



Robinson Jeffers

(1887-1962)

Ocean (1954)

The gray whales are going south: I see their fountains
Rise from black sea: great dark bulks of hot blood
Plowing the deep cold sea to their trysting-place
Off Mexican California, where water is warm, and love
Finds massive joy: from the flukes to the blowhole the
 whole giant
Flames like a star. In February storm the ocean
Is black and rainbowed; the high spouts of white spray
Rise and fall over in the wind. There is no April in the
 ocean;
How do these creatures know that spring is at hand?
 They remember their ancestors
That crawled on earth: the little fellows like otters, who
 took to the sea
And have grown great. Go out to the ocean, little ones,
You will grow great or die.

 And there the small trout
Flicker in the streams that tumble from the coast mountain,
Little quick flames of life: but from time to time
One of them goes mad, wanting room and freedom; he
 slips between the rock jaws
And takes to sea, where from time immemorial
The long sharks wait. If he lives he becomes a steelhead,
A rainbow trout grown beyond nature in the ocean. Go
 out to the great ocean,
Grow great or die.

O ambitious children,
It would be wiser no doubt to rest in the brook
And remain little. But if the devil drives
I hope you will scull far out to the wide ocean and find
your fortune, and beware of teeth.

It is not important. There are deeps you will never reach
and peaks you will never explore,
Where the great squids and kraken lie in the gates, in the
awful twilight
The whip-armed hungers; and mile under mile below,
Deep under deep, on the deep floor, in the darkness
Under the weight of the world: like lighted galleons the
ghost-fish,
With phosphorescent portholes along their flanks,
Sail over and eat each other: the condition of life,
To eat each other: but in the slime below
Prodigious worms as great and as slow as glaciers burrow
in the sediment,
Mindless and blind, huge tubes of muddy flesh
Sucking not meat but carrion, drippings and offal
From the upper sea. They move a yard in a year,
Where there are no years, no sun, no seasons, darkness
and slime;
They spend nothing on action, all on gross flesh.

O ambitious ones,
Will you grow great, or die? It hardly matters; the words are
comparative;
Greatness is but less little; and death's changed life.