

**My Witness Is the Empty Sky:  
Journeys of the Beat Generation**

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**MA Writing (by thesis)**

**2006**

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## Acknowledgements

A big thank you to Tony Mitchell for reading everything and coping with my disorganised and rushed state. I'm very appreciative of the Kerouac Conference in Lowell for letting me attend and providing such a unique forum. Thank you to Buster Burk, Gerald Nicosia and the many other Beat scholars who provided some very entertaining e-mails and opinions. A big slobbering kiss to all my beautiful friends for letting me crash on couches all over the world and always ringing, e-mailing or visiting just when I'm about to explode. Thanks Andre for making me buy that first copy of *On the Road*. Thank you Tim for the cups of tea and hugs. I'm very grateful to Mum and Dad for trying to make everything as easy as possible.

And words or poems are not enough for my brother Simon for those silly months in Italy and turning up at that conference, even if you didn't bother to wear shoes.

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## Abstract

*My Witness Is the Empty Sky: Journeys of the Beat Generation* is a piece of travel writing and ficto-critical writing, aiming to combine historical information with creative work. In this way it tells the story of the Beat Generation in various world-wide locations, concentrating on the life of the writer Jack Kerouac and his relationship with each city. The novel takes its title from *The Dharma Bums*, a book Kerouac wrote in 1958 detailing the rise of the Beat Generation in San Francisco and New York.<sup>1</sup> It includes a chapter set in San Francisco, adapted from a piece that was submitted as an Honours thesis three years ago.

Kerouac's 'Rules for Spontaneous Prose' are thirty short phrases dictating his preferred method of writing style and the sources of inspiration behind his work.<sup>2</sup> They describe a way of writing that includes very little punctuation and grammar, is composed spontaneously and is strongly influenced by the author's life and surroundings. These rules were used as a guideline for writing the novel, so that some of the energy and style of Kerouac's work is reflected in the narrative. The author often slips into spontaneous ramblings or drifts off into random tangents, just as Kerouac demonstrated in his books. Kerouac had a strong belief that the first copy of something written shouldn't be changed or edited.<sup>3</sup> Obviously this was not an appropriate action for writing this novel, but great care was taken to ensure that the spirit of Beat writing was maintained in

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<sup>1</sup> Kerouac, Jack *The Dharma Bums*, London, Harper Collins, (1958) 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Kerouac, Jack *Heaven and Other Poems*, San Francisco, Grey Fox Press, 1959, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 262.

the text. For example, in the San Francisco chapter, a brief paragraph utilising the language particular to the Beat Generation is a way of capturing some of the spirit of the time and demonstrating how the language was used. Although it is over the top and exaggerated, this paragraph is designed to be rhythmical and poetic and reflect the spontaneous prose Kerouac is so famous for.

Jack Kerouac used the character Jack Duluoz in a selection of his novels that deal with his life up until 1965. He called these books *The Duluoz Legend* and aimed to have them eventually published as one big book. There is no doubt that Jack Duluoz is Jack Kerouac and other Beat Generation figures feature under pseudonyms as well. Just as much of the Beat Generation's writing and poetry are semi-autobiographical and self-indulgent, this story uses the author's own experiences whilst travelling around the world to convey aspects of the history and personalities behind a particular literature movement. Just as in *The Duluoz Legend*, the author is also the main character in the novel.

The other characters in *My Witness Is the Empty Sky* are always on the peripheral. In Kerouac's semi-autobiographical novels, he observed and described the people whom he met on his journeys. Apart from the select few who warranted it, most of these characters were under-developed and shallow. *My Witness Is the Empty Sky* reflects this by revealing very little about the other characters. For example, The Boy is Stella's link to home and Australia and obviously an important factor in her life, however, nothing significant about him is revealed. Just like Jack Duluoz, Stella is the main character in this book and nothing is allowed to detract from that.

The remnants of this movement in today's society are uncovered as the author visits the Beat Hotel, Beat-related festivals and the former residences of Beat Generation writers. This bears a resemblance to the work of Chris Challis in his 1984 novel *Quest for Kerouac*, who re-told Kerouac's most popular novel *On The Road*, by taking the same route the book portrays and exploring the contemporary surroundings. By describing the physical aspects of the places visited and then comparing them to the places portrayed in the novel, Challis' work is not so much about discovery, but clarification.<sup>4</sup>

In this case, the structure of the novel reflects the style and structure of Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler*, in which the main character Jack Duluoz travels in San Francisco, Mexico, Tangier, Paris and New York. In *My Witness is the Empty Sky*, Stella travels a similar route to Jack Duluoz's, with the ghost of Jack Kerouac for company. In the end she travels to Kerouac's home town of Lowell, Massachusetts to lay the ghost to rest. The chapters dealing with the life of the Beat Generation in San Francisco, Paris, New York and Lowell are somewhat longer than the other two chapters, in accordance with the importance of these cities to Kerouac. On the other hand, the chapters set in Mexico City and Tangier offer the opportunity to explore the life and writing of people other than Jack Kerouac, such as William Burroughs. Kerouac does not feature until the very end in the Tangier chapter as, unlike Burroughs, his relationship with that particular city was not vital to his work. The chapter set in Mexico City is of a differing style from that of the others to reflect the lyrical, spontaneous poetry that Kerouac created in that city and the sometimes erratic nature of his writing.

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<sup>4</sup> Challis, Chris *Quest for Kerouac*, London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1984.

The chapters are constructed, like those in *Lonesome Traveler*, as individual narratives.

The Beat Generation, which includes writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso, was famous for an unsavoury lifestyle which included promiscuous sex and drug experimentation. In the novel, the main character, Stella, drinks and takes drugs with Kerouac and sometimes by herself. She makes a decision to explore everything Beat and this pastime is one more thing that needs to be investigated. The drugs often open up a world that was previously unavailable to Stella; in New York she gets stoned with Kerouac in a hotel room and witnesses the creation of one of the most famous Beat poems, *Pull My Daisy*<sup>5</sup>, by Kerouac, Ginsberg and Neal Cassady. In Mexico City, she is drunkenly able to watch as Burroughs kills his wife Joan. Just as Beat Generation writers used their environment as a source of inspiration and often wrote under the influence of narcotics or alcohol, certain scenes were created under unusual conditions to convey a particular atmosphere and mood.

Kerouac is the major focus of the novel. He is the one member of the Beat Generation with whom Stella is able to interact during her travels. He appears during significant moments all over the world to aid her in her quest to find everything Beat. Throughout all the visits to abandoned accommodations and torn-down bars, he is the one link to the Beat Generation that keeps her on track. When she is disillusioned by the consumerist nature of a conference in his honour, he appears to take her out for a hamburger. At the same time, he is a destructive force and lost man who clings to Stella because she is his

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<sup>5</sup> Kerouac, *Jack Scattered Poems*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1970.



only link to the modern world. The character of Jack Kerouac has been carefully constructed by Stella's mind, based on his writing. Kerouac's dialogue is constructed mainly from interview quotes, poems, letters or lines out of his novels. In this way, his personality, feelings and sentiments are captured and he is more real. Just as Stella did, this novel wanted to create a character out of Kerouac, and is a character constructed on the basis of his own writing, biographies and letters.

A biography of Kerouac's life is created in the novel by including descriptions of key events in his life. Aspects of his unpredictable personality are uncovered by his reactions to certain situations. The issues explored include Kerouac's strong ties to his mother, his unstable relationships with women and his inability to cope with fame. Kerouac battled with alcoholism throughout most of his life. Often it interfered with his writing, performances and relationships.<sup>6</sup> His alcoholism is demonstrated by the character constantly being seen with a drink in his hand and his unruly and disruptive behaviour. Kerouac's disintegration over the course of the narratives reflects the downward spiral his life took over several decades. Sometimes he is portrayed as being as upbeat, young and happy as he was before he had completed his first novel and the term 'Beatnik' had been coined. In Lowell, for example, he is a fresh faced eighteen-year-old on his way to college. Throughout the novel, his personality and physical appearance change considerably, reflecting how his age and substance abuse over the years took their toll. Kerouac's difficulty with dealing with his fame is shown by his cynical and sometimes angry disposition.<sup>7</sup> His depressive nature is also reflected in Stella, especially as she wanders around New York - high and happy one minute and

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<sup>6</sup> Turner, Steve *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*, New York, Viking, 1996, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, Steve *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*, New York, 1996, p. 167.

sad and lonely the next, for no apparent reason. At times in the novel Kerouac is in as disastrous a state physically and mentally as he was in the months leading up to his death.

The themes that are present in the novels and poetry of Jack Kerouac are also demonstrated in *My Witness Is the Empty Sky*. The author continually talks about modes of transport, clothing and food in much the same way that Kerouac liked to write about trains, canvas shoes and apple pie in his novels. Kerouac littered his writing with references to popular culture in order to establish a definitive atmosphere and time period for his work. *My Witness Is the Empty Sky* mentions clothing brands, make-up, musicians and candy bars to create a sense of place in each city that the author visits.

The religious and spiritual side of Jack Kerouac and how this is reflected in his writing and lifestyle is one theme that is also examined. Kerouac grew up a devout Catholic and evolved into a Buddhist and he talks about both religions extensively in his novels and poetry. The duality of his religious beliefs is shown by his references to Buddhist terminology and his drunken prayers for his long-dead brother, Gerard.

Dreams are also a huge feature of Kerouac's writing. *Book of Dreams* is a novel solely dedicated to descriptions of Kerouac's night visions. He also talked about dreams in his other novels and poems. Kerouac strongly believed that dreams were a way into the subconscious that could reveal aspects of the dreamer's personality and possibly their

future<sup>8</sup>. In *My Witness Is the Empty Sky*, the author mentions her dreams during various chapters as a way of expressing her feelings.

Kerouac's writing is strongly influenced by jazz music, whereby he sought to imitate the styles, rhythm and spontaneity of jazz in his poetry and prose.<sup>9</sup> Music is an important component in *My Witness is the Empty Sky*. For example when Stella and Kerouac listen to a jazz poetry performance, the music changes the pace and style of the writing and overwhelms the characters. When they go dancing at a modern nightclub, the electronic music experienced in the nightclub is written about in the same manner that Kerouac wrote about a jazz performance, describing not only the sounds and rhythms, but how it makes you feel and react. Stella also constantly refers to her iPod, the sounds that it emits and how it helps her cope with her travels. In Mexico City she listens to a song by Bob Dylan which has references to Kerouac's book of poems *Mexico City Blues* and in New York she listens to jazz poetry recordings feature Kerouac. The iPod is omnipresent in the story, whether it is in Stella's ears or held by a fellow passenger on the subway in New York. This is significant because it demonstrates the importance and influence of music on Stella's generation, which escapes to an insular world of sound through tiny white earphones, rather than gathering in a bar to hear Charlie Parker.

The impact of the Beat Generation on modern society is explored in the novel. In every city, the author is confronted with a remnant of Beatnikdom. For example, Stella attends a poetry reading in Paris and

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<sup>8</sup> Nicosia, Gerald *Memory Babe: a critical biography of Jack Kerouac*, San Francisco, University of California Press, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 19.

uncovers a group of writers who declare themselves to be a modernised, but ultimately more organised version of the Beat Generation. She also attends the Kerouac Conference in Lowell, MA and discovers just how marketable the Kerouac image has become when faced with tea towels, t-shirts and posters bearing his name. The chapter set in Lowell, touches on a controversial subject when it questions the handling of the Kerouac Estate by a group of relatives who are selling off mementoes and possessions one by one.

In each chapter, the influence of the city on the Beat Generation is explored. In this way, the city is presented as a character, showing how the location had a strong effect on the writers' work.<sup>10</sup> For example, San Francisco's reputation as a city that fosters a bohemian and alternative lifestyle is displayed during the festival attended by the author and the descriptions of several eccentric characters that are encountered. The importance of 'the pad' in Beatnik culture is emphasised by the author's accommodations. In the bohemian and intellectual Berkeley, the author is forced to inhabit a completely 'uncool' and fake hotel, so unlike the hip and inspiring 'pads' of the Beat Generation.<sup>11</sup> When she finally makes it to the infamous Beat Hotel in Paris, she is faced with a four-star opulent establishment and moves herself into a roach-infested room to try and gather some sense of what it was like to live in Paris when Allen Ginsberg did.

Some of the major features of the 'scene' that existed in each city in Kerouac's lifetime are examined as the author visits the haunts of the

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<sup>10</sup> Meltzer, David *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* 2001, San Francisco, City Lights Books, preface.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, Bill *The Beat Generation in San Francisco, A Literary Tour* 2003, San Francisco, City Lights Books, p. 162-163.

Beat Generation and describes the significant events that took place there and what has become of the buildings. By slipping in and out of time and space, information about each city's layout and history is revealed. There is a sense of loss as Stella and Kerouac loiter around the city looking for his old friends and hangouts. It is almost understandable when he lashes out from the frustration of finding them long gone and that a miscellaneous building has been erected in its place. In this way, Kerouac and the reader are reminded that he is a ghost, that there is nothing but the words he left behind. It is Stella who still clings to the notion that there is something of the Beat Generation left in the world and who struggles to bring its essence to the surface.

Various quotes from writers and personalities of the Beat Generation are used to give structure to each chapter and provide insights into the topics discussed. Poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth are quoted in reference to the atmosphere of San Francisco and the 'scene'. Quotes taken from interviews with William Burroughs add depth to descriptions of his life in Tangier and Mexico City.

*My Witness Is the Empty Sky* is, above all, a love story. It is the story of a young woman so obsessed with a particular genre of literature, that she travels around the world trying to discover the meaning behind the words. A true bibliophile, she is more excited about browsing through a Left Bank bookstore than ascending the Eiffel Tower. Her friendship with Kerouac is based on her research into his life and the kind of friendships he had with many other women. The author often plays second fiddle to Kerouac; it is she who follows him around the city, letting him lead her from one site to the next. She is

not completely reliant on him and is frustrated when he pops up at the strangest moments to distract her or cause trouble. At the end of some chapters, she becomes so frustrated and disgusted with his behaviour that she finally walks away. However, it is apparent that having Jack Kerouac pop up in her life is a pattern and it is not surprising when she goes to the next city and begins to follow him again. The author's obsession with Kerouac means that she will never be rid of him and that she will continue to learn from him, as he acts as a kind of guide to another time and place for which she was never present.

## Prologue

Galvanised shed, outback New South Wales, but so dark that I haven't seen exactly where I am yet. A two and a half hour drive, including the quick toilet stop where The Boy smoked a cigarette too close to a petrol pump, so we were fighting before we'd even hit the highway. Our road trips always lack the spontaneity, music and booze that everyone else's seem to have. But we always go to the same place. Galvanised shed, outback New South Wales.

Now we sit in silence, passing crackers occasionally. I have to warm up and I'm determined not to let him touch me, so I sit as close to the fire as possible. The fire is not so much roaring, as humming, but it's red hot and the logs have purple flames licking off their sides. I am in a terrible mood. I am in an armchair that has sure intentions to swallow me whole, its arms curving over my body no matter which way I lie. Suffocated even by furniture.

I take a book and I can't read anymore, each letter picks up its legs and scurries back and forth across the page. I have darting eyes following them and they crawl up the spine and onto my fingers and disappear up a sleeve. But the blank page doesn't make much more sense. I take a pen and I can't write anymore either, not what I should be writing anyway. My journals are full of nonsense. As I read them I consider the possibility of literary sabotage by The Boy. Who is this silly person who doesn't believe in umbrellas? Who is dutifully dating and numbering the entries? Who told me this was okay? I can see the words in my journals, but they make no sense. I pick up Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler* and it fits perfectly into my palm, I can almost hear

it sigh with me. I stroke the stain of pear juice that blots one corner perfectly, remembering how eating pears in a European summer is like French kissing, all juice and lips.

This is the dream I have in that chair: Jack Kerouac calls me up one day and asks me to marry him. I can't answer because I'm halfway through a massive bite of a cheese bagel (and I think, Where did I get this bagel from? Which city am I even in?). He takes my muffling answers as a no, so he starts screaming down the phone, I hear the splatter of his angry spit on the receiver and soon enough I feel its wetness. Then I feel the spongy moist pucker of his lips on the side of my face. And the bark of his voice vibrates in my ear. Soon enough, his breath sucks in strands of my hair in the pauses between abuse and then it's his whole head that I'm holding; cradling it against myself and then he's not shouting anymore, he's almost purring. I stroke his head and he lets his mouth go slack and a small rivulet of drool starts its way across my arm. I still don't say yes or no to what he asked me. I'm not at all surprised he has climbed through the phone.

I wake up shaking, with my fingers in my eyes, head level with a tractor wheel, red wine still crusted near the corners of my mouth. The Boy is passed out tenderly hugging a guitar and has the middle-aged look of red wine sleep. I walk outside and the cold crackles through my arthritis. I feel the watchful eye of a thousand stars, repeat that in a whisper and then scold myself for using such a cliché.

My witness is the empty sky. My feelings don't matter anymore. My head is buzzing. I'm on a plane. I'm going somewhere. I could be on a



train, sleeping slumped forward against the seat in front, or sprawled on the deck of a boat. I'm watching Croatian islands go so sleepily by in the early morning. I am waiting for the Mexican women to walk slowly, slowly through the markets. And my feet are as dirty as that poor child watching from behind her piles of stacked-up buckets and Tupperware. I am meeting people. I am talking to everyone. I am holed up lonely in Lowell staring out a window into a courtyard full of wet sheets. I wait patiently in Paris for the man at the Metro to serve me, the first words I've uttered in forty- eight hours. I forget how it feels to look forward to something. Instead I am always looking for something. I don't know how the calendar works anymore. I am so tired. My witness is an empty notebook. My sky hasn't changed since 1954. I use each town, each city, each person for my own selfish writing. I blow through and take all the relevant books I can get my hands on. In Tangier, I walk along the rocks by the ocean and think about diving in and washing off a day of sweat and couscous stains. I am blind in a crowd of 180,000 people roaming Manhattan streets with Starbucks and small dogs.

It doesn't start anywhere I can think of, it is one big wobbly circle. Australia back and forth. We go San Francisco, Mexico City, Tangier, Paris, New York, Massachusetts and a hundred little bus stops and restaurants and bathrooms in between. A galvanised shed in the middle of nowhere.

And always bloody Jack Kerouac, my personal, alcoholic, literati ghost. The Boy is no match for him. Itching for attention in every supermarket, library, party and train trip. It is the worst when I am drunk and I get so angry with him for interrupting and I say, 'Fuck you

Jack.' and cause a scene in a bathroom for talking to a mirror and am accused by sickly concerned friends of taking too much speed. Even as I write this he is sitting poised on the edge of my futon in a lotus position and running through his Buddhist terminology – Dharma, Nirvana, Tathata, Thathagata, Bodhisattva-Manasattvas. And then we have conversations which are more like arguments and I end up retorting, 'Well it's all right for some people who have the luxury of still living in 1959.' With Kerouac I am either the child or the mother- there is no in between.

I first met Jack five years ago in a Paris bookstore, when a friend stretched over the low the tables and poked me with *On the Road*, a sharp corner scratching my arm, leaving behind small beads of blood. 'Any book that makes you bleed needs to be read,' he said.

*On The Road* is one of those books that you want everyone to read, thinking that you are the first and only person to discover its energy and magic. Kerouac appeared during a summer of teenage European jaunting. Later, during a stint of University work in a bookshop, he forced me to order in expensive slim paperbacks from America to fill the stifled Literature section. Sometimes I lost him amongst popular fiction and cultural studies essays; only to feel him come up behind me at the last moment before an assignment was due, asking me why I wasn't more Zen.

