

The Sea Close By, Albert Camus

The Sea Close By¹

Logbook I grew up with the sea and poverty for me was sumptuous; then I lost the sea and found all luxuries gray and poverty unbearable. Since then, I have been waiting. I wait for the homebound ships, the house of the waters, the limpidity of day. I wait patiently, am polite with all my strength. I am seen walking by on fine, sophisticated streets, I admire landscapes, I applaud like everyone, shake hands, but it is not I who speak. Men praise me, I dream a little, they insult me, I scarcely show surprise. Then I forget, and smile at the man who insulted me, or am too courteous in greeting the person I love. Can I help it if all I remember is one image? Finally they summon me to tell them who I am.

"Nothing yet, nothing yet ..."

I surpass myself at funerals. Truly, I excel. I walk slowly through the iron strewn suburbs, taking the wide lanes planted with cement trees that lead to holes in the cold ground. There, beneath the slightly reddened bandage of the sky, I watch bold workmen enter my friends beneath six feet of earth. If I toss the flower a clay-covered hand holds out to me, it never misses the grave. My piety is exact, my feelings as they should be, my head suitably inclined. I am admired for finding just the right word. But I take no credit: I am waiting.

I have been waiting for a long time. Sometimes, I stumble, I lose my touch, success evades me. What does it matter, I am alone then. I wake up at night, and, still half asleep, think I hear the sound of waves, the breathing of waters.

Fully awake, I recognize the wind in the trees and the sad murmur of the empty town. Afterward, all my art is not too much to hide my anguish or clothe it in the prevailing fashion.

At other times, it's the opposite, and I am helped. On certain days in New York, lost at the bottom of those stone and steel shafts where millions of men wander, I would run from one shaft to the next, without seeing where they ended, until, exhausted, I was sustained only by the human mass seeking its way out.

But, each time, there was the distant honking of a tugboat to remind me that this empty well of a city was an island, and that off the tip of the Battery the water of my baptism lay in wait for me, black and rotting, covered with hollow corks.

Thus, I who own nothing, who have given away my fortune, who camp in all my houses, am still heaped, when I choose, with every blessing; I can set sail at any hour, a stranger to despair. There is no country for those who despair, but I know that the sea precedes and follows me, and I hold my madness ready. Those who love and are separated can live in grief, but this is not despair: they know that love exists. This is why I suffer, dry-eyed, in exile.

I am still waiting. A day comes, at last ... The sailors' bare feet beat softly on the deck. We are setting sail at daybreak. The moment we leave the harbor a short, gusty wind vigorously brushes the sea, which curls backward in small, foamless waves.

A little later, the wind freshens and strews the sea with swiftly vanishing camellias. Thus, throughout the morning, we hear our sails slapping above a cheerful pond. The waters are heavy, scaly, covered with cool froth. From time to time the waves lap against the bow; a bitter, unctuous foam, the gods' saliva, flows along the wood and loses itself in the water, where it scatters into shapes that die and are reborn, the hide of some white and blue cow, an exhausted beast that floats for a long time in our wake.

Ever since our departure, the Seagulls have been following our ship, apparently without effort, almost without moving their wings. Their fine, straight

navigation scarcely leans upon the breeze. Suddenly, a loud plop at the level of the kitchens stirs up a greedy alarm among the birds, throwing their fine flight into confusion and sending up a fire of white wings.

The seagulls whirl madly in every direction and then with no loss of speed drop from the fight one by one and dive toward the sea. A few seconds later they are together again on the water, a quarrelsome farmyard that we leave behind, nesting in the hollow of the wave, slowly picking through the manna of the scraps.

At noon, under a deafening sun, the sea is so exhausted it scarcely finds the strength to rise. When it falls back on itself it makes the silence whistle. After an hour's cooking, the pale water, a vast white-hot iron sheet, sizzles. In a minute it will turn and offer its damp side, now hidden in waves and darkness, to the sun.

We pass the gates of Hercules, the headland where Antaeus died. Beyond, there is ocean everywhere; on one side we pass the Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, the meridians wed the latitudes, the Pacific drinks the Atlantic. At once, setting course for Vancouver, we sail slowly toward the South Seas. A few cable lengths away, Easter Island, Desolation, and the New Hebrides file past us in convoy. Suddenly, one morning, the seagulls disappear. We are far from any land, and alone, with our sails and our engines.

