

Setting the Stage

Science 1

What is Science and What Do Scientists Do That's Different?: Why Trust Them—and for What?

From:

The Beginning and the End and Other Poems:

The Last Works of Robinson Jeffers 1954, 1963

The Beginning and the End

The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing,
Furiously following with the other planets
Their lord the sun: her body is molten metal pressed rigid
By its own mass; her beautiful skin, basalt and granite and the lighter
elements,
Swam to the top. She was like a mare in her heat eyeing the stallion,
Screaming for life in the womb; her atmosphere
Was the breath of her passion: not the blithe air
Men breathe and live, but marsh-gas, ammonia, sulphured hydrogen,
Such poison as our remembering bodies return to
When they die and decay and the end of life
Meets its beginning. The sun heard her and stirred
Her thick air with fierce lightnings and flagellations
Of germinal power, building impossible molecules, amino acids
And flashy unstable proteins: then life was born,
Its nitrogen from ammonia, carbon from methane,
Water from the cloud and salts from the young seas,
It dribbled down into the primal ocean like a babe's urine
Soaking the cloth: heavily built protein molecules
Chemically growing, burning apart as the tensions
In the inordinate molecule become unbearable—
That is to say, growing and reproducing themselves, a virus
On the warm ocean.

. . . [omitted lines]

What is this thing called life?—But I believe
That the earth and stars too, and the whole glittering universe, and rocks
on the mountain have life,

Only we do not call it so—I speak of the life
That oxidizes fats and proteins and carbo-
Hydrates to live on, and from that chemical energy
Makes pleasure and pain, wonder, love, adoration, hatred and terror:
 how do these things grow
From a chemical reaction?

 I think they were here already. I think the rocks
And the earth and the other planets, and the stars and galaxies
Have their various consciousness, all things are conscious;
But the nerves of an animal, the nerves and brain
Bring it to focus; the nerves and brain are like a burning-glass
To concentrate the heat and make it catch fire:
It seems to us martyrs hotter than the blazing hearth
From which it came. So we scream and laugh, clamorous animals
Born howling to die groaning; the old stones in the dooryard
Prefer silence: but those and all things are their own awareness,
As the cells of a man have; they feel and feed and influence each other, each
 unto all,
Like the cells of a man's body making one being,
They make one being, one consciousness, one life, one God.

. . . [omitted lines]

 This is man's mission:
To find and feel; all animal experience
Is a part of God's life. He would be balanced and neutral
As a rock on the shore, but the red sunset-waves
Of life's passions fling over him [god]. He [god] endures them,
We endure ours. That ancient wound in the brain
Has never healed, it hangs wide, it lets in the stars
Into the animal-stinking ghost-ridden darkness, the human soul.
The mind of man. . . .
Slowly, perhaps, man may grow into it—
Do you think so? This villainous king of beasts, this deformed ape?—He
 has mind
And imagination, he might go far
And end in honor. The hawks are more heroic but man has a steeper mind,
Huge pits of darkness, high peaks of light,
You may calculate a comet's orbit or the dive of a hawk, not a man's mind.