The Boy wakes up, sees I've been walking in circles and talking to myself and lets me know happily that I am unconsciously rolling a blob of soft cheese around the ends of my hair. 'How did it get to this?' I ask him.

'You should have stopped reading years ago,' he tells me. 'And you never should have gone to San Francisco.'

## San Francisco June

*'San Francisco was the only city in the US which was not settled overland by the westward-spreading puritan tradition ... It had been settled mostly by gamblers, prostitutes, rascals and fortune seekers.'* - Kenneth Rexroth<sup>12</sup>

I trundle my bags up Montgomery towards Broadway, fighting against the wind and spy Jack Kerouac just a bit further up the hill. He is standing at the base of 1010 Montgomery, his shoulders hunched against the cold, his hair falling over one eye. He is looking up at the apartment where his dear friend Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl* after quitting a market research job, embracing his sexuality and devoting his life to poetry after one seminal visit to his therapist. Jack looks perplexed or half asleep as he squints towards Ginsberg's window, which is now not a window at all but smooth white boards that throw his stare back at him. 'Hey Jack,' I say, and then pause, not sure if he can see me yet. He doesn't reply, so I turn to go, confident that he'll grab me some other time, but as I'm starting back down the hill he lunges at me and in one swift move wraps me up in a giant bear hug, his chin locking my head into his neck, his arms squeezing so tight that I can feel myself concertina vertically.

'Ha!' he cries, 'Ha! Ha!'

It is not a laugh, but a carefully executed exclamation.

'You didn't look me up in New York!' he yells.

'Wasn't there yet Jack,' I say and I'm not sure if he is really angry or just playful. It's one thing I've learnt after all these years – Jack's moods clamber for attention so badly that he can hate you in a

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<sup>12</sup> Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, Vintage, London, 2000, p. 159.

second. I ask him what he's doing here, loitering outside 1010 Montgomery, thinking maybe he's waiting for some form of Allen, maybe he's looking for Peter Orlovsky.

'I've left something great in there,' he replies, 'I've left my 'Rules for Spontaneous Prose' tacked to the wall.'

These first couple of jet-lagged hours have so far involved negotiating public transport and fiddling with cloned green bills. I have been to America before, but never San Francisco and during the preparations and flight the only images I could conjure up revolved around 1980s sitcoms and that overwhelming, over photographed bridge. With the theme from *Full House* in my head, the first thing that hits me as I leave the airport is how cold it is here. Even in the middle of what is supposedly summer, my toes are curled up in my sandals and nipples strain against my t-shirt. I am reminded of Kerouac's first cross-country hitchhiking extravaganza, when he took the wrong road out of New York and was left stranded in the rain, with useless falling apart Mexican sandals. To be hopelessly unprepared for these kind of trips is almost a rule for me. I make things difficult so I can gain some kind of satisfaction by overcoming even the smallest obstacles. I tell myself not buy a jacket in this weather – the cold will only make it more interesting. If I can wear this in an Australian winter then surely it will do for San Fran in June.

Listen to the hubbub of San Fran city. A junction for the masses and the Zen scrambling poets. Outside the dorm room window, it roars. It is not beckoning, it is terrifying, intimidating, telling me to stay in. Outside the dorm window I can see the tops of corn rows and black vinyl shoulders hunched under the flashing breasts that make up the

'O's of a neon strip joint sign. I am at 494 Broadway, North Beach. Up this end of town there are old pizza joints, car parks and sex shops. The building I am staying in used to be the El Matador nightclub, which hosted the 1959 premiere of the Beat depicting film *Pull My Daisy*. Now it is narrow carpeted hallways, thumped by twenty-year-olds with heavy loads. Jack Kerouac doesn't come in with me, but leans on the doorway, holding it open for the travellers who clumsily shift through and up the staircase to Reception. I can sense what he's thinking, 'These aren't real travellers, they are shiny lucky trail beaters.'

Today, in San Francisco, he is tanned, happy young Jack, broad shouldered and smiling. This is the early Jack, his eyes are grinning, he is bright, over-enthusiastic and energetic. He has the look of a young man who knows he is about to do something great. He'll marry three times, have one unwanted daughter and produce eighteen works of basically autobiographical stuff that will be translated into twenty-one languages and earn him an entronement. King of the Beats. This is the good Jack, I tell myself, this is the Jack I've wanted to see. But the truth is I don't know how to handle his good moods and spontaneity and frightening jumps from one action, thought, story to the next. It is the dark old Jack, the yellowed, saggy, hopeless man who I can understand and try to take care of. This is the Kerouac who I frequently find sweating on one side of my bed in the early morning, spit bubbles forming in the corner of his mouth with each breath, so slow, heavy and calculated. Who I talk to in the mirror, propping him up over a vomit-splashed sink, not admonishing him, but just asking him nicely to please not do it again.

I am not planning on this happening during my stay in San Fran. I have left The Boy behind and want only to enjoy myself and for once to enjoy Jack Kerouac. I have a nice little montage in my head, in black and white with a Duran Duran soundtrack of me walking the city coolly and fashionably with a sprightly young Jack in tow. I imagine we will be going to old haunts and special places that I've only read about, that I've been thinking about and trying to form in my head on a dehydrating twelve hour flight across the Pacific.

As we turn away from the door I tell him, 'This is your town, Jack, I am only here to observe.'

He is bobbing beside me, his head down and hands in his pockets, whistling something familiar.

In between a breath and a whistle his pursed lips relax and I watch him mumble, 'Submissive to everything, open, listening.'

It's number two of the Rules.

I'm staying at a Backpackers' place filled with the pale, hairless legs of Manchester students on a short working break. When I tell them why I'm here, they furrow their brows and press their lips together in confusion. It is the same reaction I got from the Customs Officer when he asked about the purpose of my trip, his 'approved' stamp hovering above the paper, deciding if a Beat Generation devotee qualified as a terrorist threat or not.

Five decades ago to be a disciple of this literature was considered radical, bohemian and counterculture. San Francisco was the heavy scene of experimentation, poetry readings, controversial political statements and censorship trials. It was the second home to the Beat Generation, mellowing out after hard-edged New York. Now, Beat is

everywhere. It is cute and kitsch. It has made its way around the world through translations and resurrections and festivals. I was born on another continent and twenty-six years after *On the Road* was published and did not witness the profound changes that Kerouac and his peers inspired through lifestyle, music and the written word. They demonstrated a carefree, reckless and entirely fresh approach to literature, relationships and living. But I am not this kind of literati rebel. Despite Jack's insistence, I am not looking for advice on how to start my own literature movement. I am only curious.

On the corner of Columbus and Broadway it looms ahead, the banner of a Pablo Neruda poem announcing its social intentions. City Lights, the great publishing house and bookstore baby of San Francisco's first poet laureate, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, is celebrating its 50th Anniversary with a festival and several Beat inspired events. I ask Jack if he's impressed by all the attention and look at the pictures in the window of the store. I make a face like a fish – puckered up lips and blow a kiss to one of the jacket photos, in which he is five inches high, legs apart and squinting into the sun.

He doesn't look at his own picture as he replies, 'No fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language & knowledge.'

Rule number 24.

As the first all-paperback bookstore in the United States, City Lights shocked the system with its progressive literature, poetry and works of a political nature. From its opening day in 1953 until today, it has functioned as a bookstore, publishing house and poets' hangout. I step into the store like a nervous lover, not quite believing I'm allowed to look and touch. There are three levels to the store and the publishing



section is high up on the fourth. The first things I notice are definitively named book categories including everything from Muckraking to Anarchism to Stolen Continents to Evidence. Jack trails next to me, puzzling over the work. He follows me up the stairs to the Beat Literature section and takes a seat at the table near the window. Signs proclaim, 'Sit down, read a book', but he just stares at the shelves, while I scramble over titles I've never even heard of before; pulling books off the shelf in a mad panic that they'll disappear in the next five minutes after waiting so long for me to show up.

There are two New York accents climbing up the stairs.

'Send me some poems, throw them my way, here's my address.'

'Just you wait, you'll be flooded.'

Jack stands up loudly and stomps down the stairs, pushing past the men. I follow him, passing the bulletin boards and letter racks to the basement, where he again sits down and looks around, confused, baffled. This is where Jack would sit for hours with Ginsberg and Neal Cassady, rapping about the world, sharing their writing. He jumps up once more and shouts loudly to Commodity Aesthetics, 'Avoid the world, it's just a lot of dust and drag and means nothing in the end,' before running up the stairs and out of the store.

I wait outside City Lights, too scared to go across Jack Kerouac Street to Café Vesuvio. I can see Dave Eggers looking through one of the front windows and it's disturbing. He is not a Beat writer, he is only thirty-one, but he did write a moving semi-autobiographical novel that makes me feel like I know a little too much about him, and that is intimidating. And although he's too far away to tell, his writing makes him sound handsome. They are setting up speakers, microphones and

drums out the front of the store, where the road has been blocked off from traffic and security men installed. I take my place outside City Lights with the jam of ill-fitting suits and dreadlocks. A middle-aged woman, a vision in purple crushed velvet, hands me her self-published selection of poems, urging me to make the \$5 purchase. Suddenly Lawrence Ferlinghetti is booming at the mike. His eighty-four-year-old voice is as powerful as ever; it's like a gust that throws me backwards. After years of listening to him on recordings, it is remarkable to finally hear it in person. There are other readers such as local poet Jack Hirschman and yes, Dave Eggers, but it is a nameless upbeat young poet who really gets my attention with a poem about San Francisco. His poem is powerful, exacting, complete. You can feel the energy start to rumble through the crowd as his poem picks up pace and suddenly people are shouting, calling out 'Yes!' hollering and moving forward to hear more. I push against the crowd, trying to get closer, as if I could absorb his voice, as if he is reading this just for me.

I wonder whether this is how it felt Friday night October 7th 1955 at the Six Gallery where Ginsberg read *Howl* for the very first time amongst five other poets and an entirely drunk audience. Kerouac sat up front drinking Californian Burgundy and rooting him on like encouraging a jazz man to sustain a brilliant solo; the poem full of sailors, sex, bad language and power. Ginsberg's description of the young bohemians was read with momentum and abandon. Even a recording of the poem is thrilling, with Ginsberg's deep and controlled voice teasing the listener with each line about masturbation and drugs in New York. It is fifteen minutes that scares and pains and jostles.

In 1956, after publishing *Howl and Other Poems*, Ferlinghetti was caught up in the heavy censorship trial revolving around the 'obscene' nature of the poem and its potential to corrupt American youth. He proudly displayed copies of the poem in City Lights' window with a sign advertising 'Banned Books!'. This was a landmark First Amendment case in that, for once, the good guys found victory and *Howl* continued to be published. The precedent set by the *Howl* trial has held up all these years, thanks to the judge's key phrase that you couldn't 'judge a work to be obscene if it had the slightest redeeming social importance.'

After the reading I take my cold self to Kearny Street and the site of the Hall of Justice where the infamous trial took place. It is now a green tinged Holiday Inn, whose dehydrating lobby I sit in for a few minutes, rubbing my arms on the chairs so roughly that they exfoliate. I go back up the street to Café Specs, recently named 'the best place to write poetry and the great American novel', but it is gloomily closed; its windows promising so much with their fill of reviews and articles.

I go up Columbus, Green, Vallejo, past the old US café where the country's largest collection of psychedelic drug related books are housed in the library. Just a few doors down, a small sign announces The Hotel Bohe`me, a dark and minimalist address with a picture of a beret on the door. It is advertised as the place to stay for a truly authentic North Beach Beatnik experience. After one look at the room prices, I am not sure how any visiting poet could afford to stay here.

Finally I take my full bladder to a laminex table at the very full Cafe Trieste. The crowd is full of literary types sitting with open books, pens poised or fingers hovering over a laptop. They are reading, jotting and sneaking occasional glances around the room to check what everyone else is doing. Masterpieces have been created here, with a cheese danish in hand and the hiss of the espresso machine in the background. Everyone from Francis Ford Coppola to Lawrence Ferlinghetti has brought typewriters here to work late into the night. Jack's picture climbs the wall with everyone else's. His handsome pose is struck next to Neal Cassady; sex addict, aspiring writer and the madman inspiration for *On The Road*.

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At night, pieces of Kerouac are reflected in the way I stroll casually with a notebook in my pocket and my hair in front of my eyes, so that I don't have to meet the stares of the lurchers and the lungers. I roam up Columbus and buy gum at a convenience store where the Bell Hotel used to stand. The apartment building a few doors down looks like an old hotel from the same era, so I stand and stare and chew, seeing Jack roll into town on the Greyhound and plunge straight into the scene after a mid morning check in at the dark corridors of The Bell. I imagine him lying straight in his bed, getting up the motivation to wander outside for more booze and listening to the Chinese conversations broken up by street noises. I think of him telling Ginsberg, when he was planning his first trip to San Fran, that this is the coolest place to stay for a young poet wanting life right outside his window. And I struggle to go back to walking, waiting for Jack to

maybe appear, hoping he'll give me more of an idea, let me know if my imaginings are on track.

Although it is after nine p.m., it is not yet dark and it seems impossible to be sleepy or alone in a late dusk chill. So, I find myself drinking whisky on an un-swivelling stool in Vesuvio. An old man, supported by two walking sticks, bumps through the door like an upended puppet master.

'Make way! Make way!' he cries in an accent thick with the panic of sobriety.

The bartender leans over and tells me to move, apparently I'm in 'Bubba's' usual perch, so I shift one along and he climbs up onto the wood, orders two scotches and hands me the sticks. Apparently, I am not only a drinking partner, but a caretaker and keeper of the sticks too. He has a curled up face, like a smiling bulldog and tufts of hair in places that only appear after retirement. His eyes are glassy cold, his mouth is always open and he takes care to suck in globs of saliva after each sentence with a menacing slurp.

'I'm not pretty!' he announces and pushes a drink towards me.

'Let's drink,' he shouts to the bar, 'to my own personal ugliness!'

He takes a sip and slurps. 'And to the ugliness of my soul!'

A sip and a slurp. 'And the general dementedness of the pretty!'

Sip, slurp.

At my third taste, Kerouac appears by my shoulder, with a bottle of beer that he takes great gulps from, a foamy trim stain forming in the corners of his mouth. This is the same happy Jack, just drunk and louder.

'Would you like a drink Jack?' I ask. 'It's Happy Hour and I can get two for one.'

'No no no no no!' He screams, 'It's not Happy Hour, but Slightly Less Miserable Hour'.

Bubba chuckles, 'You got yourself a genuine character,' he drawls. And he stares past me and looks straight at Jack.

Vesuvio Café is the place where Jack often sat from six a.m. until closing. His name is included in the infamous cement writing outside the front door– listing all those that had been 86'd from the bar at one time or another. The sign of Jack Kerouac Street tilts down towards the swirling spray painted landscape that is the outside of Vesuvio, only it is not really a street but a dripping wet alley, pungent with the overpowering smells that fall down the hill behind Chinatown restaurants. Vesuvio now boasts an impressive array of Beat memorabilia and graffiti in the bathrooms. In the sixties it was caught up in the sweep of tourist inspired Beatnik action and hung a sign over the bar that declared 'Don't Envy Beatniks ... Be One!' DIY Beatnik kits were sold to the masses of tourists who took their novelty sunglasses, sandals, berets and false moustaches back onto the bus for the North Beach tour.

*'I think people should stop resurrecting this dead decade.'*<sup>13</sup> – Lawrence Ferlinghetti. *San Francisco Beat*, edited by Meltzer, page 97.

A sun spitting Saturday morning. For The North Beach Festival they have closed off parts of Green and Vallejo Streets to set up jewellery stores, book stalls and jazz bands. I clutch a bottle of fizzing mineral water and a hot creamy mocha with fingers still sticky from salted pretzels and mustard. Along Grant Street I pass the old site of the Co-

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<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Ferlinghetti in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco City Lights Books, 2001, p. 97.

existence Bagel Shop, the social centre of a Jewish Deli which became the headquarters of the war against the 'Beatnik Squad', a division of the San Francisco Police Department intent on filtering out the city's young hoodlums in the 1960s. The doorway is now so blocked with dreadlocks and vinyl that I can't even see what it has become.

This neighbourhood is brimming with self-expressive streets and the kind of folk you'd call local characters. Most importantly, it is warm. Happily, soothing, shoulder-biting warm. Jack is nowhere to be seen but I think this is a scene he would enjoy, all these enthusiastic cats rushing around eating and spilling and dancing. I walk back down Columbus in the early evening and stop on the corner of Vallejo outside the St Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church. I look at the white marble, still warm and tingly, smiling to myself when an arm grabs me from a doorway and pulls me into the wall. Hot breath on my ear, so laden with whisky that it stings like disinfectant.

'Hey,' he says, 'It was the fantastic drowse and drum, hum, lum, mum afternoon, I had nothing to do. Old 'frisco with end of land sadness.'

Jack takes me on a hobo outing. We dress down, unfit for the now cool night and take paper bags wrapped around cooking sherry shoved into the pockets of his coat. I want to take the bus, but Jack makes me leave all my money behind, so we have to walk what feels like a million blocks west towards Haight-Ashbury.

'The moon is a piece of cheese,' he tells me, staring up at the eternal hobo's friend hovering in the clear sky.

As a part of this experiment we lunge in doorways with our booze and groan when people walk past. It is kind of fun for a while. I drape

newspaper over my legs and curl up, pretending to be asleep. Jack thinks this is hilarious and shushes all the people who come near us, telling them to 'let the lady get her beauty rest.' The sherry is leaving a sugary fur on my back teeth and burns the bottom of my stomach, but at least I feel warm. After two hours of stumbling along Haight and not making much progress, but a lot of noise, I ask Jack if we're supposed to be going somewhere.

'Of course,' he replies, 'we're heading to Rexroth's.'

Roll up to San Francisco Renaissance and see Kenneth Rexroth mentor all the kids. The masterful, original, grumpy old poet didn't identify himself as Beat, but he was there amongst the throng the whole time anyway. Rexroth was the first one to use the expression 'San Francisco Renaissance' to describe the group of poets who were circulating their work in the city. He became the centre of the set which included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia and Gregory Corso. Before rock music took over, poetry was the cultural news, but the single unaccompanied voice couldn't stand up to a wailing rock group.

Rexroth saw jazz poetry readings as a way of bringing literature to a greater audience, one that was less sophisticated and more ordinary. He was one of the first to experiment with the poetry/jazz combo and gave readings at all the great San Francisco hang-outs, including The Cellar and The Place. He first started reading in The Cellar with the owners as his band members. When he realised he couldn't sing like Leonard Cohen, he decided to read. His apartment at 250 Scott Street was the setting for Friday night gatherings where poets would meet to read and listen to Rexroth's opinions on everything from Zen to



Anarchism. Rexroth thought of San Francisco as his own private theme park, the beginning of utopia, the most radical city in the world. He idolised the city and identified the fate of the whole world with it. He had a less idealistic relationship with Kerouac; becoming annoyed with Jack's combination of drunkenness and Buddhist preaching. Once, at a New York collaboration, he was horrified when the stumbling drunkard vomited midway through the set on the still-playing piano. Eventually the relationship disintegrated to the point where Rexroth became Kerouac's greatest critic and nemesis.

