

## RANDALL EXON

*Beach House, 2009*  
oil on canvas, 36 x 52 in.



## CLAUDIA STERNBACH

### Every Day, the Beach

The healing power  
of the ocean

In late August when I returned from my yearly summer in New York City carrying my luggage and the fresh knowledge of my thirty-year-old daughter's cancer, I began to walk along the curve of the Monterey Bay. It is five minutes from my house.

Park, walk south one mile then back and north one mile, then back. I become a regular passing an older man in a wheelchair who is never without fowl. One day a hen, another a rooster. Lap sitters. He nods. I nod. He motors past and I trudge on. Faces become familiar. In early fall there are whales spouting and breaching every day. The path becomes crowded with enthusiastic wildlife watchers. Even I am distracted by the ocean activity. There are dolphins. And an enormous number of pelicans drawn to the bay by the millions of anchovies arriving on the tides.

We are in a drought and every day is clear and sunny. The only dark cloud is my daughter's health. But it is fixable we've been told. It may come back, but for now, there is a way to deal with it.

She won't let me come for the surgery. Please, she begs. It will make me feel like "The Cancer Girl" if you come.

When you are handed your newborn in the delivery room it is difficult to imagine you will one day receive this call. That you will have to listen to this kind of request.

It will test your bravery. How much easier it would be to jump into the car and drive south. To elbow your way into her emergency. How much more difficult it is to honor her request. To say, I love you so much that I will *not* be there.

She won't be alone. Her boyfriend will be with her. The day of her surgery begins with a text and photo from him.

I've got this, he says. And he does. And she begins to heal.

Later, a second doctor will say that the small bits removed from her cervix were precancerous. Who is in charge, I wonder. Who knows the truth. Who can predict the future?

But it has been sliced away. It is gone.

I walk the beach in the unseasonable heat and think, all will be well.

And soon I will receive another call from her telling me she is pregnant. Because to her it felt as if the opportunity might be fleeting. She reached and grabbed the gold ring.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

But first, on a hot, still afternoon, sand still clinging to my bare feet, a call from my sister Meg, who is changing planes in Ohio on her way to visit family back East, to tell me her cancer is back after twelve years of good health. She has just received the news. The phone message waiting for her when she got off the plane. It will be bad.

In the Weeks Before and After

For years I have been stubborn and foolish. I allowed my passion for walking the streets of New York to convince me that here by the sea there was no adequate walking to be had.

Poor Michael. Married to such an asshole. Let’s go down the beach and walk, he would suggest. And I, stubborn and negative, would say, why? Is the ocean doing anything new today? It goes out, it comes in, it goes out again. I would grumble as we got in the car to drive to the small parking area across from the sandy shore.

I missed my buildings and people and traffic and noise and surprise around every corner. In, out. In, out. This is all I believed the beach walks had to offer.

I was quite the little shit, actually. This went on for years. Seriously. And Michael didn’t throw me off the end of the pier. But last year, while in New York, before all the trouble began, the bulb in my closeted mind flickered on. Like a chorus of blue jays squawking, I heard myself. My years of complaining about missing the city when home by the beach. I realized I was a fucking idiot. I, unlike most of the population, have it all. I have city walks, which are not beach walks. And I have beach walks, which are not city walks. I found myself to be rather stunned at how patient Michael had been. He isn’t the violent type, but really, all that squawking, all those years. I am surprised he didn’t become a member of the NRA, buy a shotgun, and let the feathers fly.

Don’t believe that old dog/new tricks rumor. I am proof that one can learn even at an advanced age. And enjoying the actual surroundings one is surrounded by is so much less frustrating than trying to imagine the Monterey Bay as Lexington Avenue. That was exhausting. And I discovered the beauty of the bay just in time. Perhaps this lesson needed to be learned now, while life on land was

becoming rougher and rougher. I might find some balance walking along the Pacific, watching the ocean as it comes in and goes out. In and then out. Although, I have to admit, there is a high risk of melancholy while strolling along the shore.

No Two Days Are the Same

Each day I walk. I park my car in a small lot, hide my purse, place my cell phone and my keys in my pocket, and, after making sure I have thirty-five cents, stop in to the small bodega on the corner and buy a cherry-flavored Tootsie Pop. By the time I have unwrapped it, I am next to the garbage cans placed on the beach where I make my small deposit.

