jeffers wrote poems that were compared to the works of Walt Whitman and Homer. One critic called his verse "as primitively American as the flintlock and the Maypole."

By 1932, he was celebrated on the cover of *Time*, for elegant achievements in verse-craft and honest thought. He was popular for a time, but as his sons reached fighting age, Jeffers spoke out against World War II. His darker views of humanity earned him few fans, given the tide of American jingoism and the threat of Nazi Germany.

The publisher of his 1948 collection, *The Double Axe,* included an objection to its "unpatriotic" content. His work lost favor with academic critics and faded from public view. He was left out of university anthologies. Jeffers died in 1962, aged 75, and somewhat forgotten — though not by everyone.

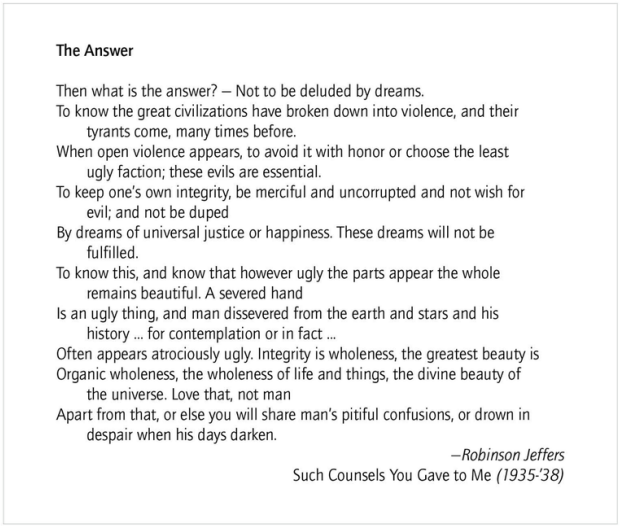
Jeffers' works had an impact on Doug Tompkins, the billionaire conservationist and founder of North Face. In the early 1990s, Tompkins left the commercial world behind to live in Chile, at the Southern tip of the world, using his wealth to establish massive conservation programs. Tompkins died in a kayaking accident in December 2015, paddling a section of General Carrera Lake, high in the Andes. At the time of his death, he and his wife, Kris, had managed to preserve 2.2 million acres of land — a sanctuary across coastal fjords and endangered forests, supporting rare deer and wild pigs, pumas and jaguars, anteaters and macaws. His death was a huge loss not only to friends and family but to the wild places of the world. Tompkins had been a reader of Jeffers and was long been inspired by beauty, Jerry Mander, his friend and fellow co-founder of the Foundation for Deep Ecology, told me. "He would talk about beauty all the time." Tompkins considered beauty itself a natural resource in need of legal protection, and beauty had been a primary force in his life beginning from his teenage years. "A lot of people talk about beauty, but he would talk about it as a cause itself," Mander said. "That was his primary guiding force, to tell you the truth."

I'd been thinking a lot about that conversation, and the idea of beauty in general, in Spain. Tompkins, who also knew Kingsnorth, was the epitome of Jeffers' ethos. But was his work meaningful? And if so, was that only because of its scale? Or was dedication to that kind of beauty merely glorified withdrawal? Where does the establishment of a nature preserve in Patagonia fit with the murder of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, or the drowning of Syrian refugees in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, or the collateral damage of U.S. drone strikes?

At night in Kabul, awakened by nightmares, I'd stand on the roof and smoke, Scorpio shimmering over the dusty city. I'd try to put myself somewhere else in the world in relation to the stars, the mountains of Wyoming maybe. I could never do it. I was always overwhelmed, disoriented. When I'd had enough, I moved to California. I would surf in the mornings, watching the waves come in, undulating, gunmetal-gray, dolphins slipping beneath me like shades. I felt at peace there — and useless. I thought I should try environmental writing and a healthier way of living, but what I found was a new kind of grief. I'd run out of places to go. In taking a step back in Spain, however, I was starting to see a way through. Kingsnorth embraced Jeffers' inhumanism, and Tompkins his ideas on beauty. But the immensity of the

ecocide demands more. Our grief comes from the takers and their modern machine, which is one of violence and injury. If our sanity is to survive the ecocide, we must address these two pains in tandem: grief for the loss of things to come *and* the injustices that surround us.

We can do this through beauty and justice, which are closer together than they first appear.



The Answer

Then what is the answer? — Not to be deluded by dreams.
To know the great civilizations have broken down into violence, and their tyrants come, many times before.
When open violence appears, to avoid it with honor or choose the least ugly faction; these evils are essential.
To keep one's own integrity, be merciful and uncorrupted and not wish for evil; and not be duped
By dreams of universal justice or happiness. These dreams will not be fulfilled.
To know this, and know that however ugly the parts appear the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand
Is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth and stars and his history ... for contemplation or in fact ...
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or drown in despair when his days darken.