The corner windows at Rexroth's place are dark with heavy curtains; the two arches peer blankly down at Jack and me, telling us there is no poetry here anymore. He is furious and frustrated at the silence of the house and kicks a wall with an unaimed sloppy foot. I feel this miserable dread creeping up on me as Kerouac raves at the building. He is almost foaming, he is torrential abuse, he is angry angry angry man. He is bottomless no hope. He is pain in the back of his eyes. He is frustration at all the things he can't undo and all the things he won't do. He takes off down the street, running too quick for me, his arms wave above his head, a hoarse growl slips through the front gates of squeaky-clean, renovated terraces. I can't keep up, I see him bouncing in front of me and I am scared that he won't stop, what if he just keeps running?

'Jack!' I scream, but it's not loud enough.

My feet are slapping against the pavement, sending a jarring pain up to my knees. Jack disappears around one corner and by the time I turn there, he is gone. I walk slowly, rasping and wheezing, peering down each side street until I see him under a streetlight. He is illuminated and crouching, staring at his chapped hands. I realise

where he is. The little Victorian terrace he crouches in front of is where his daughter used to live. Jan Kerouac only met her father twice and despite the obvious physical resemblance, Kerouac refused to acknowledge she was his child. He was dead by the time she moved in here, but maybe he still feels her presence.

*'I've seen the best minds of our generation destroyed by boredom at poetry readings.'*– Lawrence Ferlinghetti<sup>14</sup>

Poetry makes people do funny things. Lawrence Ferlinghetti was so overwhelmed by Blaise Cendrars's poem *On the Trans-Siberian* that that he took the Trans-Siberian in 1967, caught pneumonia and spent three months in a Vladivostok hospital recovering. All those piled-up books and recordings that make my bag so heavy are the reason why I shiver outside a slim doorway, with aching feet and a wheezing chest, waiting to be let in to my first ever jazz poetry reading.

The poetry of the Beat Generation was not just influenced by and included references to jazz music; it also sought to imitate the music in its rhythm and style. The same combination of improvisation and composition was used in the style of 'spontaneous bop prose' that Kerouac saw himself as the creator of. He wanted to translate his feelings into sound, as the black jazz musicians did, never mind that he had to fuel up on whisky and fiddle with a rosary to do so.

Jack bolts up to the door and doesn't bother to apologise for being late. There is an excitement and energy in him that stretches beyond the alcohol I know he has consumed before showing up. We pass

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<sup>14</sup>Lawrence Ferlinghetti in Meltzer *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001, p. 103.

through the doors, down a red velvet hallway and pay a thin blonde woman who stamps our hand.

I say thank you and Jack says 'Jazz killed itself, but don't let poetry kill itself.'

Dim the lights, so that there is a shadow on stage, with a coffee cup in one hand (although it's filled with wine) and the other resting lightly on the mike stand. The figure is hunched over, not self-consciously, but as a strong beat starts up they rock forward as if trying to gain momentum for the story they're about to tell. And on the back rock, they begin to wail and the lights come up. In case you don't know, a wail is a performance. It's not so much what they are saying, it's the power of their voice and the way they arrange the syllables that draw you in and make you gulp. The red walls of the club hug the audience like a womb. The performance is simply jazz using the voice as an instrument. It is not a compilation of bits and pieces, it is syrup. When purple lights flash, there's a piece of each musician given to the audience. The poet is washed in yellow like nicotine. His voice splashes out in orange, you can almost see the words as they strike. There is already music in what he is reading and everything else is just shades, pale hummings, nonsense murmurings, gurglings in the back of a half coughed throat.

There are people here tapping their toes on the carpet and their fingers against the tablecloths, and when I look at Jack I find him jutting his chin out in time to the beat, moving his whole body with each snare tap.

'What do you think?' I ask, 'Is it good?'

I have never seen this kind of thing before, only listened to it alone in my room at night, so I have no idea if it's just the atmosphere that is making me feel so elated or the wine or simply the idea of being here. 'You can't have birth without existence and you can't have death without birth.' says Jack.

'What does that mean?' I ask, 'what does that have to do with the poetry?' and then I remember Jack Hirschman, who I saw hovering on the stage at City Lights, the mike tightly gripped with his whitening hands. He claims that poetry needs fire, that its main components should be birth, death and love. I look for these things in the poet on the stage, I want him to make me burn like I do when I listen to *Howl*. Jack's face is lit up in the stage lights; he begins to shout out to the poet. At the end of each phrase he calls 'Yeah!' He cries 'Come on!' He does this until the poem is finished and then he claps sloppily and loudly like a retard, standing up unsteadily. I catch a glimpse of the napkin in front of him, he's scribbled all over it, but it hasn't come out properly, so there are only childish markings and scratches.

*'Kerouac used to say writing was like having a dope habit. You just keep on doing it'– Philip Whalen<sup>15</sup>*

Stoned and muddled, we lean against the cold wall after sharing a single joint that I don't inhale properly, but Jack sucks on greedily. His eyes are reddened and slitted, the muscles in his face slip downwards until they've gathered in his chins. Marijuana is a good drug for Jack, it slows him down, levels him out. He is quiet, but still interested. He used to smoke a lot of pot in Mexico and then sit up all night and write. I explain to him that when I smoke I either get sleepy or over

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<sup>15</sup> Philip Whalen in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001, p. 348.

emotional, that I'm never able to gain inspiration from taking any kind of substance, that I always forget to write things down, that I'm terrified of spontaneous prose. Then suddenly the composure vanishes and there is dishevelled, drooling Jack with his head on my chest, a wetness flowering outwards on my t-shirt, each of his sobs causing me to stumble backwards.

'Don't cry Jackie,' I murmur. He is paunchy old Jack with TV glazed eyes and a downwards mouth. 'What is it?' I whisper against his skull, 'What is it? Tell me.'

'Death hovers over my pencil ...'

*'Kerouac's version of Buddha is a dimstore incense burner, glowing and glowering sinisterly in the dark corner of a Beatnik pad and just thrilling the wits out of bad little girls.'*<sup>16</sup> – Kenneth Rexroth

On the second day of not seeing Jack I lie down in Washington Square Park, staring at the statue Richard Brautigan posed in front of for the cover of *Trout Fishing in America*. It seems smaller, rustier. The sun is stretching its way over towards me. This is the largest public space in the area, but it is closing in on me anyway, with red-headed screaming babies and homeless fashion victims. A bottle of wine thuds down next to my head, followed by the grin of Jack Kerouac.

'Well here I am, two p.m., what day is it?'

He stretches out alongside me and raises his head to swig at the wine. I take a few sips and feel sleepy and tell Jack to maybe leave off it for a bit.

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<sup>16</sup> Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001, p. 234.

'My manners, abominable at times, can be sweet. As I grow older I become a drunk. Why? Because I like ecstasy of the mind. I'm a wretch. But I love love.'

And this makes me giggle.

He sits upright in a mockery of the lotus position, because he can't fold his limbs that way anymore, nor focus straight ahead. He falls to one side and the wine spills into the grass, where he slaps his fingers down on the puddle, as if he can absorb it like a sponge. Then he begins to recite his own translations of Buddhist terms. Dharma: 'truth law'. Nirvana: 'blown-out-ness'. Tathata: 'that which everything is'. Tathagata: 'attainer to that which everything is'. Bodhisattva-Manasattvas: 'beings of great wisdom'. With each term he attempts to raise himself and only succeeds in planting two knees on the ground, so he kneels above me, his dripping red hands splayed in front opening and closing with each slowly spat syllable.

Kerouac, although brought up in a devoutly Catholic family, was swayed into Buddhism by his friend Gary Snyder, a Berkeley student and scholar of Oriental languages. Being influenced by his simple living, extensive writings and serious reading list, Jack followed him by working as a fire lookout for the summer. His isolated musings are captured in the novel *Desolation Angels*. On the mountain Desolation Peak, in his solitude, Jack's hermit wish was fulfilled. It was the typical Kerouac thing though, he liked to preach and read and try, but in the end he came out from the woods, tired and hungry and guzzled a flask of wine. So anxious to return to the mad bad world that he cut up his feet on the way down and had to wait three days to get new shoes.

Jack wavers above me, not sure which knee he wants to lean on and it is somehow frightening to have this heavy figure so unsteady and close. He is getting plumper now, softer and fuller, his neck is swollen, doughy and almost purple. Soon the wine will be replaced by whisky. He says, 'My fault, my failure, is not in the passions I have, but in my lack of control of them.'

Is he talking about the alcohol or the religion? He was not alone in this passion for alternative spiritual fulfillment – many of the writers of the Beat Generation practised or showed some interest in Buddhism, seeing Christianity as a religion tied up with the American lifeless conformity. Especially those based in San Francisco.

Jutting out on a peninsula, cornered by the Pacific, San Francisco is like an island cut off from the rest of America. Maybe this is what makes it so intent on fostering the growth of the bohemian, the alternative and the experimental. During the height of the Beat Generation, it was the last stop in America before hitting Asia, where many of the poets including Ginsberg spent some time learning about meditation and Buddhism. Jack's own Buddhist ideals found their way into his novels and even his poems, as he experimented with new forms of haiku. Ignoring the traditional rules of haiku form that the poem had to consist of seventeen syllables, he simply used three short lines to present a clear, direct image. Like a continuous breath in the jazz music he was so besotted with, he revealed almost everything in just one breath of a poem, often using dashes for pauses, just like a tie in a jazz composition. In his book *San Francisco Blues* each poem is a jazz blues chorus– eighty short scene sketches and a tribute to the spontaneous phrasing of jazz music. In the spontaneity and directness of the poems he tried to grasp the basic terms of existence: suffering,

transitoriness and egolessness. I think he'd suffered plenty and moved a lot, but I don't know how he let go of that ego, not while everyone was proclaiming him a great genius writer and 'King of The Beat Generation'.

*Around Jack there circulated a palpable aura of fame and death.'* – Gary Snyder<sup>17</sup>

Old buddy Kerouac and me, we are as slippery as butter as we run about town. Like the stuff melting into our pancakes that we eat quickly, hot gooey mouthfuls, before bolting out the door into a quiet San Fran morning. He is tugging at me through San Francisco streets, up muggy hills, over a vent in an in-between alley. Holding on for dear life at the edge of a cable car thundering away from Fisherman's Wharf I can feel Jack Kerouac's hands wrap around mine, they are in thickly lined gloves and they smell of sweat and forests and whisky and typewriter ink. His breath makes clouds appear at the top of the pier that is disappearing from view. With each exhalation a cruise ship disappears into the steam and then breaks through the mist again while Jack fills himself. At the wharf we watch the fishmongers, who seem more like restaurateurs, flogging the fried clams and shrimp cocktails. We grab bread bowls filled with creamy clam chowder and sit on the edge of a mermaid statue eating it with plastic spoons. I get up to leave, telling Jack I'll see him later, but I have to call home now. He calls out after me, 'Don't use the telephone, people are never ready to answer it, use poetry'.

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<sup>17</sup> Gifford, Barry and Lee, Lawrence *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac*, London, Rebel Inc, 1978, p. 234.



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I am like one of Jack's often abandoned lovers, loitering on a North Beach fire escape waiting to hear his strong voice pound its way up the hill after a drinking session in Vesuvio. He needs my help to come inside, but he doesn't want to admit it, so he lurches through the backpackers' doorframe and calls me a whore and a slut and asks for his mother. I get behind him and try to push him in the door, but Jack crouches over and pushes back, in a slobbering move that digs up a memory of a Columbia football scholarship. I grab one of his legs- the very same leg whose break caused the loss of said scholarship and Jack to drop out of school- and it gives way, sending him sprawling onto his back. He paws at my chest, but more out of a need for balance than romance. With skills like this, I understand how easy it was for him to abstain from sex during the serious Buddhist years.

Later I watch as he snores on the lobby couch, his mouth as wide as propaganda. I zoom in on the face and squeeze his nostrils with two fingers and place my hand over his mouth, it is cool and calculated, a small experiment to see how much he needs to breathe. He lies there quietly for a few moments and then wakes up with an ignorant jolt only to roll on one side away from me and I hover above him to hear the mumbling, 'I keep falling in love with my mother.'

I understand that the only woman to control Jack's drunken mayhem was Gabrielle Kerouac. His wives and girlfriends could never, ever compete with her rules, judgments, strong Catholic values and cooking. Jack loved his mother but was always writing, asking her to wire him some money. In a photo he is half in shadow, slumped

behind onto the saggy breast of an old grey bunned woman who stares into the camera daring it to question her.

*To rebel! That is the immediate objective of poets! We can not wait and will not be held back ... The 'poetic marvelous' and the unconscious are the true inspirers of rebels and poets.'* – Philip Lamantia<sup>18</sup>

I race onto the train, with my bag slamming sweatily into my hips and run straight into someone's bicycle wheel, jamming a kneecap between the spokes. I am on my way out of lumpy San Francisco city and heading to the east side of the bay. The name Berkeley provokes images of student rallies, tie-dye and casually dressed professors standing at the bar alongside the students. When I arrive the main street, Telegraph Avenue, is empty for the summer, leaving only second-hand bookstores, shops with copied University paraphernalia and homeless people on every bench – most of them old and in floral, like the hippies who got left behind. It is cold again, blustery and foggy and I feel the same as Gabrielle Kerouac when Jack plonked her down here after a Greyhound from the East Coast – dissatisfied with the weather. Mother and son shared a ground floor apartment just off University Avenue for a few months in 1957. It was here that Jack received a large box from Viking Press one afternoon – the bound advance copies of *On the Road*, which he opened immediately, handed out and then abandoned his mother by running over the bridge back to San Francisco to celebrate. My own copy of the novel sits in my bag with its thin and curly pages after too many readings and red wine

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<sup>18</sup> Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001, p. 142.

splotches from those desperate nights where I would introduce it to a drunken bed, wanting to impress some boy with rambling quotes.

The only reasonably affordable accommodation in Berkeley is the YMCA on Allston Way. Downstairs the panelling, cushions and contemporary muzak make it look like a respectable budget hotel, but upstairs there are urine-stenched hallways and mumbling drunks in the TV room. I sit at a desk in the lobby next to a deaf guy who is hissing and jangling a pile of keys around his neck. Old men eating tired sandwiches watch each other's backs, grip walking sticks and groan softly when someone walks past. A dishevelled middle-aged man, in an ensemble constructed entirely of beige corduroy mentions he's lived in the building for 22 years. A security badge on his front pocket identifies him as a professor of Literature at the University of California. When I touch the wood of the desk, a fine white dust sticks to my fingers. It is the old men shedding their skin onto the furniture.

Beatnik accommodations were cheap and crowded lofts, drafty gardeners' cottages, the attic room in a boarding house, cold water single room apartments where you had to wash the dishes in the bathtub after heating up coffee on the illegally installed burner. A Pad was a place to drink, smoke and talk, but more importantly to create and share work. It was filled with the furniture that everyone else threw out and more often than not the central piece in a dwelling was a large square futon where most of the day and night's activities were conducted. From Rexroth's Friday night gatherings, to Diane Di Prima's 'everyone's welcome, fed and sexed up' lofts, the poets' habitats were more than just a place to sleep and eat. The view from an apartment was often the inspiration behind poems, stories and music. Ginsberg

took a photo of his place at 1010 Montgomery, where he wrote *Howl*, certain that one day it would be an historic site.

The Beat Generation is now a thing to be archived and preserved. In The University of California, the Bancroft Library holds one of the world's biggest collections of materials related to the Beat Generation and the San Francisco Renaissance. Kerouac's Rules for Spontaneous Prose are not flattered by the fluorescents that hum above me in the pasty room with its red wood chairs and carefully assigned places. I've declared my passport, pens, any noise-making devices and taken the sharpened pencil to my seat where I wait to be served. A young lady approaches and I hand her the delicately filled forms with their triple carbon layers, which she trades for heavily bound folders, white gloves and a small pair of tweezers. I tweeze my way through Neal Cassady's letters, scribblings of Jack's, Herbert Hunke's homoerotic subway bathroom journals and a pamphlet advertising a Beatnik get-together at the Co-Existence Bagel Shop. I see Kerouac's life work splashed out on the scratched table. There are letters, journals, pieces of poems, so unlike the amateur and unreal photocopies of originals. I devour the handwriting and printing as much as the words, because although these are things I've read hundreds of times before, now they are suddenly real and more precious. The legendary scroll which contained the original hastily typed version of *On the Road* doesn't appear in this list because it was sold for 2.4 million dollars in 2001. The most prized thing I find is an illustrated beat glossary – a perfect guide to the language of the Beat Generation. It is thin and pale blue, written with a malfunctioning typewriter, so that every 'b' and 'p' are raised slightly above the line, jumping up like musical notes.

So I have my jive talk, I am trying not to be a cornball about this. I've been turned on to the scene that'll blow my wig, eye heavy glassing after being 86'd by a popcorn. I dig the hepcat who is holding and have eyes to blow any kind of axe, or fall by the casbah with some apple baby. I don't have enough bread to buy a box, but she'll flip about the nutty sides and we'll get a slide to make the run. Back at the pad it is trim city baby, until we get tossed and eventually tapped by the Man for wailing too loud. What a drag.

*'We do a lot of talking, don't we? And the best talking we call poetry.'*<sup>19</sup>  
– Lew Welch

From the sidewalk table we watch a group of overdressed high-school students celebrate their graduation with poses and flashes. They look too eager to go out in the world, too excited and happy. Shaded Kerouac half-obiterated by a Starbucks umbrella pokes his tongue out at me and announces, 'Does anyone have a ciggie-boo?'

There's no smoking Jack. There's no jazz either. No button down collared lumberjack shirts. And late night beans and franks dinner dates. And tacked on postcards from Mexico to Allen's letters. And dark conversations recorded in the almost-morning light where you try and make shapes in the world by talking it out, half asleep, half stoned, half serious.

The high-school students give me an idea.

'Mr K,' I say, 'This is a student town and we are going to enjoy ourselves. We are going to do what students do and have a good time.'

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<sup>19</sup> Lew Welch in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001, p. 310.

We are going to get drunk and silly and go dancing.’ He looks doubtfully at me, but I spit in my hands and rub it through his hair, so it spikes up.

‘Now, stop that,’ he whines, one paw flattening it back down.

When Jack was forty-three he developed a hernia from hanging out with the students of the University of Southern Florida, participating in the ‘belly busting’ competitions where he would slam his beer gut into the young men until they were knocked over.

*‘Try to never get drunk outside your own house’ – Jack Kerouac<sup>20</sup>*

Jack Kerouac and me in a nightclub, the lights hurt his eyes. We enter through a blackened door and pass by the burly doorman, who remains immobile, with all the personality of a piece of meat with eyes. Inside it is smoky, hot and loud, a complete sensory overload. I think about the jazz clubs that Jack is used to and worry if maybe this is too much. At first he looks terrified, then slowly fascinated as he takes in the half naked bodies, the gyrations and pulsations. It is primal, sweaty, gut wrenchingly sexual on the dance floor. Jack keeps his head down, lifting his eyes every few steps to gawk at the women. ‘They could be men,’ he tells me, ‘they are acting like goddamn men.’ It’s true I guess, they are wearing slightly flared pants and tops which resemble Jack’s undershirt. They move with freedom, expectancy and blatant sexuality. Most of them have cropped and spiky hair and faces free from makeup. I feel like a doll next to them, with my ripened curves and way too long hair.

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<sup>20</sup> Kerouac, *Heaven and Other Poems*, San Francisco, Grey Fox Press, 1959, p. 46.

We shuffle along the dance floor perimeter, Jack's hand squeezing mine and make our way to the bar. I order beers, it's the cheapest thing, but they are in tiny bottles and the glass is too cold. Jack thinks the water bottles the dancers are passing around contain straight vodka, but he does realise they're all on drugs. This is after all the man who produced the famous 120 foot long scroll from a three week Bensedrine high.