Alone also with the horizon. The waves come from the invisible East, patiently, one by one; they reach us, and then, patiently, set off again for the unknown West, one by one. A long voyage, with no beginning and no end ... Rivers and streams pass by, the sea passes and remains. This is how one ought to love, faithful and fleeting. I wed the sea.

The high seas. The sun sinks and is swallowed by the fog long before it reaches the horizon. For a brief moment, the sea is pink on one side and blue on the other. Then the waters grow darker. The schooner slides, minute, over the surface of a perfect circle of thick, tarnished metal. And, at the most peaceful hour, as evening comes, hundreds of porpoises emerge from the water, frolic around us for a moment, then flee to the horizon where there are no men. With them gone, silence and the anguish of primitive waters are what remain.

. . .

A little later still, we meet an iceberg on the Tropic. Invisible, to be sure, after its long voyage in these warm waters, but still effective: it passes to starboard, where the rigging is briefly covered with a frosty dew, while to port the day dies without moisture.

Night does not fall at sea. It rises, rather, toward the still pale sky, from the depths of waters an already drowned sun gradually darkens with its thick ashes. For a brief moment, Venus shines alone above the black waves. In the twinkling of an eye, stars swarm in the liquid night.

The moon has risen. First it lights the water's surface gently, then climbs higher and inscribes itself in the supple water. At last, at its zenith, it lights a whole corridor of sea, a rich river of milk which, with the motion of the ship, streams down inexhaustibly toward us across the dark ocean. Here is the faithful night, the cool night I called for in the rollicking lights, the alcohol, the tumult of desire.

We sail across spaces so vast they seem unending. Sun and moon rise and fall in turn, on the same thread of light and night. Days at sea, as similar each to the other as happiness ...

This life rebellious to forgetfulness, rebellious to memory, that Stevenson speaks of.

Dawn. We sail perpendicularly across the Tropic of Cancer, the waters groan and

are convulsed. Day breaks over a surging sea, full of steel spangles. The sky is white with mist and heat, with a dead but unbearable glare, as if the sun had turned liquid in the thickness of the clouds, over the whole expanse of the celestial vault. A sick sky over a decomposing sea. As the day draws on, the heat grows in the white air. All day long, our bow noses out clouds of flying fish, tiny iron birds, forcing them from their hiding places in the waves.

In the afternoon, we meet a steamer bound for home. The salute our foghorns exchange with three great prehistoric hoots, the signals of passengers lost at sea warning there are other humans present, the gradually increasing distance between the two ships, their separation at last on the malevolent waters, all this fills the heart with pain.

These stubborn madmen, clinging to planks tossed upon the mane of immense oceans, in pursuit of drifting islands: what man who cherishes solitude and the sea will ever keep himself from loving them? In the very middle of the Atlantic, we bend beneath the savage winds that blow endlessly from pole to pole.

Each cry we utter is lost, flies off into limitless space. But this shout, carried day after day on the winds, will finally reach land at one of the flattened ends of the earth and echo timelessly against the frozen walls until a man, lost somewhere in his shell of snow, hears it and wants to smile with happiness. I was half asleep in the early afternoon sun when a terrible noise awoke me. I saw the sun in the depths of the sea, the waves reigning in the surging heavens.

Suddenly, the sea was afire, the sun flowed in long icy draughts down my throat. The sailors laughed and wept around me. They loved, but could not forgive one another. I recognized the world for what it was that day. I decided to accept the fact that its good might at the same time be evil and its transgressions beneficial. I realized that day that there were two truths, and that one of them ought never to be uttered.

The curious austral moon, looking slightly paled, keeps us company for several nights and then slides rapidly from the sky into the sea, which swallows it. The Southern Cross, the infrequent stars, the porous air remain. At the same instant, the wind ceases. The sky rolls and pitches above our immobile masts. Engine dead, sails hove to, we are whistling in the warm night as the water beats amicably against our sides. No commands, the machines are silent.

Why indeed should we continue and why return? Our cup runneth over, a mute rapture lulls us invincibly to sleep. There are days like this when all is accomplished; we must let ourselves flow with them, like swimmers who keep on until exhausted. What can we accomplish? I have always concealed it from myself. Oh bitter bed, princely couch, the crown lies at the bottom of the seas.

In the morning, the lukewarm water foams gently under our propeller. We put on speed. Toward noon, traveling from distant continents, a herd of walrus cross our path, overtake us, and swim rhythmically to the north, followed by multicolored birds which from time to time alight upon their tusks. This rustling forest slowly vanishes on the horizon. A little later the sea is covered with strange yellow flowers. Toward evening, for hour after hour, we are preceded by an invisible song. Comfortably, I fall asleep.

