

*Reading these volumes over several months is to feel a sense of awe and admiration that anyone can sustain such a life's work continuously over so long a period of time.*

its own against that of virtually any American poet of the last half century. *These Are My Rivers: New and Selected Poems 1955–1993* (already twenty years old) is probably the best available introduction to this writer's work, but his more recent books—*How to Paint Sunlight* (2001), *Americus, Book I* (2004), and *Time of Useful Consciousness* (*Americus, Book II*, 2012)—testify that his energy remains undiminished. The author notes that the latter title “is an aeronautical term denoting the time between when one loses oxygen and when one passes out, the brief time in which some lifesaving action is possible.” This is a brilliant metaphor both for the poet's acknowledgment of his own mortality and his belief in the potential of art to rescue a civilization spiraling into catastrophe. The cumulative effect of reading these volumes over several months, as I have, is to feel a sense of awe and admiration that anyone can sustain such a life's work continuously over so long a period of time.

In the little volume of zingers and manifestos, aphorisms and exhortations, slogans and definitions titled *Poetry as Insurgent Art* (2007) Ferlinghetti spells out as directly as possible his belief in the transformative, revolutionary, magical powers of poetry to enlighten and inspire the individual who writes or reads it, and to thereby change the world for the better. It is perhaps a quixotic or even naive

belief but, lived with his fervor of undiminished conviction, it can feel forcefully persuasive to those who embrace it. This sense of courage and encouragement, of resistance to despair and to the machinations of marketing and political bad faith in all its forms, has endeared the man to his fans, even those who have read him only a little.

And so it was no surprise that when filmmaker Chris Felver brought his bio-documentary *Ferlinghetti* to Santa Cruz on October 18, 2011, that day was declared by the mayor Lawrence Ferlinghetti Day, and five hundred people filled the auditorium of the art deco Del Mar Theater to have a good look at the legendary figure on film, and also at the great man in the flesh. Onstage after the screening, Felver and Ferlinghetti took a few questions from the audience. One older gentleman toward the front of the hall asked Lawrence what advice he had for staying upbeat and productive in one's later years, and the poet replied, deadpan, “Read Samuel Beckett.” That Ferlinghetti the perpetual optimist and overthrewer of the powers that be should invoke Beckett, the bleak yet paradoxically hopeful bard of existential hopelessness, may have left most of the audience scratching their heads; but to me it revealed tremendous wit and self-awareness, implying that only by facing the darkest reality of what we're up against—both individual death and socio-political (not to mention ecological) disaster—do we have a chance of using it for creative purposes. Beckett's characters, like Chaplin's, are bumbling victims yet tough survivors of a world that couldn't care less. Ferlinghetti is wise enough to recognize this truth. Such spiritual resilience in the face of certain doom is a gift deserving of our deepest gratitude.

**Stephen Kessler** is the editor of *The Redwood Coast Review*. His most recent books are *Scratch Pegasus* (poems) and *Poems of Consummation* by Vicente Aleixandre (translation).

## CHRISTOPHER FELVER

*Ferlinghetti Old West Hotel, 1981*  
archival photographic print



courtesy the artist