'Can we get some?' he asks me, like an eager puppy, 'What can we get? Do you think we can?'

Like a mother I'm apologetically firm when I tell him we probably can't afford it.

'I heard that it's like \$40 a pill around here.'

Jack, who even in his own timeframe had a doubtful grip on financial matters, looks at me, stunned.

It is probably the same as the weekly rent of a North Beach hotel in 1952. His favourite railway district dive was The Cameo Hotel, where he wrote *San Francisco Blues* rocking in a chair by the window. I went by there to see the levelling and rebuilding and there was not much left of the neighbourhood you can find in *On The Road*, *Desolation Angels* and *Lonesome Traveler*. Not a trace of the whores, hustlers, winos and cop cars. But back in the club Jack has lost his uneasiness and is looking about with a manic grin, soaking it all up. A heavy beat pulsates under the electronic sounds – this is carefully constructed music, designed to make it almost impossible to be still in its midst. I rock my hips from side to side and step up and down with the rhythm, then signal to Jack to do the same. The steady doof doof interrupts our heartbeats. I am on the dance floor with my hands pressed against Jack's chest, he is wide-eyed, sweaty and glowing. He presses his palm over mine and then brings our hands back over to my neck. He

strokes me with calloused fingers. Our eyes lock and I mime 'hello', he mimes it back and we are serious. We are jolted by the other bodies and pulled and twisted, we are dancing without doing anything. Jack's tongue is in my ear and rule number seven slips into my head, 'blow as deep as you want to blow.'

When we walk into the YMCA at some ungodly hour, the streets are still quiet but humming with a temperature that screams for the tourists to come out; it is going to be warm tomorrow. There is that part of me that wants to walk back out and stand in the middle of the warm road and recite my bad beat poetry to the silver trees. But we take the elevator up to the fourth floor, its clunking making music with the buzzing in our ears and open the door to my room. I smell that night air as my feet are black on white sheets with the scum of a thousand dance floors stomped into their soles. I try to sleep, but there is a stomach churning, a mouth dry and feet aching trying to un-pluck themselves from the horrible high heel mould they've been wound into during the past few hours. Jack is on the floor with his sleeping bag wrapped around him like a hot-dog bun. This is what he mumbles to me anyway, 'Look at me Stella safe inside my hotdog bun.' The thought of hot dogs makes me wretch, and I push a wad of sheet into my mouth and feel my eyes stream. We sleep late into the day, so the sun is overtaken by air-conditioning rumbles. I don't want to wake Jack, but can't get up to pee without stepping on him so I lie there in bladder agony, hoping he'll stir eventually. There are images of some slowly fading dream sliding through my head, with my eyes open they are going faster and soon I can't think of what it was at all that had me so absorbed for at least a few hours and left my arm with teeth marks, my pillow moist with drool. Running my fingers along one



cheek, I feel the battle scars of the night – creases and indentations spidering across the surface. Jack shudders awake and rolls towards me, the connection from last night has faded and he is gruff and angry with me for apparently waking him.

'So poet, rest awhile and shut up,' he groans.

I slip out the door once he snores again and take the next train out of Berkeley.

San Francisco was the end and beginning of every great cross-country, rite of passage road trip whether it was taken the old fashioned hitch-hiking way or spent in the upright carpeted seats of a Greyhound bus. Before I leave I take a ride over the Golden Gate Bridge, its ruby red arches peering through the fog, stretching up above me and criss-crossing like eyelashes. There is the nozzle shaped Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill, the great monument to the San Francisco firemen whose phallic symbol appears in Gregory Corso's and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poetry. Kerouac slept through his first trip across the bridge and missed the sight of San Francisco creeping up to rival the bridge in a hilly peak, topped off with the nozzle. He woke up in the Fourth Street bus station and staggered into the charcoal morning, not quite believing he'd made it. And then he pulled out a notebook and started to write, so San Francisco could exist on paper and somehow make more sense.

I try to write in my journals at every opportunity like he did. I want to feel that power rushing into my fingers before the words reach the front of my head. I wish I could make the words into sounds, like Jack. I wish I could jump around from one topic to the next like on a tennis court, playing two or three balls at a time. When I sit down to write I

try to pour out the words as furiously and undeliberately as him. For Jack Kerouac, writing was a way of untangling life's mysteries; he just kept typing and scribbling, hoping for that moment of illumination.

I take one last browse in City Lights, fingering the spines, scanning the covers. I play the game of looking for my favourite books; just seeing their familiar, well-known covers is comforting and reassuring. I slowly follow the alphabet, waiting to get to the Ks and then the KEs, but before I find what I'm looking for I'm interrupted by a spray of spit and a 'Bah!' Then appears ghostly pale Jack Kerouac, alcohol swollen face peering from behind the shelves, telling me to go towards the back of the store, at the base of the staircase and peek at the poets' mailbox. A few orphan envelopes with wavy air-mail stickers poke out of the top, waiting to be claimed. I hiss at him like a cat, and he retreats to the Independently Published Zine section, rubbing a photocopied, stapled pamphlet with his fingers and looking angrily at its cover. He pulls out a pencil and scribbles harshly onto the paper before throwing it at my head. His constant props, the beer, the cigarette, the checkered shirt make him seem cartoonish and large – he fills up the bookstore with his figure, his huffing, his roaring grumpiness. I storm out onto the sloping sidewalk and he doesn't follow me. I should have remembered what's scrawled down on the zine: rule number nineteen, 'accept loss forever.'

*'They can kill a poet, but they can't kill his poetry' – Jack Micheline<sup>21</sup>*

As I crawl forward on the tarmac, it strikes me that I have Kerouac under my skin, on the inside of my eyelids even. And as the plane lifts

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<sup>21</sup> Micheline, in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat, Talking with the Poets*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001, p. 227.

off I see Jack Kerouac sprawled drunkenly on one side of an armchair, his belly propping up a beer. And I see Jack Kerouac on stage at the Cellar, humming gently in time with the saxophone, his poems crumpled into one hand. And I see Jack Kerouac leaning out of a Columbus Avenue window to breathe in Chinatown messes and the sweat of the masses of hungry office workers who make their way up the hill. And I see Jack Kerouac frustrated at his loneliness on Desolation Peak, stirring a pot of beans, holding the lotus position and trying to read the Sutras all at the same impractical time. I see him announcing at Rexroth's one evening he is a great Buddhist scholar, only to be quietened by the fact that everyone else in the room speaks at least one Asian language. And I see him, kind of glowing, Jack Kerouac standing out the front of 1010 Montgomery, the apartment different from Ginsberg's picture, but still holding traces of *Howl* as Kerouac counts on his fingers and lists the Rules one by one.

## Mexico City Madness

'Shoot the bitch and write a book. That's what I did.' – William Burroughs<sup>22</sup>

I end up in Mexico, looking for the Jack who wrote *Mexico City Blues*, ignoring the teenage prostitutes, homosexual orgies, morphine, whisky, marijuana. Mexico is full of life and death posing as life. The heat makes everything swollen and sour, from my hard-worked ankles, to the over bright fruit that lines one street after another, blocking all the shop fronts. On the curbs rest sleepy people and the occasional dazed piglet that looks up in alarm as I push through the crowd followed by a trail of teenage boys calling, 'Hola chica!'

Am I more appealing than those tanned, well-hipped local girls whom Jack wooed so convincingly in *On the Road*? I ignore the boys and listen to my iPod to drown out the heckling with Bob Dylan singing 'I've had the Mexico City blues since the last hairpin curve,' his gravelly voice the perfect soundtrack for a hot and bothered day.

The Beat Generation kept coming back and forth to this strangely shaped country for a taste of its lifestyle, marijuana and cheap tasty food. And in its capital they found a sprawling metropolis, surreal and huge that somehow fed creativity. William S. Burroughs – the

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<sup>22</sup> Laughead Jr. George, *Shooting Joan (Vollmer) Burroughs: William S Burroughs at home*, Beats in Kansas, viewed 22 November 2006, <<http://www.vlib.us/beats/shootingjoan.html>>

esteemed heir to the Burroughs Adding Machine fortune, wily drug addict and influential elder Beatnik, spent the most time in Mexico City, moving here with his children and common-law wife Joan in 1949.

William Burroughs' Mexico is the one that let him freely wield knives and guns and the inspiration for a trip further south to find the potent hallucinogenic and telepathic plant yage. It was then a city of only a million people with a bright blue sky and a tolerance for corruption. In *On the Road*, Jack's Mexico is simple, happy and idyllic without a trace of the dysentery that is slowing me down. Mexico to me is disease and poverty, it is the aggressive shoe-shine boys who attack my rubber thongs with black polish, it is the blank CDs purporting to be pirated music. Mexico is nothing like America, it is nothing even close to the Mexican restaurants in San Francisco with their shiny plastic cacti and creamy guacamole. Mexico City makes you feel dirty, the sky is dark with the pollution and the street dust creeps up through the bottom of my thongs and turns the soles of my feet black. After only a day, my hair is clumped with sweat into tangled dreadlocks and a dust outline settles around my watch strap.

I take my tired American clothes to a laundry where a kind teenage girl washes and folds them for two dollars. Then I visit a farmacia in the hope of finding relief for the illness that has taken hold after just one day and the man in the white coat tells me to drink 'coca' and sends me away. So, armed with a cold bottle of dark fizzy drink, I prowl the late afternoon like Burroughs on a morphine run. And when I see that dark, stocky walk straight ahead I can't help but follow, stumbling past rows of sink plugs and shoe horns. A staunch woman in

a safari suit blocks my path, requesting money for her dancing monkey and I press on through the Centro Historico, blocked with fatigued army trucks and slim young boys holding guns like hockey sticks. At the corner, a familiar profile is projected against the dirt and yes hello Jack Kerouac here we are again.

Jack stands in front of a line of young girls, thinking they're all whores and motions for the youngest one (still a teenager) to take him into their house so he can pay her a few pesos for the privilege of ramming her from behind. Jack's most intense love affair was with a Mexican morphine addicted prostitute once – a relationship fabled in the novel *Tristessa*. In the book Jack struggles to cure her addiction by introducing her to his Buddhist theories. He writes her as a beautiful Madonna figure made wretched by the slums of the city. In reality it was a doomed relationship between the chronically ill junkie and a lonely, aimless Kerouac.

I steer him gently away from the whores and we take the crumbling streets back to my hotel, dodging the green and white Volkswagen taxis that inconveniently mount the sidewalks. A police car cruises slowly by and the officers call out to me and try to pass their phone numbers through the window.

When Jack came to Mexico City in the early 1950s he stayed with Burroughs at 210 Orizaba Street and set himself up on the rooftop with a sleeping bag and his notebooks. The notebooks contained the workings of his novels *Maggie Cassidy* and *Dr Sax*. He used Burroughs' typewriter to hash out a very early version of *On the Road*. Initially, the pair had a fabulous time watching bullfights and ballet. Then

Burroughs grew irritated with his paranoid and selfish guest as Jack ate all the food, hid marijuana and refused to pick up the tab for the long nights they spent at Lola's bar.

He quickly takes over my hotel room, flinging his canvas shoes on the floor and spreading out his sweat soaked clothes to dry by the window. My carefully laundered things are rifled through and he helps himself to a pair of navy socks. A bottle of tequila is poured into a plastic water bottle which he tucks into his back pocket. The tequila is drunk straight, without the nightclub additives of salt and lemon, and it is chokingly strong and hot.

In Mexico City with my ghost friend Jack Kerouac there is just enough time to go to the El Chopo markets and deck ourselves out in punk clothing. We walk past the abandoned Central Station following the heavy metal music to an open-air collection of stalls selling clothing and accessories all in black. We shop amongst Skateros (rude-boy and girls), Darkeros (goths), hippies, Mexican Rastafarian-types, new punks, gutter punks, rock-and-rollers, death metal folk, skaters and S&M people. I buy Jack a dark vinyl jumpsuit and line his eyes with heavy pencil. With his swagger and cheekbones he could be on MTV.

Then we take the metro in our plastic black outfits, hoping to scare the other patrons, but the Mexicans ride the subway like they're ascending to heaven – packed in and serious faced, not meeting anyone in the eye. The only person who speaks to us offers to sell children's mathematics books and Jack almost buys one because he sees how poor and sad the guy is and obviously we have more than enough money for this silly economy. We have enough pesos for the white

tiled hotel room with lemon yellow curtains and a clean toilet which I block by illegally flushing the toilet paper. And we have enough pesos to sit on the hard seats in a café called El Popular. It is a place where local people go, where Jack likes to watch men in overalls and imagine their professions and comment that they are 'good hardworking men'. We order onion soup and quesadillas like local people and try not to flinch at the heat and sting of the chilli. The tequila works its way through my system in hot stinging flushes and I think of Bill Burroughs who maintained that in Mexico it was impossible not to be drunk by eight a.m.

Suddenly it is grand to be in Mexico City! The world's largest and most polluted city is liberal and dangerous in an appealing way when I'm with Jack Kerouac. There is alcohol everywhere, even in the post office where I buy postcards to send to Australia and Jack wants to list how cheap everything is: hamburger – 12 pesos, cigarettes –30 pesos, filet mignon – 40 pesos, etc. As if it would encourage the recipients to come here and live on a hotel rooftop for ten US dollars a day. Jack relishes the opulent lifestyle that developing countries offer. He is the big-man-king from America flinging his dollars about town in his super new rebel rockstar outfit.

He wants to go to an old-fashioned bullfight and watch a finely clothed Matador taunt the black, solid beast to its death, but I remind him how upsetting and horrible it can be. He looks sadly at the finished bottle of tequila and says, 'How awful it is to live just so you can die trapped like a bull in a screaming human ring.' And we try to take a taxi to Coyoacan to visit the Frida Kahlo museum but I should know better – Jack has no interest in artists with monobrows. So we go to the Zona



Rosa because someone says it's the most expensive part of town and order steaks with red wine sauce and he insists on eating the whole meaty mess with his hands because this is what real men do and real Mexicans do.

But on the way home we both feel the tug in our stomachs of the typical Mexican sickness and I know it was always like this for Jack, but I'm still unprepared for the cramping and burning and hours spent hunched over the blocked toilet while he lies outside the bathroom door on the cool tiled floor to soothe the fever and calls out haikus through the crack to keep me company. The only thing that makes me feel better is the fizzy coca cola, so maybe the man in the farmacia does know best.

In the morning we return to normal attire and eat coconut-sprinkled melon for breakfast, hoping the vitamins have a chance to course through our body before the next wave of sickness hits. Then we take to the streets and I want Jack to show me the old bars and haunts, but he is reluctant and vague and I realise that Mexico City is not really his town. But it is the inspiration for one of his most important pieces of poetry, a giant poem with all the elements of spontaneous prose endorsed by Jack and the rhythm of a jazz composition. *Mexico City Blues* is fresh and lyrical and full of jazz phrases and made-up words, designed to be read aloud with soul and rhythm. When the poem emerged in 1959, some said the poem was genius, others like Kenneth Rexroth said that if poetry separated the men from the boys, then Kerouac was obviously a boy. I like the poem and think if we walk long enough around this packed city, Jack will recite all the choruses for me

in his earthy grand voice, filling the morning with karma, nirvana and cabbage soup tales.

As we are strolling along one of the wide boulevards, a flood of young people gushes from the gates of a smart-looking building, chatting and cackling in Spanish far too quickly. We push against the tide of students and wander into the lush grounds of The National Autonomous University of Mexico. 'How these educational institutions just keep popping up!' exclaims Jack.

We walk through a paved laneway past fleeing students and pale sandstone buildings. Something catches Jack's eye and he runs towards the side of the Library, transfixed by an image. He tears from the wall a large glossy poster splattered with the dark profile of William S. Burroughs. I take the poster off him and see that it is advertising the International Burroughs Symposium – a week of lectures and readings dedicated to exploring the work of his old friend. Burroughs loved Mexico City – he loved the liberal lifestyle, the availability of drugs, the powerless authorities. In the house on Orizaba Street, aided by daily doses of morphine, he finally began his writing life and penned his first novel *Junky*, an autobiographical ode to his own addictions.

Jack strokes the angled cheek of Bill, looking miserable. And I remark that it is nice to see this haunted city honouring its notorious resident in an academic and cultural forum. I am also pleased to see from the poster that the lectures will be given randomly and out of order, to put them in context with the style of Burroughs' work.

But Jack just sighs and mutters, 'All that literary stuff is just a drag.'

And it makes me wonder if the lectures will be given high on opium, peyote or yage in another grand Burroughs tradition.

I find an internet café to e-mail The Boy while Jack waits outside scanning the hot sidewalk for a dealer or a hooker. A woman runs in and starts shouting and threatens me with the mouse from one of the computers. She is chased off by the owner but steals a giant can of instant coffee from behind the desk. Nobody else looks up from their computers.

I seem to be sweating tequila and I'm covered in mosquito bites. Mexican keyboards have no question marks. The Mexican girls all have long dark hair that they run their fingers through as they walk past and taunt Jack Kerouac. Mexico is dark corners and dusty shelves and Mexico City is sour sweat smells and plastic voodoo dolls hung from the doorways. Mexico has bitten me, sipped me slowly like a hot martini made from its undrinkable water. Mexico City magic, madness, humming streets and cooking smells and snakes and weaving and simmering flames. *Mexico City Blues* had two hundred and forty-two choruses and thirty-five characters and endless alliteration and hopeless exaggeration. And when I get outside the internet café, Jack is helpfully yelling its 64th point, 'I'd die than be famous... I'd rather be in the desert sand.'

That night we get high on seedy pot that was terrifying to buy and wander into the massive concrete square of the Zocalo. It is huge and grey and tourists gather in its corners watching horrific Mariachi bands break out into Neil Diamond songs for an extra few pesos. A group of teenagers set off fireworks randomly and without concern. We rush

towards them and try to catch the bright sparks as they fall to the ground and I look up and see the burning ash crowning Jack's hair and brush away his hot halo before he is set alight. So we run through the square like hyperactive children whooping and yelling through the steamy ten o'clock heat.

In a dark alley we find a strange church with indigenous people in bright clothing and with ribbons trailing from their hair. And I watch from the shadows as an ancient old lady Shaman dances around a child on the ground and rubs eggs over her body. She cracks the eggs into a cup and pokes them with her finger and makes the little girl drink them raw and whole. Then the Shaman drinks a two-litre bottle of Coke and burps away the evil spirits into the night. And Jack burps along with her, only his smell of cheap unrefined tequila.

I say to Jack, 'Do you know these people believe that the world is a cube on four poles surrounded by water?'

He says very seriously, 'The earth is an Indian thing.'

And the way he makes this grand proclamation like it is the word of his God or his Buddha makes me explode into giggles.

And then the hunched form of the ancient Shaman freezes and she raises her head, ruffling the feathers and ribbons, and her eyes bore through my head and I'm startingly sober.

Projected against the wall behind her I see a terrible sight – the greatest of all Beat Generation scandals – a wobbling William S. Burroughs holding a pistol in one hand. And the flowing sweetness of his wife's long dress is outlined beautifully in the shadows of the gun dealer's house and her hand holds a half empty glass of gin and

limonada. Joan Burroughs finishes her highball and places it on her head and turns her eyes away, saying coyly, 'I can't stand the sight of blood,' as if she knows what is about to happen. And then old Bill raises his pistol, takes aim and fails spectacularly at his William Tell act by shooting his twenty-seven-year-old wife in the damn head.

