

TABITHA SOREN

Panic Beach (03589-9), 2010
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COURTESY THE ARTIST

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

At Sea

(for Pablo Neruda)

In 1953 **Lawrence Ferlinghetti** cofounded City Lights, the first paperback bookstore in the United States, a Mecca for millions. His *Coney Island of the Mind* is one of the best-selling volumes of poetry by any living American poet. Born in Yonkers, New York, in 1919, Ferlinghetti has received the Robert Frost Memorial Medal and the first Literarian Award of the National Book Foundation.

"At Sea" was first published by City Lights Books, November 2017. Used with permission from the poet.

The sea through the trees
distant
shining
The dark foreground
a stone wall
with lichen
An old salt
sits staring out
at the sea
A wind sways the palms
infrequently
Another day prepares
for heat and silence
A small plane
buzzing like a fly
disturbs the sky
The air eats it
Far out on the slumbering sea
a trawler creeps along
The wind from the south
blows the bait in the fish's mouth
The yawning sea
swallows the trawler
The lichen lives on
in its volcanic stone
taciturn
eternal
awaiting its turn
in the turn of the sun
Never will I return here
never again
breathe this wind
on this far run
in the reaches of morning
where the sea whispers
patience and salt
The sun
scorches the sky
and drops like a burnt-out match
into night

And I am an animal still
 perhaps once a bird
 a halcyon
 who makes its nest at sea
 on my little flight across
 the little chart
 of my existence
 Life goes on
 full of silence and clamor
 in the grey cities
 in the far bourgs
 in the white cities by the sea
 where I go on
 writing my life
 in neither blood nor wine
 I still await an epiphany
 by the petri-dish of the sea
 where all life began
 by swimming
 But it's time now
 to give an accounting of everything
 an explanation of everything
 such as
 why there is darkness at night
 Everywhere the sea is rising
 Am I to be drowned
 with the rest of them
 all the animals of earth
 washed away in ocean
 motherer and moitherer
 in this tremendous moment
 of calamitous sea-change
 as our little world disappears
 in a tremor of ocean and fear
 to the murmur
 of the middle mind of America
 as imbeciles in neckties
 drop from the trees?

No matter then
 if I end up
 in a house of insurgents
 on the Avenida de los Insurgentes
 or shoeless on Boston Common
 or cast-up clueless
 in my great Uncle Désir's
 beach hut
 in St. Thomas
 Pardon my conduct then
 if I can't give you
 any final word—
 a final unified theory of existence—
 all thought subsumed
 in one great thought
 (utopian vision!)
 Humans with all their voices
 as myriad as
 the syllables of the sea
 have never been able to fathom
 man's fate
 nor tell us why we are here
 Still will we be
 free as the sea
 to be nothing but
 our own shadow selves
 beach bums after all
 in future time when
 nations no longer exist
 and the earth is swept
 by ethnic hordes
 in search of food and shelter?
 Neither patient nor placid
 in the face of all this
 in the sea of every day
 with its two tides
 I run before the wind
 immune to hidden reefs or harbors
 Someone throws me
 crystal fruits
 in the shape of life-preservers
 Others wave
 from distant strands
 Goodbye! Goodbye!

Beached at last
 bleached out
 I would to the woods again
 with its ancient trees
 that sing like sitars
 in the wind
 Wordless ragas!
 Shipwrecked ashore
 at the mercy of avaricious gulls—
 And yet and yet
 we are still not born for despair
 Spring comes anyway
 And a gay excursion train appears
 The ancient conductor
 with stove-pipe hat
 and gold pocketwatch
 greets us like long-lost passengers
 gracing us with
 wreathes around our necks
 as arms of lovers
 insanely embrace us
 Is there anything more to be said
 before they carry us off
 as dead
 while we're still dreaming
 still in search
 of the bread of the world
 cast upon the waters
 the dough that rises
 in the yeast of speech
 in the written word
 in poetry
 Tracks upon the sand!
 left by corralled bands of animals
 cornered by mistakes and habitudes
 and trains taken
 to mistaken destinations
 or trips taken or not taken
 with angels of love
 to lower latitudes
 Between two waves
 the ocean is still—
 a silence of ages

lasting but a moment
 between two waves
 of emotion
 as lovers
 turn to each other
 or away
 Love ebbs and flows
 comes and goes
 between two emotions
 but surges forth again
 with each new wave
 as some sea-creature from the deep
 breaks the surface with a leap!
 The sea roars but says no more
 O the yarns it could spin
 if it would
 between its rages
 under the eye of the sun
 under the ear of the sky—
 Plunderers and pieces of eight!
 Invisible cities!
 Crystal skulls!
 Petrified hulls!
 Sailors' masturbations!
 or yesterday's sperm
 lost in the wake
 of a pleasure boat
 O endless the inchoate
 incoherent narrative—Voyageur, pass on!
 We are not our fathers
 yet we carry on
 breathing like them
 loving and killing like them
 Away then away
 in our great tall ships
 over the hills of ocean
 to where Atlantis
 still rides the tides
 or where that magic mountain
 not on any map
 wreathed in radiance
 still hides

—BELIZE, 2/2010