There is a walkway, but if the weather is nice, no heavy winds, no heavy fog, I walk on the sand. I head south for one mile. My flip-flops kick up wet sand, which sometimes sticks to my candy. I don’t know it until I place it back in my mouth. The sand adds a sugary crunch, which is surprisingly pleasant. There are expensive beach houses to my left and the ocean on my right. Every day it is different. I could smack myself for never noticing this.

It is late summer, early fall, and the whales are migrating south for the winter. I see them. I let out a whoop before I can even help it. And there are dolphins. Hundreds it seems, every day. There are more anchovies in the bay this year for some reason and everyone wants a piece of them, literally. Pelicans swoop down like some kind of prehistoric creatures, which I suppose they are. The dolphins leap to the surface, then swim under the waves. Seals ride the swells like kids on boogie boards. Kids on boogie boards mimic seals.

And the light shifts and changes with each cloud that passes overhead. At the one-mile mark I turn and head back to the parking lot. But I am not finished. There I leave the beach and walk on the promenade just above the sand one mile north.

As I become a regular I see familiar faces every day. Rabbi Paula comes toward me and in passing asks about my daughter and my family.

They are all fine, I tell her. And your family? I ask. Fine too, she replies. We are both walking at a fast clip. There is no time to tell full stories. I wonder if behind her

“fine” there may be more. I imagine someday meeting her and having the luxury of time to sit down on one of the wooden benches and fill her in completely. But for now, we will stick with “fine.” Besides, things seem to change so rapidly.

My daughter had cancer. She had surgery. She is pregnant. Meg has cancer. Meg had surgery. Meggie is dying. There is a small dog I have become fond of. His name is Pierre. His owner’s name I do not know. But Pierre, with gray, wire-like hair and a short, exuberant tail, is a welcome addition to my daily walks. While certainly more interested in sniffing out critters, he doesn’t seem to mind taking a moment to greet me. After nosing my hand and then sniffing the air, off they go. Pierre in full control of their destination.

By the time I have returned to the parking lot and my car, it is tempting to step into the café with the outdoor tables and chairs. There are lush tropical plants in pots surrounding the small patio. And a cocktail would be so good, so very good. Even at this early afternoon hour. Especially in this heat. This unrelenting heat.

I resist, however. Afraid one would lead to two and knowing just how messy that might be.

Months Later, the Wall

My destination each day when I walk on the beach is the same. I walk, in all weather, to the wall. It was built years ago to keep the private homes from the public. There is a gate that opens for those who have the code. The wall, made of stone, has over the years become a place for people to leave their mark. For the most part it has become a memorial wall. Photos are placed, plaques mounted, notes written with marking pens, which eventually fade to soft whispers. After her death, I had a tile made for Meg. A photograph taken of her at my nephew’s wedding a few years ago. She looks so happy and very healthy.

Every day I walk to the wall. The first morning after attaching the tile I approached it with a bit of apprehension. I was afraid that somehow the tile, my sister, might have come loose. Been blown away by high winds. Or removed by pranksters.

But she was still there. Enough time has passed that I am confident she will be there as long as the wall is.

I love seeing others gathered as I approach. I watch them read the inscriptions. Inspect the memorial plaques and tiles.

Look, I say to myself, Meggie has visitors. Every single blessed day Meg has visitors. They know she was a “beloved sister.” They know when she was born and when she left us. It is a beautiful spot. The sandy beach to the left, the Pacific lapping just steps away.

Before she died, Meg asked me if Michael and his friends would do something for her.

Anything, I said. Would they do a paddle out, she wondered? Would they take some of her ashes out on the ocean and scatter them? Then scatter flowers on the waves?

I will make sure of it, I promised. We haven’t done it yet. I am waiting for the baby to be born. I picture Michael and his friends and my daughter and her (now) husband and their baby all on the beach. I too will pull on my wet suit and step out into the cold water. We will paddle out beyond the break and spread her ashes on the blue-gray surface of the water. We will scatter flowers, which will be seen from the shore. From the wall. We will paddle back in and wrap ourselves in blankets and towels and against the rules or not, drink a toast to my sister. My beloved sister and to her final resting place, the breathtaking Monterey Bay.

Claudia Sternbach is the author of two memoirs, *Now Breathe* (Whiteaker Press) and *Reading Lips, a Memoir of Kisses* (Unbridled Books). She was newspaper columnist for the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* and has written often for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. She has also been published in several anthologies as well as *Redbook Magazine*. She served as editor in chief for the literary journal *Memoir* until her retirement two years ago.