As we gather ourselves in El Popular with hot coffee sweetened by condensed milk and a splash of rum, I think that it would be great to give up this city for a night in a fancy international chain hotel. I could have a real bath and possibly flush the toilet paper and watch Melrose Place in Spanish and eat french fries to calm my stomach. Maybe if I was like Jack's friend Gregory Corso, I could sit in the lobby for long enough with clean hair and painted nails and find someone to take me back to America in exchange for love and conversation.

But Jack tells me something different. He wants to go into the desert to sleep on the rough Mexican ground and find a petite local girl who will make him good warm tortillas by hand every evening. He tells me he longs to sleep with the *chicanos* on a dry riverbed by a farm just like he did once in Southern California. And to make love to a young girl who never complains or questions and says, 'Everything will be all right manana.'

So back in the cool tiled hotel room we part ways, his clothes shoved back into their canvas home and his tequila supplies carefully wrapped in paper bags. And I watch him walk towards where he thinks he'll find a desert, wondering how long it is before he ditches the Indians and seeks out the whores. I think of Joan Burroughs' feeble bones lying unmarked and unpaid for somewhere in one of the city's giant

cemeteries. I want to know more about that ridiculous junkie husband of hers and I feel the pull of Europe. The old rough roads of Mexico City will give way to something shiny and new. The last lines of *Mexico City Blues* give me the best idea; you better get back on your kind of boat.

## One Night In Tangier

*Jack Kerouac, on editing Naked Lunch (in disgust): "Bill, what is all this stuff about young naked boys being hanged in limestone caves?"*  
*Burroughs: "No idea. I know I'm some kind of interplanetary agent but I don't think my signals are decoding properly."<sup>23</sup>*

'One night in Tangier' I say to myself and it sounds like the title of a play or my autobiography or a song by an 80s boy band with fluffy hair. I don't have an iPod for this trip though, I have left everything vaguely valuable behind because everybody has told me that Morocco is notorious for thieving and pick-pocketing. I have brought lots of three-quarter-length cheesecloth shirts because my Lonely Planet book says that women baring their arms can be controversial and provocative. I don't want to provoke anyone; after all I am not of the generation of wandering expats who strolled into Tangier in the fifties and sixties looking for drugs and encounters.

William Burroughs floated in to Morocco with a suitcase of heroin in 1954 and a hard cock for all the young, lithe boys. Jack came on a Yugoslavian ship direct from Brooklyn in 1957. Allen Ginsberg and his boyfriend Peter Orlovsky took a freighter across the green ocean later that year, hoping that Bill's lovesick obsession with Allen had faded. I pile into a ferry at Algeciras, exhausted from a cross-Atlantic flight and ride the cool ocean all the way to Tangier.

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<sup>23</sup> *Wikiquote William S. Burroughs*, Wikiquote, viewed 8 November 2006, [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William\\_S.\\_Burroughs](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_S._Burroughs).

There is a woman on board who I cannot stop looking at because she is so obese. She has enormous calves holding up a symmetrically rounded tummy, with a tiny head perched on top. I don't know if she is Spanish or Moroccan, but she has dark earthy skin and henna orange hair. She waddles around the boat as it lolls from side to side and I am worried she will fall and roll off the side. She unwraps a woven shawl from around her shoulders and then undoes the tie of the skirt at her waist. For a minute I think she is about to expose herself to the other passengers, and I prepare myself for an onslaught of wobbly tummy flesh, but she keeps unwrapping the skirt to reveal a piece of material three metres long and she still has another skirt on underneath. She unwraps that one and another and another, pulling off endless layers of bright material and stuffing them into a garbage bag at her feet. Her legs hold scarves and her arms are hidden by silk handkerchiefs. I am completely fascinated and spend the entire time watching her undress – one layer after another, instead of looking out at the flat Strait of Gibraltar. By the end of the journey she is a tiny gypsy woman with a big sack of Spanish material to sell at the Tangier markets. And she never had to pay the mandatory luggage fee of the boat.

When we dock, it is the smells that assault me first - the diesel of the turning ferry, the sweat of the hustling passengers, the smell of death oozing down in the breeze from the tannery on the hill.

Tangier sits in a tiny corner of Africa, living off the passing trade where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Mediterranean. It is the city that everyone seems to be passing through on their way to somewhere more exotic with camels and palms and rolling sand dunes. To a party



in Marrakech hosted by rapper P Diddy or to witness Jimi Hendrix's inspiration in the hippy town of Essaouira. English tourists sail over to Tangier from Gibraltar for carefully monitored group day trips, to be robbed and to purchase overpriced dodgy carpets. I join the line to get off the boat, following the wobbly thighs already pinkening in the sun. I have the impression that those who choose to stay in Tangier longer than a couple of days are a little bit mad. Tangier sets the tone for Moroccan culture shock and the looming walls of The White City stare down, daring me to enter.

The custom officials eye my passport lazily and my breasts eagerly. Gregory Corso came to Tangier in 1961 with an expired passport and after bawling at the dock all day was forced to take another boat to Casablanca to face the embassy. I am faced with a series of taxi drivers who try to usher me into beige Mercedes and a small boy with a monkey who runs his hands over my bare wrists. And I think, if only he was carrying a baby lamb, so I could exclaim like Kerouac in *Lonesome Traveller* 'Look a real shepherd boy carrying a baby lamb!'

The major player in the Beat Generation's infatuation with this city was William S. Burroughs, who was happy that it resembled Mexico in a lot of ways. He took a great liking to the young boys, the liberal police and the steady supply of and tolerance for any kind of drug he wished to use. When he first arrived in Tangier, the port city did not belong to Morocco and was classified as part of an International Zone, having been divided up amongst eight countries during World War Two. It had two currencies and three official languages. Tangier was famous for its lax laws, corruption and drug tolerance. Anyone with a passport could declare themselves a citizen, run a business or even open a bank. It

was not uncommon to hear the whispered transactions of gun runners in the tea houses and bars.

Burroughs based himself in Tangier during the height of the Beat Generation explosion while all his friends back home were busy getting famous. He began his second novel *Naked Lunch* within the walls of the Hotel Villa Muniria (or, as the Beats christened it, Villa Delirium). He set the novel in the fictional city of Interzone as a tribute to the disorientated Tangier.

Fuelled by coffee, chewing majoun and trying to kick the heroin habit that had haunted him in Mexico, he started scrawling his manuscript for six ferocious hours a day in his hotel room. A couple of years later Jack, Peter and Allen arrived to help make sense of the manuscript and to ease the loneliness of Bill's life in Tangier. The four friends typed, edited and rearranged the yellowed pages that Bill simply wrote and dropped to the floor. They cooked meals, smoked hashish and bonded. Jack complained that the food was awful and the whores expensive. Bill ignored the man whom Allen had fallen in love with and a brewing hostility between himself and Peter developed. One night whilst completely high he lurched around the hotel room waving a sharpened machete at Peter's head.

Tangier is an explosion of people, Arabic coca-cola signs, begging children with bandaged arms, fake Fendi purses and flat silver shish kebabs sending dark, meaty smoke up to the sky. Snake-charmers confront me with their tiny wriggly animals and I brush away their offers to hold one, knowing it will cost me more than the 'un dirham' they ask for. The old men who have the job of charming the cobras sit

on cushions and make them dance for the tourists. Apparently there is magic in Tangier. The expat writer and painter Brion Gysin once believed a spell was cast on him that caused him to lose his restaurant. Another expat, Jane Bowles, believed her lesbian lover was a witch who cursed her with a debilitating stroke. And Burroughs believed he was invisible and no one could see him as he walked the streets gaunt and unhappy, so the young Spanish boys he bedded called him 'El Hombre Invisible'.

I take a tiny hotel room in the Medina of the city, comfortable behind its high white walls and the maze of its tiny streets. It costs me US\$20, about the same price that Burroughs paid for a month in the 1950s. It has a beautiful tiled terrace upstairs which offers a view of flat rooftops, the Tangier harbour and, far off in the distance, the sun-baking coastline of Spain. The streets of the old town are winding, tiny, curling veins pumping people around the old town and spitting them out into the harbour. The dirty yellow buildings rise up three or four storeys to roofs grandly adorned with the latest in satellite technology. On their faces are blue and green shutters that are closed when the sun bears down in the early afternoon. A crazy jumble of telephone and electrical wires snake their way down the sides of each building leading to street signs printed in Arabic, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

Tangier is a gateway to Europe, a crush of cultures, a mystical port town that is unlike any I've ever been to. A middle-aged woman and her two teenage daughters run the small hotel and deliver fresh mint tea to my door. They tell me in bad English and slightly better French not to wander to the upstairs rooms where the 'special' guests stay. I

am slightly offended that I'm not special enough until I catch a peek of the impressively thin legs of a transvestite walking up the stairs past my window in a pair of patent Ferragamo wedges.

Brion Gysin had the most popular queer and crazy restaurant in Tangier called 1001 Nights. Situated in an old palace it was a haven for homosexuals, musicians and expats. He ran it with his boyfriend Hami (who was also the cook) for a few years in the mid-1950s. Gysin was introduced by Hami to the music of the Master Musicians of Jajouka and fell in love with the trance-like sound the Sufi Masters created. Jajouka is a small town in Northern Morocco that produces an incredibly unique, atmospheric and hypnotic music that is passed down through the generations. The sound is hard to describe- it is a repetitive, yet compelling mix of traditional drums and bamboo flutes. Rolling Stone Brian Jones recorded an album with the musicians before he died and many performers see it as being the root of all trance, rock and psychedelic music. Gysin wanted to hear the music everyday and hired several of the musicians to perform in the restaurant. 1001 Nights was filled with dancing boys, drunk expats and serious literary types all moving to the amazing Master Musicians of Jajouka.

In the 1950s there were no real tourists; only a handful of Swedes appearing in the summer, but now Tangier is on the lips of every backpacker and jetsetter, if only for its hectic ferry schedule. I see them ducking out from the air-conditioned cool of the fading Hotel Continental, once the most fashionable hotel in Tangier which now charges US\$150 a night for its peeling archways and sullen doormen. The tourists in Tangier are conspicuous in their wariness and bewilderment. I prepare to leave the hotel and join an impressive

conga line of day-trippers as they move en masse back towards the harbour.

I walk along the sea wall marvelling at the white sand on the beach, so much prettier than the dirty pebbles in Europe. A cart pulled by a donkey trundles past, filled to the brim with small brown children and metre high sunflowers. The children jump off the back of the cart and run down to the beach, plunging into its polluted water, screaming happily. I have a photo taken in this very spot which shows the whole gang, Peter, Jack and Bill posing against the flat sea of Tangier. Jack and Peter are wearing white, cropped, baggy shorts and are bare-chested (Jack looks particularly magnificent). Bill Burroughs lies on the ground at their feet fully clothed in a suit, tie and army boots.

*'I have a strange feeling here of being outside any social context.'*  
– William Burroughs in *Tangiers*<sup>24</sup>

I am starving and want something hearty and cheap. I ask a small boy who's been following me if he knows anywhere that serves good food and he offers me copy Gucci sunglasses and leads me to his friend the shoe-shine boy. I realise there is an international conspiracy to polish my thongs. Scandalously, I take a table alone at a seaside restaurant and the beautiful boy waiter flirts shyly while he explains the menu. A steaming pile of couscous is placed before me, heaped with eggplants and chunks of tender lamb. I try to eat it as the locals do and the saffron stains my fingers a buttery yellow colour as if I have had the wedding Henna drawn into my palms.

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<sup>24</sup> Miles, Barry *El Hombre Invisible*, London, Virgin Publishing, 2002.

When I get up to leave the waiter holds my hand in his and says, 'We will have relations yes?'

I hold up the hastily placed band on my ring finger and shrug my apologies. He looks undeterred and presents me with a scandalous magazine featuring big-breasted models in horrific 80s lingerie. He eyes me expectantly – like any good Western Christian woman, it is obvious that I should be wearing something similar under my cheesecloth. I shake my head and move away from him and he stares after me with ferocious, judgmental (and disappointed) eyes and I know this should be a serious moment, possibly a dangerous situation where I as a young, unaccompanied white girl should be afraid for my modesty – but I cannot help but break out into furious giggles at the thought of those high-cut, fluorescent pink g-strings.

Tangier is messy. Islam, French, Western. There are the silent black cloaked women who move like ghost ships through the market place. There are the French speaking shopkeepers who sport orangey-red Chanel lipstick. There are the billboard icons of any good European city – Coke, Rexona, Juicy Fruit. Above all Tangier is a port city; a place for trading and a border town. There is something seedy and unwholesome about the place – Tangier is not the earth-red resorts that are featured in most Vogue travel articles on Morocco. Tangier looks like the perfect setting for a Martin Scorsese documentary on white slave trading.

I wonder where the expats are? Do the queers of Europe still seek out The Hotel Continental for its liberal boy-whore offerings? Do the junkies of America find opium and gossip in the corners of bars and

cafes? Are there any writers and artists left in Tangier fuelling their creativity with the unwholesomeness of the Interzone?

Burroughs once said of Tangier, 'I've never seen so many people without any money or the prospect of money'. He referred to it as Interzone because it was a place of insecurities, permissiveness and detachment from the rest of the world. In the late 50s, Tangier was emerging from its International Zone status but still held onto its tax-free, anything-goes business operations. About 60,000 foreigners called Tangier home at the time, but they were a rag-tag group who were more often than not, like Burroughs, escaping some judiciary fate in their home countries.

Bill mixed little with the other expats and while he pretended not to care, their exclusivity bothered him. He inhabited a world dominated by his heroin addiction and the great search for a cure. In Tangier he was the lonely invisible man who escaped America after shooting his wife in the head. The Swiss-Canadian Gysin was king of the expats, taking advantage of every liberty that the seemingly lawless city had to offer. He cut a bizarre figure strolling about the Medina dressed in traditional Arab garb with a strong following of Moroccan boyfriends. In 1954 he held an exhibition of his paintings at the Hotel Rembrandt which Burroughs attended and found him surprisingly cold and conceited. Gysin mostly ignored Bill or gossiped about his drug use and penchant for Spanish boys who Bill claimed he only chose because he couldn't understand a word of Arabic.

I find myself sitting at a window seat in Dean's Bar, once the most fashionable and exclusive establishment in Tangier where Burroughs

was received with suspicion and hostility by the legendary barman Dean. I am greeted with a cordial 'Bonjour', handed an unasked-for beer and dismissed with a weary sigh after I've paid in dirhams. This is a place which my guide book describes as 'Just one of those great places to hang out and enjoy an evening'. The suggestion has made quite an impression on other readers and I spot three copies of the thick Lonely Planet being flicked through at other small tables. I know from the book that glamorous drinkers such as Ava Gardner and Errol Flynn once sat at the bar with gin and tonics. Tonight there are only tourists like me who sit expectantly with a Heineken as if Hemingway might return. At the other end of the bar, old Moroccan men have claimed a corner in which to swig the local beer. No one is raucously drunk or misbehaving. There are no conspiracies or international arms deals being discussed. I am not offered cocaine or hashish and there is no sweet tinge of Marijuana smoke lingering in the air. I would like Jack Kerouac with his dispiritedness and sickness from drinking the local water to appear and start some trouble. I would like to see an expat writer sit down and clack away on an old typewriter, munching on a locally grown apple and I could witness some new genius being created in this slimy city.

It was the Paul Bowles novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, that inspired Bill to choose Tangier as his point of dislocation. For fifty-two years, the twisted city of Tangier was home to its most magnetic expat, Bowles and his lesbian wife Jane. Never part of the Beat Generation, he was the leader of the old-school literary brigade that set itself up during the International Zone period. Bill not only loved Bowles' novels, he admired the man and sensed that they were living very similar lives – both had escaped the middle-class American values they resented to



Tangier and both had married women they loved even though they were gay.

At first Bill was ignored by Bowles in the same way that he was shunned and rejected by most of the international society in Tangier. Eventually he invited him to tea with Gysin and the three strange men sipped from dainty glass cups while they told sad old stories about America. In return, Burroughs invited Paul to visit his junky den and watch him practise shooting holes in the hotel room wall with an old pistol.

At night I notice that Tangier is strangely silent and the only noise in the hotel is the careful clacking as the transvestites make their way out for a night on the town. When I curl up on the stiffened sheets in the tiny tiled room I take out a copy of *The Sheltering Sky* and in it I read about a completely different Tangier from the dirty, stifling one outside. The novel makes Tangier seem unique and magical – an oasis in the Sahara desert, a refuge from the inanity of American life, filled with beautiful, extraordinary people.

And then I begin an immediate dream about Burroughs' Tangier where dark shadows in cowboy hats chase enormous cockroaches down to the sea. And where I chase Jack in a maze of earthy streets until I am tangled in a woman's clothes and swept under her shawl into horrid darkness and then Bill appears and says, 'I am junk sick,' and begs me for a cure.

In the morning I am awoken by the call to prayer and the call of a hundred roosters seemingly perched outside my window. I use the

delightful hole-in-the-floor toilet, making good use of the Sephora make-up wipes I carted here from the US. I think about how Jack coped here in 1957 and how he was disgusted by the living conditions, craving his American breakfasts and his mother's housekeeping.

I wonder what to do today. The thing about Tangier is that it doesn't appear to have many tourist attractions – perhaps its dirty scandalous nature is enough of a 'must see'. The national drink of Morocco is mint tea and it is drunk in tiny tea houses with a hookah pipe in tow. I have seen the menthe leaves carried on the backs of dark men as they take them from shop to shop to sell. I decide to find the Café Central on Petit Socco where Burroughs used to go to drink his mint tea and watch old men play competitive backgammon.

I set off into the heat of the day armed with a guide-book map that proves to be completely useless. The city's most popular square and meeting place does not show itself to me as I shuffle down one narrow street after another. So I decide I want to find the old site of 1001 Nights in Rue Riad Sultan, but once again it appears that Lonely Planet cartographers have not yet mastered the art of capturing the thousands of twisty Tangier alleys and miscellaneous staircases. The buildings tumble on top of each other; when I think I am turning into a street, I enter a bare courtyard; where I see an opening, I find a closed-off doorway. I am lost and it is bloody hot and no one is selling cool bottles of mineral water, only sticky opened glass bottles of warm Fanta. There are so many young men in Tangier, brushing past me, staring, offering me Fanta- where are all the women? I am confused and hot and want to rip the three-quarter-length modesty-protecting garments from my body, but I'm afraid of being spat on or raped or

swapped for a dowry of camels. And I turn blindly into laneways and follow a stream of women into a cave-like doorway where I am asked to hand over some coins and I do because they are all smiling and laughing and it smells so good.

In the earthy coolness of the bathhouse I am stripped naked by teenage hands and doused in soapy water. A young girl rubs soap stones between her hands until they lather up and then digs her fingers into my scalp pulling my hair at its roots; the squeaky sound lets me know just how clean I am becoming. She takes handfuls of the stinky green clay that is henna and rubs it through the ends to dye it a horrible ginger orange colour that will be exotic and beautiful until I get back to Europe. And then a chubby older woman lays her body over mine and massages gritty soap into my muscles, pulling away months of dirt, fake tan, sweat and ingrown hair blockages. The atmosphere in the steamy room is joyous and playful as girls wash each other's hair and backs. It is feminine and ritualistic and I feel privileged to be involved. I also feel smug that I have an experience unavailable to Bill Burroughs – there is no mention of lovely bathhouses in the rambling of *Naked Lunch*. In fact, Bill was pleased that women were shrouded and covered and destined to follow the men and donkeys around town. They were inconspicuous and quiet and he could go for days without noticing them. I emerge from the bathhouse shiny and new, and when I walk down the streets I believe I am glowing. I walk amongst the men in their long white robes and I am invincible.

