

## BEING AT SEA

Inspired by the painting of Ernest Ange Duez

GRADES

6–12



## INTRODUCTION

In this 1873 painting by Ernest Ange Duez, a well-dressed woman in a fur-trimmed coat and fashionable hat, gazes out to sea. The sky is grey, as is her dress, the sea choppy with a frothy foam similar to her gossamer scarf — the seeming inutility of which contrasts dramatically against her warm coat. This is a moment of in-between, a moment of not knowing. Is she going toward something or away from it? Is she anticipating, regretting, longing, hoping, mourning? We don't know. But for me, at least, the magic of this painting, with its mysterious backstory and masterfully painted surfaces, is the shock of the real. I am arrested by her earlobe. It is cold, her ear has turned red. This is real. This is human. This is something we know. And in this moment now, when we might feel confused, directionless, alone, literally "at sea," that wind-rouged ear is an anchor. It reminds us of our shared humanity, our vulnerability. It gives comfort in the power it possesses, like a cold blast of sea air, to clear our confusion and ground us in the very transcendent transience of life and plans.

## INSPIRATION

Writer Arundhati Roy describes our current moment as a portal. She writes:

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

## ACTIVITY

*A dictionary definition of "At Sea": Someone who is at sea is completely lost or deeply confused... The phrase at sea — or all at sea — has a nautical source: before modern navigational systems, when a ship was at sea, it was out of sight of land and therefore in a dangerous, uncertain position.*

In a sense, this painting can be seen as a threshold or a portal to the unknown or uncertain. The direction is unclear. Write about a moment when you have felt "at sea." What do you hold onto in those moments? What helps you find direction, brings you back to reality, at such times?

OR

What world of the future do you imagine is worth fighting for? Write a description of that world.

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Ernest Ange Duez (French, 1843-1896), *Woman in Grey on Board Ship Gazing at the Sea*, 1873. Oil on canvas. SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Suzette and Eugene Davidson Fund, 1994.21.