

Queens Cemetery, Setting Sun

By Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Airport bus from JFK
cruising through Queens
passing huge endless cemetery
by Long Island's old expressway
(once a dirt path for wheelless Indians)
myriad small tombstones tilted up
gesturing statues on parapets
stone arms or wings upraised
lost among illegible inscriptions
And the setting yellow sun
painting all of them
on one side only
with an ochre brush
Rows and rows and rows and rows
of small stone slabs
tilted toward the sun forever
While on the far horizon
Mannahatta's great stone slabs
skyscraper tombs and parapets
casting their own long black shadows
over all these long-haired graves
the final restless places
of old-country potato farmers
dustbin pawnbrokers
dead dagos and Dublin bouncers
tinsmiths and blacksmiths and roofers
house painters and house carpenters
cabinet makers and cigar makers
garment workers and streetcar motormen
railroad switchmen and signal salesmen
swabbers and sweepers and swampers
steam-fitters and key-punch operators
ward heelers and labor organizers
railroad dicks and smalltime mafiosi
shopkeepers and saloon keepers and doormen
icemen and middlemen and conmen
housekeepers and housewives and dowagers
French housemaids and Swedish cooks
Brooklyn barmaids and Bronxville butlers
opera singers and gandy dancers
pitchers and catchers
in the days of ragtime baseball
poolroom hustlers and fight promoters
Catholic sisters of charity
parish priests and Irish cops
Viennese doctors of delirium
now all abandoned in eternity
parcels in a dead-letter office

inscrutable addresses on them
beyond further deliverance
in an America wheeling past them
and disappearing oblivious
into East River's echoing tunnels
down the great American drain

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti is best known for his rejection of traditional artistic and social ideas, a challenge that inspired a generation of writers in the 1950s known as the "Beats." As a forerunner of the group, he opened the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco in 1953. It became a major destination for freethinking writers and artists from all over the U.S., and also served as an independent publisher of "Beat" poetry, including his own, *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958). Considered a historical benchmark for the time-period, that book maintains its place as one of the best-selling volumes of poetry of all time. The City Lights Bookstore remains a beacon for unorthodox writers and artists to this day.