And I think naively, I will conquer you Tangier, I will experience everything.

Hollowed alleys in Tangier filled with strangers and men and women who won't look at me except for the old lady who takes her hand and brushes it over my face and mutters, 'Jolie.' Young smooth-faced men who offer me dark chalky sticks of hashish that I don't know how to smoke so I grind it into a weird paste and swallow it with gulps of the fizzy orange Fanta. When I am high, Tangier is frightening. How the hell did Bill cope with a heroin addiction in this atmosphere? When I feel the first onset of a buzz it is accompanied by a continuous loop of the Clash's 'Rock the Casbah'. When the call to prayer is projected over the city, I am filled with sudden terror that it is a war cry or a search warrant for me. I follow the noise to the nearest mosque and find the recorded sound is coming from four loudspeakers taped to the upper part of the tower.

There is a festival happening but no one will tell me what is in aid of (because I am a woman, because I'm baring my arms?) There are old men lugging slaughtered sheep around town on their backs and in rusty wheelbarrows. Younger men have set themselves up on street corners with flat round stones for sharpening the slaughtering knives. The high-pitched sound of them grinding on the stones cuts through my stoned head in a terrifyingly paranoid fashion and I retreat into the centre of the Grand Socco.

Charcoal is being lit at the numbered stands in preparation for the nighttime customers. Each vendor helpfully yells out the number of his stall to me as I walk past, asking me to return for a lamb kebab later. Scores of thin teenage boys offer me their services as a guide for the night in perfect American English. They ask me if I am 'George Bush'

or 'Fish and Chip' – colloquial names for nationalities I guess and I reply that I am 'Kangaroo'. In the market I look for the gypsy woman from the boat, thinking I would like to buy the third layer of green shawls she carried on her left thigh. I am offered drums, silver jewellery, thick knitted gloves, carved wooden boxes, hand-made chess sets. I almost purchase a Bedouin-made, camel-hair poncho which I am drawn to by its Christmassy green and red tassles. I am not good in markets like these because I'm not good at haggling. Every time I reach for something that I think I might like to buy (a carved flute, an enormous turquoise headpiece, a ceramic tajine – all incredibly practical purchases), I am overcome with confusion over what it's worth and walk away clutching my wallet.

I pause in front of a tiny, gnarled old man who sits cross-legged on a mat and displays tiny glass bottles of oily liquid next to dried bunches of herbs and small pieces of bark. He is a medicine man, selling ancient pharmaceuticals and magic potions that have been used for centuries to treat common illnesses in the local people. I assume he also sells ridiculous remedies to backpackers and tourists that look exotic but have no beneficial properties whatsoever. I finger a tiny dead lizard and wonder how I could get it back through customs and he snatches it out of my hand and hisses at me. Then he beckons me to lean in close and forces open one of my eyes with his rough brown hands and stares intently into it. I am frozen and stay there in mid-crouch, close enough to smell his smoky old man breath until he offers up a long pinky nail filled with a fine white powder. My first reaction is caution, but then I realise that this could be the seedy underworld of Tangier rearing its mystic head. If I sniff this powder will it be an opium high or will I find myself hunched over in the tiny hotel room

days later, terrified that like Burroughs I am becoming invisible? And when he draws the nail closer and sticks it straight up my nostril I take a deep sniff of something that hits me in the back of my head and burns through my sinuses, making my eyes water and my throat contract.

Men riding donkeys at a hundred miles an hour streak through the narrow pathways causing customers to retreat and shopkeepers to yell. A powerful menthol taste sticks to the roof of my mouth and I am buzzing and paranoid, unable to speak or focus. And I understand how Bill must have felt – surrounded by people and madness, yet cut off from the rest of the world. I walk in a frantic circle around the Grand Socco and take the first clear street I can see to leave its centre. If I had the energy I would take a train out of Tangier high into the Rif Mountains, seek out the Attar family clan in Jajouka and enjoy their special traditional trance music. If I knew where I was going I would walk the long white beaches for kilometers, searching for rhythmic fishermen and brown-robed Spanish priests. I would follow the tracks to Casablanca and watch the brakemen master their trains just like in California. I would find Jack Kerouac in cheap restaurants taunting beggars and Arabs, high on opium and trying to sleep on codeine. I would join in that lamb-slaughtering festival and sit in a cool bar drinking gin and tonics with famed international correspondents. I would find the Beat Generation in this city; I would find something other than couscous and ponchos. But Tangier does not reveal itself easily.

So I pay a young man to take me back to my hotel and I curl up on the bed sifting through the pages of the novel *Interzone* and for the

first time its narrative makes sense and I begin to think Bill Burroughs is a genius, not just some old homo junkie.

*'If people and their manner of living were alike everywhere, there would not be much point in moving from one place to another' – Paul Bowles<sup>25</sup>*

As night comes in on Tangier and my one night is up, the Levanter wind blows through the Strait of Gibraltar and tousles my hennaed hair. The smell of Eucalyptus is caught in the wind and for a second Tangier is merely Fremantle – a warm port city with an afternoon breeze. After just one night in Tangier I am not surprised that Jack Kerouac has not appeared in this strange city – he always found it too dirty and weird. He was intimidated by the people and wary of the covered women and as many people noted, Jack was always more comfortable in America than anywhere else in the world.

To leave Tangier is much harder than arriving. Although I have only been here one night I am subjected to three different lines of custom investigations and receive three different beautiful Arabic stamps on separated pages in my passport. My bag is thoroughly pulled apart as I am given a document to read on the dangers of drug importation and aiding illegal immigrants. And I finally board the ferry and enter its air-conditioned European style interior and even though nothing really horrible happened to me in Tangier, it is a relief.

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<sup>25</sup> Bowles, Paul *Let It Come Down*, London, Penguin (1952), 1980.

I search for the bathroom in the bowels of the ship and find Jack Kerouac sitting on the steps, shaking along with the loud rumbling engine and holding a tin bowl and spoon. I sit down next to him and look at his dirty bowl of boiled beans and feel sorry for him.

He offers me a mouthful which I decline and then he sighs a deep old sad sigh.

'Didn't think you'd be on this boat,' I say and put my arm around his shoulders because he seems truly down.

'World travel isn't as good as it seems, it's only after you come back from the heat and the horror that you forget to get bugged and remember all the weird scenes that you saw.'

'I know, that day in Tangier felt like a week.'

He nods, puts the beans on the floor and leans into me and our hot shaking bodies hold each other up on that bottom of the ship stairwell somewhere near North Africa.



## Paris August

'Death to Van Gogh's Ear!' – Allen Ginsberg's standard letter sign-off.<sup>26</sup>

On the map it is a very short distance between Spain and Paris and I can trace the journey with my finger in half a second. In reality it is three trains, a coach, a plane and a shuttle bus before I am given the opportunity to utter my first *merci*. And a terrible one it is too, tinged with Italian expression and guttural German vowels. Ryanair advertises its flights to Paris without mentioning that the airport is a cold steel hangar an hour's bus ride away. The packed bus takes us past fields of tulips and daffodils and I wait for the earth to change colour, the road to become less straight, the trucks to disappear and this grey highway to take me to Paris.

The bus stops at Porte Maillot and I grab my heavy heavy bag and pull it from the bus belly and drag it to a pay phone. I have the obligatory Lonely Planet and work my way through its listed hostels, all sounding so bland and unappealing, some noted for including sheets and pillows, some given a highlighted box because there is a bar downstairs. None of them strike me as where I want to be in Paris.

So I sit at a café in the bus station filled with other people and their luggage and order a café au lait and a croissant – badly. I have that lump in my belly that happens when I first land in a country, even though hours ago it all seemed so certain and sure. And I, as usual, turn to what I know for comfort and think about middle-aged Jack

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 216.

bumbling through France in his beggar clothes with his Joul accent, incomprehensible to every native Frenchman.

When Kerouac came to Paris in 1965, he was a little too late for the literary revolution. He came for a different purpose – to research his family tree and lineage and spent a couple of weeks stomping in and out of libraries frustrated and depressed that the librarians, sensing he was drunk, would not part with information. He took taxis around the city in expensive loops looking for prostitutes and wholesome food.

But I am not here for old Jack Kerouac. I am here for Paris and its other literary children. Paris the creative nerve centre of Europe. I count the names, Stein, Hemingway, Clifford-Barney. Those who made Paris their home, their inspiration and their subject. What is it about this city that fostered such creativity?

The first time I came to Paris I was alone and seventeen years old. It was Valentine's Day and I sat on a bench under the Eiffel Tower, unable to convince myself to climb its great height, and looked around for romance. I remember the fountains and ponds were all frozen and I wore a green coat made from sleeping-bag material and I was three times wider than I should've been. My feet were wet and freezing and I slipped in and out of cafes looking for hand-dryers to dry my socks with, like I'd done once in Canada. The Seine was flowing quickly and I stood looking at it, expecting chunks of ice to slide by like Niagara, still looking for romance. At Notre Dame I was accosted by a group of American teenage religious drama students who tried to involve me in a liturgical dance. And then just when I thought there was no romance left in Paris, I looked across the street and spotted a bookstore called

Shakespeare and Company. Inside I marvelled at the stacks and shelves of books – any book you could ever want. And I marvelled at the sophisticated clientele of people in velvet and torn denim and felt hats. Then I bumped a stack of books with my enormous coat and they crashed down in the centre of the store, thumping and thudding on the poets and expats' feet. I knew I couldn't pick them up and I ran from the store blushing and sweating, gripping a stolen book by Allen Ginsberg in my hand.

In the bus café, in Paris late afternoon, the bag at my feet is heavy with that book and others and I understand that I only have one hotel to go to if I want to find something in Paris that doesn't belong to Jack. So I grab a taxi and hand the driver a slip of paper when he tries to speak to me. 9 Rue Git-le-Coeur. He doesn't know it, but I know the direction by heart. I say, 'Boulevard Saint Michel, Rue St Andre` - des-Arts,' and we are away.

I pause in front of the welcoming sign for The Relais Hotel du Vieux Paris, admiring the golden letters on a smart navy blue awning. It is a four star, four storey high hotel in the middle of San Michel, on the narrow lane that joins Quai de Conti to St-Andres-des-Arts. It is expensive and somewhat opulent with a mahogany front desk and a beaming receptionist who assures me in perfect English that it will be no problem to find a room without a booking. I am handed a key on a heavy wooden ring and take the tiny modern lift to the second floor. The air in the corridors smells antiseptic, there are vases full of apricot roses perched on tiny hall tables and the carpet is so thick that the wheels of my bag dredge unmistakable tracks to the door of number 27. And it is hard to think that it is the same building *Time Magazine*

once referred to as 'A flea bag shrine in a section of Paris where passersby move out of the way for rats.'

My room forges an assault on the senses by way of hideous wallpaper, mahogany beams and mountains of floral bed linen. Disappointingly this is the Beat Hotel. In 1957 the no-name hotel on Rue Git-le-Coeur was cheap and crowded with expat artists and writers. Ginsberg, Corso and Orlovsky arrived in October in the middle of a power strike and took the leaky, top room – number 32.

My room with its carefully constructed flamboyance is none other than the initial corner lodgings of William S. Burroughs. Burroughs arrived in 1958 fresh from Tangier and settled straight into the hotel with the intentions of reigniting an old affair with Allen and finding a psychoanalyst to break through the walls of his subconscious. What happened in the years between 1957 and 1963 in the remaining nineteen rooms is the stuff of legend, as the hotel became a hive of creativity, artistic expression, language experiments and hallucinogenic ambitions.

The culture of Paris was somewhat lost on the Beat Generation, but the Beat Hotel was its own little world. Without knowing the language and without an input in French society, the guests inhabited a private creative paradise amongst the four disgusting, rat-filled floors. Paris, with all its history, politics and struggles, carried on outside the walls. Instead, the Beat Hotel was the Beat Generation's major inspiration, as they chose to ignore all the images, messages and opinions from the daily life of the city.

I hear the rush of the street outside my window and can't imagine ignoring Paris. I expected to feel inspired by Paris. Do I? Or do I feel freed by its language and culture and people? Do I feel more creative for being shut on the second floor of this hotel? I take out a pen and wait.

How do I write Paris? I try and feel romantic in Paris, so I am naked. I have underwear scattered all over the floor and tangled in my feet at the end of the bed. I can't see anything. I have my eyes closed, but when I open them it is still so vague because I've closed all the windows and curtains and it is that horrible cold afternoon-nap feeling when the light is like cold coffee. How do I write Paris when I am inside this flowery cocoon of a hotel room with its overenthusiastic wallpaper and pale green bath gels? I get up and crawl across the floor, so heavy, and pull the curtains slightly apart. They smell like wet dog. I blink through the heavy curtains at a young man with a long shish kebab who could be thinking I'm naked, who couldn't even be looking at me. His eyes are too brown. The corners are milky like oysters. I just press my head against the glass and flatten my face like a child and breathe noisily across the window, breathe slowly and unhappily.

There are no sounds with the windows closed but I could try to manufacture noise. I could turn the air-conditioning on to hear its tasteful hum and I could run a bath and sit on the edge dangling my calloused feet and watching the way they turn the water darker with each back and forth swish and slush. I could tidy my eyebrows if only for the faint squeak I have to make with each pluck just before I bring the fresh hair in front for an examination of its roots. I could roll

across the sheets, so harsh and crisp and tight that not even sex (although solitary) would seem to dislodge them. I could pick up the phone and listen, ear pressed, bottom lip between teeth, to its foreign dial tone, its sad waiting. And I could figure out after interminable fiddling how to operate the TV and let the harsh squawking of the Eurovision Song Contest finals blast in from the top left-hand corner. I could open the window and let the sounds of the Latin Quarter come in like they're supposed to. But I can't go outside and I can't leave because this building with its narrow beige hallways is the very reason why I'm in Paris. And naively, I promised myself I'd stay here for at least twenty-four hours and just absorb the atmosphere.

But there isn't any. It is clean and cold and full of pretend lived-in knick knacks like a pen holder and a bathrobe embroidered with the word 'Vous'. I sit and stare at the over-tanned shiny midriff of a Latvian solo artist and wonder what happened. This was THE place.

It was the jester, cheapskate poet Gregory Corso who came up with the name Beat Hotel for a place that rated thirteen out of thirteen on the terrible hotel scale. The Beat Hotel had no name, no carpets, hole-in-the-floor toilets with last week's newspaper and a sensational smell of men, sweat and shit only offset by the sweetness of cannabis. An ageing, squat Madame Rachou ran it single-handedly after the death of her beloved husband some years before. She expressed a fondness for the artists and writers who inhabited her forty-two rooms, having been a waitress in the café where Monet used to eat as a young girl. She was a grey-haired, round old landlady who kept her patrons safe from the authorities by offering lunch to the local Police Inspectors every month.

I came here to do nothing but think and feel and try to resurrect some pieces of history, some vague memory from the concierge, some other literary ghosts. I have carefully wrapped books brought all the way from City Lights, San Francisco. In the books, the pictures show the hotel with one toilet per floor, steps missing, a dark attic and the walls tacked with unfinished poems and dirty canvasses. The pictures show the inhabitants naked, scowling, mesmerised and filthy.

I lie on the carpet and look under the bed.

'Show me something,' I say.

I think about how I found Kerouac in San Fran waiting outside his apartment looking for a poem. And I draw words into the carpet with one finger as if that would bring him here. I write Rimbaud's name in curly, loopy letters, thinking of Jack's poem that is a detailed biography of the crazy, alcoholic French poet. Rimbaud is one of the reasons the Beats were drawn to Paris, influenced and inspired by his free flowing poetry and claiming him one of their 'Secret Heroes'.

But Jack does not come, and I leave the hotel and step into the wet maze that is the Left Bank of Paris, its streets filling as it gets darker. Hopefully with wild-eyed poets.

The cheap cafés and artists hang outs of the 1950s are now Greek and French restaurants with carefully printed set menus. The tourists flounder under umbrellas and raincoats, questioning every blackboard even though they are all the same. I walk into the first place that offers *potage d'oignon* and settle in for a 12 euro three-course meal. The waiter calls me 'princesse' and I answer his questions in Italian,

confusing him for a moment until he responds in Spanish. The soup is salty broth with stringy cheese attached to a piece of dipping baguette. The steak comes with a gloopy Roquefort sauce that makes me wrinkle my nose.

When it rains, it is the rain of European cities that splutters rather than falls and collects on the street to wet the bottom of my pants. The cobblestones are pretty, but impractical and I tackle them like I do the reefs of Western Australia, methodically checking with the ball of one foot for slippery patches on each stone before taking a full step. The rain brushes over the edge of my fingers – each nail has a drop balanced on it. I do the touristiest thing I can think of and eat a sticky crepe by the Seine. It is soon reduced to mush by the rain and I feed it to a passing terrier that trots along uninhibited by owner or leash. The river is lined with stalls that sell faded prints of the city and Eiffel models. In the hey-day of the Beat Hotel they would sell illegal books and pornographic novels. Many of the American residents earned money from writing the Dirty Books for Olympia Press, a publishing house that produced slim, green wrapped English language books that would have been banned in the USA.

Through the rain I search vaguely for something familiar to remind me where I am, until I finally find the tiny alley with 'Git-le-Coeur' nailed to a wall. I stare at the careful printing and remember that the street name translates to 'lies the heart'.

Back upstairs in the over-decorated room, I am not sure where my or William Burroughs' hearts lie, but it is not in the mini-bar, or electronic safe, or satellite TV, nor in any of the other wallpapered rooms.



Burroughs had this room as a hive of activity and typing and sorting to complete the final construction of *Naked Lunch* in 1959. He spread the sections of the book around the room in a completely random order, moving the sequences around, repeating lines and creating something that he claimed could be read in any order. I take out the green and pink copy, still in print with Flamingo and flick through the 201, pages wondering which order I could possibly begin with. *Naked Lunch* remains as one of the creepiest, most disturbing pieces of literature I have ever read. Ginsberg took it to the publisher of Olympia Press, thinking it would be exactly the kind of thing they'd like, but Maurice Girodias claimed he couldn't understand it. The junkies, the humour, the depraved humans and hallucinations – it reads like a dream or a nightmare that you're never sure is real.

Eurovision continues in all its sequined, fake-tanned glory – the accented wailing of the Greek contestant makes the perfect background music for reading about the hanging of Mary as she's impaled on John's cock in Interzone. I fall asleep and dream about Burroughs and Eurovision, shooting up on a stage set in the Beat Hotel. I wake up briefly around four a.m. and smell cigarette smoke and acrylic paint. When I wake again at six the bathtub is filled with cold dirty water.

I take breakfast in the small nook off to the right of the lobby which used to be a counter from which Madame Rachou served coffee and wine. I sip Earl Grey tea as I read the *International Herald Tribune*. I muse over a basket of warm rolls and tear open their crusty shells to stuff them with unsalted butter and good French jam. There are a couple of other guests, one German, one American and we sit at our

individual tables, reading our own newspapers, tearing into our own bread. The American's phone rings and he hastily turns it off, glances up and apologises. As if there was a mood to be ruined. There is a Guest Book on one of the low side tables and I flick through the scrawls of travelers: 'Great!', 'Thanks for a nice stay!' 'Merci from Sal and Dave Colorado USA' and mysteriously, 'I didn't see enough of anything to make a decision.'