—*Robinson Jeffers*
Such Counsels You Gave to Me *(1935-'38)*

Consider the portrait series by photographer Nick Bowers, "Scared Scientists (http://nickbowers.com/work/personal/scared-scientists/)." In it, Bowers takes portraits of researchers as they are interviewed about their greatest fears. The result is a collection of images that captures the low-grade trauma many of us are experiencing. The greatest fear for Shauna Murray, a biological scientist at the University of Technology Sydney, for example, is "reaching four degrees (Celsius) of warming." "At the moment, we've at least 10,000 different papers, completed over 20 years, each using different data sets, and they are all coming to the same climate change conclusions," she says. "We've a weight of evidence that the average person is simply not aware of — and this frightens me. I'd like to think that we're not going to reach the projected four degrees of warming this century; because I can't even imagine what that would look like. Eighty years is not that long, and unless we act soon, my seven-year-old daughter will probably have to live through that." Her portrait looks like something out of war photography: hair mussed, eyes wide in shock, mouth grimacing — a new class of soldier, one traumatized by computer models and visions of a frontline future unknown to most of us.

Bowers' work bears witness to injury, not only to the scientists but to future generations. The series is a work of art that bends beauty toward justice, addressing grief with both. Likewise, when Coates establishes a relationship between injustice

and exploitation of both people and nature, he is arguing for justice. However, he is also arguing for integrity, which is close to Jeffers' ideal of beauty: "However ugly the parts appear the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand / Is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth and stars and his history ... for contemplation or in fact ... / Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe."

Perhaps, then, the way through the ecocide is through the pursuit of integrity, a duty toward rebalancing the whole, toward fairness, in both senses of the word. Elaine Scarry, a professor of aesthetics at Harvard University, describes this relationship in her book-length essay, *On Beauty and Being Just*. The word fair comes to us through Old English, *fæger*, which meant both pleasing to the sight and morally good. This is because beautiful things serve a specific purpose. They "give rise to the notion of distribution," Scarry says, "to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of 'a symmetry of everyone's relationship to one another.' " Beautiful things "act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space … letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before."

The pursuit of beauty can create a form of justice, a healing of injury. When I allow my backyard to grow unchecked, when the un-mown lawn becomes a tangle of blade and seed, the garden a mess of roses, grapes and hollyhocks, I have created a refuge and put something to right, returning wild to the world that has been taken away elsewhere by violence, trespass or dominion. The benefactors are the sparrows and buntings, hummingbirds and butterflies, the praying mantises, hornets and bees, the black widow in the shed, the garter snake in the flowerbed. Conversely, the creation of beauty can come from advocates of justice. A human rights lawyer, a sanctuary church, protesters for women's rights or science or both, demonstrations against police violence — these heal injury also, rebalance the whole, adding beauty to the world.

I am a decade shy of the age at which my mother died, less than a year after my grandfather's suicide. One day my ashes will be scattered in the eroding mountains, and our civilization, like that of Ozymandias, crumble, and the Earth be swallowed by our dying red star. This is no cause for despair; it is a reminder to be meaningful, to be makers instead of takers, to be of service to something — beauty, justice, loved ones, strangers, lilacs, worms. This is what Jeffers, the poet laureate of the ecocide, has to teach us. He points the way, but we must go further, and we must do so while

keeping a sense of perspective. In Spain I carried with me a handwritten note from James Karman, a Jeffers scholar and author who helped me greatly in my reporting. On it are the final lines of a poem called "Credo" and a favorite Jeffers' insight: "The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the heartbreaking beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it."

SUBLIME: The L.A. River 1, 2015.

Elena Dorfman

THE FINAL DAY OF THE RETREAT promised to be dismal. It had rained all night and through the dawn, sagging the tents and soaking the fields. This was our finale, the "wilderness solo," and it was shaping up to be a sufferfest. In some sunnier moment, I and two other men had decided to range far from the farmhouse to a nearby crag. We slogged down old roads and footpaths, through muddy valleys and drizzling woods, as raindrops pounded our parka hoods. Climbing through brambles and mist, we broke at last from a stand of mountain pine at tree line. Just then the sun came out. Still silent, as instructed, we grinned and laughed and hugged.

My companions found their way to solo sites nearby. I scrambled a bit higher, to a flat section near the crag's peak, where I found a soft, grassy spot between two boulders. I rigged my tarp, fluffed my bag and removed my wet shoes and socks. I sat back against a rock and stretched my toes and let the sun dry my face. I watched a crow for a while, and two hawks wheeling above a derelict stone keep. I took deep breaths, turned a smooth stone in my hand. From the valley came clamorous birdsong, from the mountains a chilly wind and wisps of fog. I took a swig of water, then closed my eyes and leaned my head back, feeling for the first time in a long time an emotion that might have been joy.

Which is probably why I didn't notice the storm blow in — not until the first flash-bang of lightning and thunder. I jumped up to see dark clouds sweeping down valley, a thick, determined thunderstorm. From below the cliff rose the panicked bleating of wild goats. I considered going down. But this was the last day, and I wanted to make it count.

Fuck it, I thought at last. *I'm doing qigong*. I found a flat, smooth spot and stood there with my bare feet apart. I took a soft breath, sweeping my arms over my head and down. Rain lashed the mountaintop and spattered my face and lighting flashed in purple, splintered arcs. Sometimes it sparked sideways, sometimes straight down, flash after flash, followed by thunder. To the east, the moon rose over the wine-dark sea, breaking through the clouds as a giant bolt of lighting flashed below it. I laughed out loud. No one would believe this; no one would care. This moment was mine alone. I stood transfixed in the darkness, watching the storm and grinning like a lunatic, a tiny living part of a beautiful, heartbreaking world.

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