All sails stretched to the keen breeze, we skim across a clear and rippling sea. At top speed, our helm goes hard to port. And toward nightfall, correcting our course again, listing so far to starboard that our sails skim the water, we sail rapidly along the side of a southern continent I recognize from having once flown blindly over it in the barbarous coffin of an airplane. I was an idle king and my chariot dawdled; I waited for the sea but it never came.

The monster roared, took off from the guano fields of Peru, hurled itself above the beaches of the Pacific, flew over the fractured white vertebrae of the Andes and then above the herds of flies that cover the immense Argentinian plain,

linking in one swoop the milk-drowned Uruguayan meadows to Venezuela's black rivers, landing, roaring again, quivering with greed at the sight of new empty spaces to devour, and yet never failing to move forward or at least doing so only with a convulsed, obstinate slowness, a fixed, weary, and intoxicated energy.

I felt I was dying in this metallic cell and dreamed of bloodshed and orgies. Without space, there is neither innocence nor liberty! When a man cannot breathe, prison means death or madness; what can he do there but kill and possess? But today I have all the air I need, all our sails slap in the blue air, I am going to shout at the speed, we'll toss our sextants and compasses into the sea. Our sails are like iron under the imperious wind. The coast drifts at full speed before our eyes, forests of royal coconut trees whose feet are bathed by emerald lagoons, a quiet bay, full of red sails, moonlit beaches.

Great buildings loom up, already cracking under the pressure of the virgin forest that begins in the back yards; here and there a yellow ipecac or a tree with violet branches bursts through a window; Rio finally crumbles away behind us and the monkeys of the Tijuca will laugh and gibber in the vegetation that will cover its new ruins. Faster still, along wide beaches where the waves spread out in sheaves of sand, faster still, where the Uruguayan sheep wade into the sea and instantly turn it yellow. Then, on the Argentinian coast, great crude piles of faggots, set up at regular intervals, raise slowly grilling halves of oxen to the sky.

At night, the ice from Tierra del Fuego comes and beats for hours against our hull, the ship hardly loses speed and tacks about. In the morning, the single wave of the Pacific, whose cold foam boils green and white for thousands of kilometers along the Chilean coast, slowly lifts us up and threatens to wreck us. The helm avoids it, overtakes the Kerguelen Islands. In the sweetish evening the first Malayan boats come out to meet us.

"To sea! To sea!" shouted the marvelous boys in one of the books from my childhood. I have forgotten everything about that book except this cry. "To sea!", and across the Indian Ocean into the corridor of the Red Sea, where on silent nights one can hear the desert stones, scorched in the daytime, freeze and crack one by one as we return to the ancient sea in which all cries are hushed.

Finally, one morning, we drop anchor in a bay filled with a strange silence, beacons with fixed sails. A few sea birds are quarrelling in the sky over scraps of reeds. We swim ashore to an empty beach; all day plunging into the water and drying off on the sand. When evening comes, under a sky that turns green and fades into the distance, the sea, already calm, grows more peaceful still. Short waves shower vaporous foam on the lukewarm shore. The sea birds have disappeared.

All that is left is space, open to a motionless voyage. Knowing that certain nights whose sweetness lingers will keep returning to the earth and sea after we are gone, yes, this helps us die. Great sea, ever in motion, ever virgin, my religion along with night! It washes and satiates us in its sterile billows, frees us and holds us upright. Each breaker brings its promise, always the same. What does each say? If I were to die surrounded by cold mountains, ignored by the world, an outcast, at the end of my strength, at the final moment the sea would flood my cell, would lift me above myself and help me die without hatred.

At midnight, alone on the shore. A moment more, and I shall set sail. The sky itself has weighed anchor, with all its stars, like the ships covered with lights which at this very hour throughout the world illuminate dark harbors. Space and silence weigh equally upon the heart. A sudden love, a great work, a decisive act, a thought that transfigures, all these at certain moments bring the same unbearable anxiety, quickened with an irresistible charm. Living like this, in the delicious anguish of being, in exquisite proximity to a danger whose name we do not know, is this the same as rushing to our doom? Once again,

without respite, let us race to our destruction.

I have always felt I lived on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness.

1953

¹ This essay first appeared in the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1954. Camus first noted down his intention of writing an essay on the sea in *Carnets II*, p. 290, (Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 228) when he remarked that "the desperate man has no native land. I knew that the sea existed, and that is why I lived in the midst of this mortal time." —P.T.

The end