Sunny day in Paris and I walk and walk and buy a pair of bright red loafers from Galeries Lafayette so I can carry the bag of Paris' premier department store around town. My shoes are so French; everyone is wearing them with cropped pants and a fawn trench coat. As soon as my outfit is adapted to the city I feel instantly better and more capable. I sit in a busy café opposite the enormous department store where there are outside tables for tourists to lounge on and order a bottle of Perrier in a confident accent. I sit quietly with my journal and write a list of things to do this week (and this is what it is):

1. Buy more Parisian style outfits (e.g., scarf, pale headband, navy and white striped t-shirt, capri pants)
2. Eat in out-of-the way bistros recommended by authentic food guide book.
3. Shakespeare's bookstore
4. What is Kilometer Zero?
5. Does poetry exist in Paris anymore?
6. Discover a Beatnik ghost (not Jack)

The last of the Perrier bubbles bursts on my tongue and I leave four euros on the table in an American fashion.

In the grand scheme of Beatnikdom and the history of Beatnikology, we can say that they met in New York, they developed on the West Coast, they explored Mexico, but in Paris they absolutely thrived. Well, most of them anyway. Ginsberg, Corso, Burroughs, Peter Orlovsky and Brion Gysin set themselves up in a city filled with nostalgia for their long-dead literary heroes like Rimbaud and Apollinaire. The Beat Hotel provided a creative bubble for them to indulge in their art and thinking, and most importantly it was cheap. While the previous literary expats of Paris like Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway led opulent, indulgent lives with gourmet food and expensive wine, the Beat Generation was far less glamorous. The Beat Generation in Paris was one of drugs, jeans, weekly baths and one-pot meals. The writers lived from day to day only concerned with how to stop the typewriter keys from sticking, how to get laid and how to finish the latest poem.

From the Lafayette I walk through tiny laneways, not concerned with where I'm going, hoping only to take an indirect route to somewhere else. I turn randomly and irrationally cross streets and I find myself in alleyways being frowned at and past apartment buildings being barked at. Suddenly I emerge on the edge of a park and am confronted with the spectacle that is Place de la Concorde. The massive obelisk dwarfs the three red Metro signs. The sun hits the golden spike in a magical way for a split second so that the top beams like a giant torch. Compact European cars circle the square in flashes of red and navy and it takes me ten minutes to figure out where to cross the road. The Avenue Champs Élysée stretches out westward for two kilometres, the most famous six lanes of traffic in the world. From here I can see the Arc de Triomphe standing guard at the other end of the avenue,

overlooked by the Eiffel Tower. It is the view for a million postcards, in a square where thousands were executed during the French Revolution. From here I could stroll into the lobby of the Hotel de Crillon, the most expensive hotel in Paris and revel in its luxury and refinement, certain that there are no Beatnik ghosts waiting in the lobby. Or I could walk through the Tuileries Gardens all the way to the Louvre to stare numbly at that woman everyone talks about. And I think I might find Jack Kerouac in the 19th Century room entranced by Van Gogh, convinced that Rembrandt's angel is smiling at him. I am perched on the edge of the square with a horde of other tourists, each deciding which way to turn and which page of the guidebook to mark.

I veer away from the square and search for hearty French food off Rue de Rivoli, an idea fuelled by the paragraphs of *Lonesome Traveler* that Jack devotes to describing steaks and perfect *pommes frites*.

I sit in an amazing restaurant eating salted marrow straight from the bone with a tiny spoon. I feel fatter with each mouthful and as gorgeous and velvety as it tastes, it leaves a greasy, meaty residue on the roof of my mouth. The tables around me are only filled with French people – not a jeans and sneakers combo in sight. I use the beautiful white bathroom and wipe down my face with a soft hand towel. When I return Jack Kerouac is sitting at my table eating a plate of salted pork hock with braised lentils. He spoons the thick mush into his mouth ungraciously and sips a large glass of Burgundy between bites. I sit down opposite him and sigh, 'You're eating my lunch.'

'Good wholesome French food.'

I also have a basket of bread and a bowl of small black olives in spicy oil. Jack pops them frantically into his mouth, spitting the tiny pips into his palm.

'I didn't know you liked olives,' I comment. It just doesn't seem like the kind of thing he would eat.

'Oh the history of the world is built on olives,' he tells me, 'but what I wouldn't give for some peanut butter and milkshakes I can't say.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm having lunch. What are *you* doing here?'

I show him my list and then show him my new loafers. He grunts and goes back to his pork hock.

'What do you do in Paris?' I ask him, 'besides eating other people's food in fancy restaurants?'

'I watch beautiful short haired mademoiselles strolling by.'

But this is not Jack's city; his floundering and awkwardness is well accounted for in the novels *Lonesome Traveler* and *Satori in Paris*. He sat in restaurants like these and ate pâté and fresh bread, eavesdropped on the other diners and imagined their lives. One day he imagined himself married to a tiny French woman with neat children and a small home in the country. But then he also scoured the streets for whores and spat angry Joulal French at the citizens who couldn't understand his dialect. *Satori in Paris* is the novel Jack wrote in 1966 about his journey to Paris and Brittany to research his genealogy. It is more of a novel about France and its people than a book about research and libraries and history. But apparently, during the trip he had a grand illumination, a 'satori' of the mind at forty-three years of age. Despite my studies and friendship with him, I still have no idea what he actually discovered.

Jack has a flask of cognac which he takes small sips of as we walk down the wide boulevards. He asks me if I know where all the prostitutes are and I point out it is only late afternoon. He waits outside Zara while I try on another inspired outfit of capri pants and a red linen shirt dress and when I emerge on the Champs Élysée wearing it he says, 'Your thighs are shy,' and tries to lift up the dress.

The avenue stretches ahead of us in a stunning display of McDonalds, Virgin, Gap and Sephora signage. These homages to American consumerism inhabit the glamorous old building facades, but Jack is oblivious to them, as he only wants to look at the pretty young tourists and earnest French schoolgirls. It is obvious that Paris is no longer shielded from American mass media. While I stare at a MAC display in the Sephora store window I lose him for a moment, only to find him dumbly nodding along to a gypsy girl's tale of loss and sorrow while another, more nimble one unsuccessfully searches his deep pockets for a wallet. When I shoo them away he is disappointed and sulky and takes a deep gulp of cognac.

We walk towards the Arc de Triomphe, which sits squat and heavy in the middle of a giant wheel of traffic. Twelve lanes of roaring, beeping mopeds, ambulances, smart cars and limousines stretch outwards from the centre – a circle without lanes and traffic lights. Jack, oblivious to the noise and crowds, steals a beret from a small boy's head and runs straight towards the arch and into a variety of oncoming vehicles, fixated on a teenage girl in a long red coat. I close my eyes and wait for the crashing, the swearing, the inevitable tragedy but when I open them he has flown safely across and is

shadowing the red coat as the girl circles the arch. She is beautiful, with delicate Eurasian features and alabaster skin. She walks around the souvenir shops fingering the horrific plastic magnets, oblivious to the drunk old man gazing at the back of her head. When I emerge from the underpass at the base of that colossal piece of art, I find Jack about to reach out and close his hand over hers as she touches another magnet and I slap him away and steer him furiously towards the Metro station. He seems to forget the girl as soon as we descend into the tiled interior and talks incessantly for our six-minute journey about how clean the damn subway is compared to New York. To me, it smells of the dozens of tiny dogs that casually take up the bench seats.

To complete our grand tour of Paris monuments and tourist sites, we of course get off at the station where everybody else does. And we walk towards the tower that is now lighting up over its city, as the day fades away. The lines of English speakers still extend from its base and surround the tacky gift shops featuring the same image in every earring, key chain, lamp and tea towel. Under the Eiffel Tower and it is dark and mysterious and I feel that familiar pull in my stomach. Paris at night is like Chanel jewellery, sparkling and gold, yet classic and understated. Paris is so romantic, I think and if anyone (including Jack) was to propose to me right now it wouldn't seem disastrous. I grab his cognac off him.

'I am drunk on this city,' I tell him, 'this place is amazing and romantic, beautiful and inspirational.'

He is silent and takes the flask back off me.

'I can't believe you didn't stay here longer, this is where you should have written everything, not on top of Big Sur, not in your mother's house, just here on a bench under the Eiffel Tower.'

He takes a long swig and stares straight into my eyes in the deepest, scariest way and I see the shadow move across his face and he spits the cognac straight at me so that it stings my skin and I squeeze my eyes shut feeling the burn of alcohol. When I open them I am alone and I stink and Paris is not so romantic.

*'Methinks women love me and then they realise I'm drunk for all the world and this makes them realise I can't concentrate on them alone, for long, makes them jealous, and I'm a fool in Love With God.'* – Jack Kerouac<sup>27</sup>

When I am trying to sleep in the muffled heating of the Beat Hotel, I think I hear the slow tenor of Burroughs' voice outside the window. But when I go to look it is a strangely empty street and I think of his other name, The Invisible Man. Dangerous William S. Burroughs, who disappeared and reappeared in his own life just as Jack pops in and out of mine. The man who was feared and loved by his friends, the torturer of cats, the heir to the family fortune with his three-piece suits and long overcoat. When Bill was arrested in Paris in relation to a Tangier drug deal, the police tried to take a picture and it came out blank. I pick up a photo of Burroughs where he is pale and thin in a pair of white boxer shorts and his fists raised to fight the camera. I stand in the window and fan my face with it and I press it to the glass so it looks out across the street and then I see a figure lurching their

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<sup>27</sup> Kerouac, *Jack Satori in Paris*, London, Quartet Books, 1966, p. 25.



way towards the hotel. They shuffle and drag a large canvas bag, occasionally heaving it on to their shoulder, only to have it slide to the ground once more. They stop in front of number 9 Rue Git-le-Coeur and I hold my breath as they scan the sign above the welcoming potted ferns until they give up, shake their head and move on. As they pass under my window the head tilts in a way that I recognise and their hands with the thick railroading gloves brush through the hair. And I realise it's Jack Kerouac stumbling around the Latin Quarter searching for the cheapest skid row hotel he can find.

I work my way steadily and methodically through the mini-bar – from clear spirits, to darks, to wine – in the hope of falling asleep. I wish I had something stronger than cold medication: I drunkenly wish for a suitcase of pharmaceuticals like Bill Burroughs had. I decide on a night time expedition – if Bill is in the damn hotel then I will find him. I open the heavy door to my room and peer into the empty hallway and then creep down to the elevator, cringing at its loud 'ding' when I press the up button. I take the lift up one floor, trying to conjure a mental map of the rooms as they appeared in 1958. My bathrobe drags on the carpet as I swish from one door to the next. Burroughs never stayed in one place long, he was in rooms 15, 18, 29, 30, 31 and 32. Ginsberg, on the other hand, might be easier to track down; he stuck to 25 for most of his stay. It is difficult to imagine that behind one of these painted, gold handled doors is the room in which Allen wrote letters to his father, made love to men and (less successfully) women, followed the trial for *Howl* and countered his demons in a marijuana hallucination.

I stop outside one of the doors and stifle an awful hiccup. Something draws me to the door – a vibration, a feeling, a soft moaning. Could this be Allen’s room? I think that in this room sitting on a crumpled bed, with a pot of lentil soup in the background could be that Jewish boy from Patterson New Jersey, with thick glasses and extra thick chest hair. It could be the room that Allen wrote to Peter in and suggested a new kind of love that included multiple partners but a strong intimacy with each other, setting the tone for the next generation as they tossed around the idea of free love. And the room where Allen mourned his long-suffering mother in one of his most significant poems, *Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg*. Did you do that here Allen? Begin the powerful eulogy for a woman you never properly said goodbye to?

I pause at the door, my hand ready to knock, when I hear the unmistakable sounds of pay-TV porn accompanied by live moaning with an American accent. I flee down the hallway, taking the fire stairs two at a time back to my room.

*'I'm running out of everything now. Out of veins, out of money.'* –  
*William Burroughs*<sup>28</sup>

The next day I wake to find the full heat of August has landed on the city and it is so warm that even the kebab maker below my window has left the coals unlit. I am still waiting for a hit of inspiration from the Beat Hotel and decide I could find it in its surroundings, the notorious Rive Gauche.

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<sup>28</sup> Burroughs, William and Ginsberg, Allen *The Yage Letters*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1963, p. 27.

The river in Paris flows westwards, cutting the city in half, leaving the two sides linked by much-photographed bridges. The Left Bank is not just the name of this side of the river; it refers to a particular lifestyle, fashion and intellectuality. I pull on my best Left Bank Look – gold wedge sandals, a halter neck silk maxi-dress and enormous amber sunglasses. I skip breakfast in the stifling lobby and buy a sticky date pastry from the Arab bakery on the corner and I take Bill Burroughs' daily newspaper-buying route. Down the tiny lane that is Git-le-Coeur, left onto Rue l'Hirondelle and then through the archway into frantic Place Saint-Michel. The kiosk that Bill got his *New York Herald Tribune* from burned down in 1961 – an event that he claimed to have caused by using his own mind and willpower. I find another kiosk and buy my own copy of *The International Herald Tribune* from a surly man who scowls at my accent and I think naughty thoughts for a moment, wishing that when I walk past tomorrow it too would be a pile of ash and dust.

Strolling around the Left Bank and I enter the cool interior of Notre Dame with the other tourists, none of them here to pray, all of them armed with tiny cameras. I peer at the enormous stained-glass windows. just as Allen used to with an intensity fuelled by marijuana. And I, as in every church stop, to light a candle and drop a euro in the tin box. I settle quietly on a bench, bow my head and think my universal silent prayer over and over, Don't let anything bad happen, don't let anything bad happen.

The North Rose Window in all its azure glory glows thirty-four metres above me and a swarm of families and tour groups and couples in khaki gathers at its base. I hear someone sit down in the pew behind

me and their weight shift as they lean forward. His lips close to my neck, he smells of alcohol and dirt like he slept in the street.

'Everything is God, nothing ever happened except God,' he says.

I turn to Jack and look him straight in the eye and say a little too loudly for a church, 'Don't let anything bad happen.'

Outside Notre Dame on the Île de la Cité, the Seine flows roughly down either side of the island. I see Jack running across one of the bridges, to the other more fashionable side of town, where he once had a prostitute for \$120 (a small fortune in 1965). His jacket looks bizarre in this warm weather and it flows out behind him like a cape in the breeze as he tears down the cobbled streets away from me. And I let him go.

The hermit residents of the Beat Hotel wouldn't cross the Seine and lived within an isolated few streets of the Left Bank. They had Café Le Royal and Café Select to while away the hours in with bowls of coffee and a journal. They had the jazz clubs of Rue de la Huchette to meet and drink in. And they had bookstores to buy English language titles and gather for poetry readings and events in. In the 1950s there were dozens of booksellers and shops to choose from, some on the streets and some hidden high up in the buildings or down tiny laneways, open only to those who knew of their existence.

When I turn away from the fleeing Jack, I see the familiar green sign of Shakespeare and Co. across the road. When the store opened in 1951, this part of the Left Bank was filled with junk yards, bad hotels, wine shops and grocers. Shakespeare and Company Bookstore has a tangled history. The original store, established in 1951, owned by

George Whitman was called Le Mistral. When his favourite Parisian bookstore owner Sylvia Beach died, he changed the name to Shakespeare and Company as a tribute to her bookstore which was the site of the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Whitman still owns the store, but it is his daughter Sylvia who runs it now. Upstairs there is the old Tumbleweed Hotel, a collection of beds and couches for travelling writers, who pay by reading a book a day and writing a brief autobiography for George Whitman to read when they leave.

On the wall inside there is a sign advertising a poetry reading by Kilometer Zero. I browse next to the mostly American and British tourists and am ignored by the girl behind the register who talks to the tourists half in French, half in English. Could she be Sylvia? The carefully printed sign above the doorway reads 'Be not inhospitable to stranger let they be angels in disguise.' Sylvia ignores this creed and is rude to every question-asking individual who interrupts her Proust-reading session.

Shakespeare's is a labyrinth of alcoves and cubbyholes. Up the steep and dangerous staircase there is a library that smells like mould and grandmothers. The books are not in an order of any kind, they are stacked in piles next to posters of Ferlinghetti and an assortment of horrible chairs arranged in a half circle. An audience gathers around the chairs and I think about the readings that Allen and Gregory used to do here. The atmosphere is certainly different and the crowd is not rollicking drunk like the one that egged Gregory on as he stood beautiful and naked and proud before them. They are young and clean with a high fashion retro look. They are not Parisian, and they do not

speaking French but they have a stance and confidence that indicates they have been here a while.

As I lower myself into a wicker lounge chair with unravelling sticks that dig into my ass, a man steps to the front and begins what is the first of a set of very unrevolutionary poems. He is forty-ish, balding and slightly podgy and has the annoying habit of the middle-aged poet of rocking with each line and breathing noisily through his mouth to punctuate. He announces that he always wears black because he's from New York. The audience nods in accordance. He says, 'I should remind you that this reading is brought to you by Kilometer Zero,' and everyone claps and cheers. Except me, because I still have no idea what Kilometer Zero is. Also I am very obviously the only person in the crowd in an aqua silk maxi-dress.

The next poet is from Berkeley and his poems are all about San Francisco. He is tall, skinny and geeky-looking and has a worn leather satchel swinging across his hip which falls open at one point and I catch a glimpse of an apple, an iPod and (shock horror!) a Michael Crichton paperback. When he is done he takes an awkward bow and then the first poet comes back to the front. I shift in my seat preparing for another onslaught of breathing and rocking but he is there to announce the third poet. Buster Burk does not appear when his name is called. The audience wriggles around in their seats, craning their heads as if he might jump out from behind one of the book stacks. I'm thinking, Who is this poet that he warrants an announcement and who is he to go missing for his performance?

A black cat snakes its way through the crowd and settles comfortably in the cleared space and the announcer says, 'Buster has come back as a black cat.' Nobody except me laughs. Finally he emerges at the top of the staircase with a hippie looking girl in tow. She passes him a silver hip flask and he steps up to the front and says, 'Thank you my wife,' as she sits in the front row. He is wearing rubber thongs on his feet, a blue t-shirt designed like a tuxedo with ruffles on the front and a beige and black striped jacket. He is like the designer entering the retro Parisian fashion show where my maxi-dress would feature and the audience looks up at him expectantly and in awe. I roll my eyes at the shirt.

His first ten poems are short and read quickly with a serious nervousness but the audience claps him loudly at the end of each one. I don't attempt to applaud because I'm never quite sure when the poems are ending and the next one beginning. For poem eleven, he becomes suddenly confident and stands straight backed and tall and recites by heart something called *Zoocity* – a poem about living and breathing in Paris. He has the voice of the poet who knows when he is reading something brilliant. If he had taken his clothes off and made his drawl more New York I could see Gregory Corso reciting his revolutionary Paris-composed *Bomb* poem. The audience does not react to this great poem in the way of the '50s and '60s; they sit rigid in their seats, only Buster Burk's wife and I nod and sway along with his poet beat. I am loving this, I am feeling it. If this is Paris poetry – whatever the hell Kilometer Zero is – then I want a part. Burk is reaching a crescendo with a frantic, alliterative listing of Parisian characteristics, when I hear a low coughing from behind the book stacks and freeze. Burk carries on with his poem, flicking onto page

three, hardly stopping to draw breath. No one else can hear the devastating low chuckle except me, but they all notice when a pile of hardcover 2nd editions tumbles down on the left, just missing Buster Burk's head. They land in a reckless pile, spines bent, pages folded in accompanied by an enormous thud on the delicate hardwood floors.

'That damn cat hates your poem!' says the Berkeley poet and Buster, unshaken, carries on with *Zoocity* to its glorious end. I see Jack sneak up the stairs carrying his shoes in one hand, his bare feet daring the wood to creak. I am furious that he would sabotage a scene that never belonged to him. I follow him up to the third floor which smells of strawberries and pancakes and find him sitting on an unmade bed in the deserted Tumbleweed Hotel.

'What the hell are you doing here?' I ask and stand with hands on hips, ready to attack. The room is filled with backpacks, deodorants, hairbrushes and sarongs. There are books on every bed, on the floor and piled up in the doorway. The whole thing reminds me of boarding school.

'I'm lonely as hell,' he replies. 'I walked away from you and hurried angrily bumping people along the Seine. And I know why it is the French who perfected the guillotine, not the English, not the Germans, not the Danes - '

'Is this going somewhere?'

' - not the Italians and not the Indians, but the French, my own people.' He looks up at me mournfully and expectantly.

'So what? You can't just wander in and destroy a damn poetry reading because you think you're French. And you can't expect me to help you after what you did last night.'



He is woeful, 'Don't be mad, where am I to go?'

'I don't care. But you have to get out of here. You can't stay in the Tumbleweed Hotel. It's for writers.' He looks hopeful. 'It's for female writers.' He looks ecstatic.

'Well you move in and I can visit.'

'I'm not staying here, Jack.'

'Why?'

'Because I like nice sheets, I'm scared of Sylvia Whitman and I am not in the mood for joining a bibliophile sisterhood.'

With that I grab his hand, pull him off the bed and we go back downstairs to the disintegrating poetry reading. Buster Burk is still at the front telling people to check the Kilometer Zero website for more information on readings and events. Jack yells, 'What is it anyway?'

Buster looks at me and launches into a fantastic little speech, 'To throw in my two cents on the way I understand Kilometer Zero, we sought a literary revival in Paris, but the literary side quickly burgeoned into an explosive and very contagious dream to offer, share, and expose culture to as many people as possible with no limits or boundaries except that of asking its participants to do their best.'

'By writing poetry?' I ask, for this is sounding a little like a Beat Hotel Revival Squad.

Buster is thoughtful and strokes his pale wife's hand as he answers me.

'Kilometer Zero is a forum of freedom. The Project aims to bring together the trying, the good and the best in music, literature, art, philosophy, and whatever song you sing.'

To emphasise his point, the pale hippie wife breaks out into a soprano-style aria. A surprised Jack squeals in response and drags me away

from Buster and Mrs Burk down into the main part of the store. And we rush past a frowning Sylvia Whitman and the black cat hisses from the door and Jack throws a couple of stolen books at it.

Later, back in the shiny safety of my hotel, I Google Kilometer Zero and learn more about its projects and beliefs. There are strong similarities between these expats and the Beat Generation in Paris. Like the Beats, Kilometer Zero believes that culture should not just be for the elites and offers all its events free of charge and free of advertising. Unlike the Beats theirs is a highly organised and productive revolution. It has a magazine, a theatre group and offers internships in its head office. I think, Could the literary revolution of Cut-ups and *Kaddish* and Dreamachines have occurred in such a pragmatic space? Is it Madame Rachou's no-name, crazy hotel that allowed for such inventiveness and creativity?

And I make a decision to find out by ceasing my 200 euro a night existence and indulging in a cold-water, cockroach-ridden room.

I find a hotel two streets away that has a lonely dark brown desk in a foyer with an old yellow couch, no elevator, six floors of stairs and decide that it is the one for me. It may not be the class 13 of Madame Rachou's establishment, but it is low enough not to advertise a rating. The room I am given is beyond depressing, it is a lopsided cell with a single bed and a bath with a constant drip falling into the green lime stain. In the Beat Hotel the sloping, the cell-like rooms without any windows were the cheapest.

Despite being in the peak of summer, it seems to be colder in the room than outside and the first thing I do is open the one tiny window

and peer out into the hot damp night. I am so cold that I consider using the horrific bath, but the water runs a grey chill and I think of the Beat Hotel where at least hot water could be expected on Thursday, Friday and Saturdays. I pile the three scratchy blankets, some with cigarette burns, on my legs and read poetry by fluorescent light. I listen to the noises; the street sounds are comforting, the voices and footsteps and barking. But the inside noises, the mysterious window rattling, the hollow banging a floor below, the shouts in a language that is not European are unsettling. My head is thudding, my sinuses ache and my chest rattles along with the window. I want desperately, more than anything to feel legs wrap around mine and arms to cover my shoulders – to be spooned and taken care of.

*'That's not writing, it's plumbing.'* – Samuel Beckett when Burroughs explained Cut-ups to him.<sup>29</sup>

The fluorescent lights flicker above me in a horrible epileptic kind of way. At the Beat Hotel Madame Rachou had a light control panel displaying who was in and out of their rooms. If a resident was using more electricity than permitted, the light for the room would flash and she would wander upstairs to investigate. During the time of Cut-ups and when the Dreamachines and tape recorders were in full use, Burroughs and Gysin were forced to pay for extra electricity they used.

Bill Burroughs saw Brion Gysin in the street one day and asked him if he wanted to score. The old Tangier hostility disappeared and he

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<sup>29</sup> Morgan, Ted *Literary Outlaw: the life and times of William S. Burroughs*, London, Pimlico, 2002, p. 323.

promptly moved into the Beat Hotel, staying for years. He had Allen's old room, number 25, stolen from another American boy by using a Moroccan curse. Bill was fascinated by the unique style of Gysin's latest paintings, which used Japanese calligraphy. More importantly their sudden friendship opened the way to a hugely significant literary partnership as Brion introduced Bill to the Cut-ups technique.

Burroughs went on to use this technique in many of his novels. It is a relatively easy literary tool to master – phrases are cut out of text and rearranged to form a new narrative. Sometimes pages of text are divided into four pieces and shuffled around to form a new story. Sometimes two pages of text are folded in half and pieced together in a similar way. Today there are websites with software that manipulates text for you, generating random poems and stories. Budding songwriters use the technique to write lyrics, English classes to create Haikus. When I began this journey and didn't know where to start *The Boy* suggested I write down all the destinations on paper, shuffle them up and pull them out of a hat. I like the idea that I am on a Round the World Cut-ups trip. I could start a tour company for any Gysin enthusiasts left and take them to computer chosen destinations. The idea behind Cut-ups is that the randomness of the technique allows for the true meaning of the text to appear.

Alone in this horrible room I wonder, Will the true meaning of my trip emerge as it is formed? Where is my satori? When will I be hit with a hot sweet rush of an epiphany? I am trying to be Gregory Corso, plunging headfirst into literature without the proper connections, education or training. But unlike Corso, there's no movement for me to slip behind. I can't produce just anything and let it, with its Beat label,

become acceptable and genius. I am circling the edges of a classic genre, clinging to the history books as much as the poetry books, because the circumstances it was written under have become just as important as the writing.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight and concentrate on my open-mouthed, heavy, sour breathing and when I can't meditate myself to sleep I take two blue pills.

I wake up in the middle of the night, hot and sweaty under the itching blankets and tie my long damp hair up with an elastic band. An orange light from the window forms an imperfect shape in the middle of the floor and I am drawn to it and sit down. And the floor feels so nice and cool and I lie perfectly still on my back for a long time, with the orange light making me glow. Eventually I sit and dizzily drag the books from my bag and flick through them listlessly. I tear out a photo of Ginsberg and Corso taken in Tangier 1961 where they candidly face the camera naked and hairy side by side. Their crotches are illuminated by the tan marks from short shorts. I tear the photo in half lengthwise and then sideways and I mix up the bodies and the heads until I can't remember whose penis is whose. Then I settle on something far blander, the Guest Book from the Relais Hotel du Vieux. Did I slip this into my bag after breakfast that day? Did it fly on its own accord across Rue St Andrè-des-Arts, throw open the rattling shutters and snuggle its way into the deep clothes in my bag? I take out a pair of nail scissors and use the tiny blades to cut careful lines through each entry. Then I do the same with my own notebooks. I am methodical, yet random in the lines that I choose. I stick the lines and the photos together with the only adhesive thing I can find, plastic strips from a

leg waxing kit. And when I am finished I have something that looks like a Kindergarten project and it says:

*You came to me at nine through the spinning wall and your harrowed voice was ringing the telephone but no message was taken. And my own scrying didn't come close to a hallucination but I was ready for a vision, a nightcap, a porter anyway. Luxurious bathrooms that make all the difference and the tiniest bit tingly from all the wine. It is a pleasure to hear familiar voices in the elevator and see shadows and smell damp drug addict smell, that mouldy wool and greasy hair scent that comes up through the floorboards when I press my face to them and if I rush across the floor lean flat against the door I hear the mutterings and shufflings of a hundred poets trying to find a safe dry room to create something in. And I ask you 'What is Time?' expecting some great answer but you just cough and laugh. Brilliant! When I focus my eyes it is not who I thought it was at all. Colorado USA.*

There is loud thudding outside my room, too heavy and even for footprints. The boom booming of it reminds me of the onomatopoeia in Corso's *Bomb* poem. *Bomb* is a love poem, an ironic ode to the nuclear bomb and it is one of the first poems to confront the existence of the said weapon. Corso typed it in individual lines and then cut and pasted them so that the poem takes the form of a nuclear mushroom cloud. As the noise continues outside my room, I find my copy of *The Happy Birthday of Death* and decide I will read the poem along with the thumping.

If I had met Gregory Corso in 1957, he is exactly the kind of thief I would have fallen in love with. Gregory would meet me in coffee shops

in a royal blue cloak and make me buy him thick cream cakes and give him enough francs for groceries. In pictures he has the sharp, charismatic face of an Italian and wild hair that I would flatten with my hand as he wrote me a poem on a napkin. If I was allowed up to his attic room at the Beat Hotel, I would sit quietly on the floor while he ate grapes with nicotine stained fingers. I would find his rude and forward manner appealing. I would be impressed endlessly by the New York orphan and convicted criminal who saw poetry as his saviour. I would not mind him stealing and hustling his way around Paris and then retreating to write in room 41. I would sit and watch as his writing evolved and matured and he discovered his own rhythm and sound in the dauntingly long poems.

Towards the end of my reading day breaks over Paris and my cell is filled with orange sunlight. The roaches retreat back into the dark halls and the boom booming ceases. My head is filled with Corso's crazy view of the world and I am absolutely starving. In the Beat Hotel they set up illegal kerosene stoves to cook simple and cheap meals that would feed the masses. Kilometer Zero has produced a Squatters Cookbook full of delicious and healthy meals that can be prepared with limited facilities and no running water. I decide I will find grand French pastries to feast on for breakfast and if Jack shows up again I won't share any of them with him.

*'If you believe you're a poet, then you're saved.'* –Gregory Corso<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Corso, Gregory *An Accidental Autobiography: The Selected Letters*, New York, New Directions Books, 2003.

Corso had long crazy poems. Kerouac had spontaneous prose. Ginsberg had long lines filled with extreme emotions. And Burroughs had Cut-ups. I have a dark hangover and a dry mouth and some of Apollinaire's poems printed off the internet, freshly translated from their unpunctuated French.

Under the Mirabeau flows the Seine  
And our amours  
Shall I remember it again  
Joy always followed after Pain

Guillaume Apollinaire was an Italian born poet who settled in Paris in the early 1900s and died in his late thirties from the Spanish Flu. His poetry is unpunctuated and unstructured and appealed to Ginsberg with his 'conversation poems' – a kind of spontaneous, improvised poetry that is reflected in both Kerouac's and Ginsberg's work. To them, he was as much of a hero as the enfant terrible of French poetry, Arthur Rimbaud.

The cemeteries in Paris are tourist destinations and I follow a dirty grey path through the sandstone gates of Père Lachaise Cemetery. Groups of young people with maps and backpacks walk past the tombs and graves and take pictures underneath the olive trees. I, like the masses, pay my rock'n'roll respects to Jim Morrison. At the back of the cemetery where the graves lie in grid-like rows and the young tourists don't take any pictures and the trees are overgrown making the paths darker is the grave of Apollinaire. The headstone is an unmanicured hunk of rock that sits erect with a simple cross carved into its face. Red poppies are spread haphazardly along its base.



I find *Apollinaire's Grave* in my copy of *Kaddish and Other Poems*. In the poem Ginsberg places a copy of *Howl and Other Poems* on the grave 'for him to read between the lines with Xray eyes of Poet.' As I feel the ghosts of the Beat Generation (yes, one in particular), Ginsberg sought out the dead figures of Rimbaud and Apollinaire, more fascinated with the past of Paris than its present. I consider that just as Ginsberg returned to Rue Git-le-Coeur to write the experience of Apollinaire's grave up as a poem, I should go back to that dirty hotel and write about the experience of looking for Ginsberg looking for Apollinaire's grave.

While Morrison's grave is covered in graffiti and wine bottles, Apollinaire's is tidy and cared for and I sit in the fading sun on the warm stone and read his printed poems again. I wish I had something to leave for dear Apollinaire to read, but my copy of *Kaddish* is a second hand book with an intriguing inscription. *'To Hazel Marie from Pasadena in April 1970 – darling I picked this up in curiosity and read it with sincere interest, though it is mostly strange and not easily comprehended. Anyway, shouldn't all us swingers read Ginsberg?'*

Instead, I decide, I will go to Ginsberg's grave in Newark one day and leave him one of my drunken poems – possibly a Cut-up of that inscription.

The sun starts to retreat and I realise I have spent an entire day staring at a long-dead poet's grave and I'm not even stoned. When I leave I am disorientated and take the wrong path. The trees bend inwards with the breeze and I am spookily tickled by their leaves. I

find myself, only metres away, staring at the inscription for Marcel Proust carved into a flat granite box. There are no flowers on his grave at all.

I listen out for the quiet roar of a hundred backpackers leaving Jim Morrison and trail them into the Metro station where they compare digital photos and sing a few Doors tunes. There is a particular group I am drawn to; half Australian and half Irish who are all from the same hostel and I have a sudden urge to belong to their gang and give up the poets for a while. I casually cross to their side of the train and in the crush of people who get on at the next stop I am pushed into the group. When enormous cans of French beer are pulled out of a backpack and passed around, I take one too and join in with the toasts and cheers that accompany their openings. When they change trains at Opéra, I follow them into the next jammed carriage and by the time we exit eight stops later I know one is called Chunky and the pale dumpy girl is from Cork.

Their hostel has pamphlets by its door and I take one to read 'The pub plays a special part in our hostel: we serve more than 20 varieties of beer (the cheapest in Paris) and stay open until 1am.' I am self-conscious in my Lafayette outfit and hastily tie my jacket around my waist and tie my hair up into a messy knot. I find myself using a nearly dead credit card to buy a round for the group. I find myself dancing on the bar to 'Land Down Under' with a girl from Tasmania who lifts up her skirt during the chorus to flash her undies for emphasis. It is not quite the kind of cultural event that Kilometer Zero promotes. I find myself cuddled up on the dirty couch with an eighteen-year-old Polish guy who I don't understand but he has such

blonde hair that I can't stop stroking it. And when my new group of friends drags me from his clutches and Chunky leads us in a conga line around the bar, I break off mischievously and snatch one of the giant disco balls down from the ceiling. And then I run out into the night with it.

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For my second Gysin/Burroughs experiment, I sit drunkenly in my room clutching the giant disco ball and stare into its mirrored surface. I try unfocusing and rolling my eyes around as if it will help but it makes me feel nauseous and dizzy and I lose my balance and roll across the floor clutching the ball to my chest. I pause, balanced on top of the ball, like a Pilates position. And I duck my head down to see my grisly reflection. I am trying to use Scrying, the ancient magic of divination by staring at a shiny surface. When Burroughs looked at the shiny ball he'd bought he saw Tangier scenes, musicians and funerals; he saw the future.

When the disco ball doesn't work I try the tainted bathroom mirror but all I see is smudged eye makeup. I won't give up; I have instructions direct from old Bill to wait more than twenty minutes, to breathe deeply, to relax the focus of my eyes, to let my eyelids close halfway. I wait for the mirror to change, to become misty and dark and then for the point of intense light to appear and to open up my inner eyes and reveal the pictures of my future. And the mirror fills with a dark foggy shadow that shimmers and pulses in the dim light, but there is no future; it is a giant Parisian cockroach working its way towards my head.

In the morning I look at the calendar and realise everything is moving too fast and I have only one more night in Paris. Should I be out on the streets looking for museums and history? Should I be in this hotel looking for inspiration and my psyche? Allen had guidebooks and maps and followed his ghosts around Paris in old buildings and galleries and to their cemeteries. Bill, on the other hand, rarely left the Beat Hotel, preferring to hole up and attack his experiments with words, drugs and ideas.

In The Relais Hotel du Vieux there were businessmen, romantic couples and solo German travellers. In this no-name hotel there is me, a small barefoot Indian man, an overweight Kentucky lady with three suitcases that she lugs up and down the halls at all hours and the sad man on the desk, middle-aged, paunchy and so tired of being here. The Beat Hotel had Allen, Gregory and Bill. It had around seventy miscellaneous but vital guests all piled into rooms and friendship groups. I think of the poets with their beards, eye patches, rounded British vowels, barefeet and tiny publications. And the artists with their brushes poised for hallway murals, the photographic models, the homosexuals, the liberated, the visitors and the fixtures. Just like I will never be a member of The Beat Generation, I think I will never be a guest of any inspirational hotel.

*'The process is more solitary than masturbation, or should be' – Brion Gysin talking about his art.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Miles, Barry *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs & Corso in Paris 1957-1963*, London, Atlantic Books, 2000, p. 155.

I sit on Rue Mouffetard in a square near a fountain, drinking an overpriced cappuccino and watching the people and the dogs. I walked down here in a slow waddle past the Pantheon and the markets where the tourists roam the stalls selling fish and strawberries. In one corner of the square it appears as if an amateur short film is being made. The director is wearing a black velvet suit and deep sweat stains are forming in his arm pits. He appears angry with the cast and shouts particularly loudly at a girl in a white bikini. I am thinking, Why is she in the middle of the Latin Quarter nearly naked? If this was a Kilometer Zero project, the whole lot, including the director, would be in white bikinis to demonstrate the idealisation of women in the media. And then Buster Burk would emerge with a beach ball covered in inspirational quotes to toss around the crowd.

Rue Mouffetard is a parody of Paris, a movie version of the city where the Americans and Australians and English have the opportunity to feel at home and a little bit foreign all at once. The French shopkeepers and waiters are in the same league as the mime artist in the other corner of the square – performers for the tourists. At the table next to me a group of young Americans and Australians order cassis and Stella Artois. They have large backpacks stacked up along the wall and I learn from their conversation that they have just arrived on an overnight train from Algeciras. A girl brings out a small cloth bag and empties Moroccan silver jewellery onto the table.

I attempt to apply the Cut-ups technique with the snatches of conversation that are carried throughout the restaurant. This is what I get:

*Is this where he said to be?*

*So we took three  
Camels that you never wanted to see again  
Boys that ordered the beer  
And I can't tell you how heavy it rained that June  
Real leather and everything  
A hard school to get into, I don't know if you could do it  
Which way did we come from? East?*

I vow to end the Cut-ups – they are not predicting any noticeable future, they are only confusing me. I've had enough of Bill's experiments and decide to try Allen's technique, taking a long long walk down Boulevard Raspail searching for number 261. I come to a modern glass and steel building opposite the Montparnasse Cemetery. It is The Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, a private foundation that features major exhibitions from all over the world. It used to be the Centre Américain des Artistes, a community centre for expat students that doubled as a meeting place for American artists in the community.

At the dawn of one of the most significant decades in history, this was the site of a three day creative event called Domaine Poétique in May 1963. The event featured readings by Burroughs, and Gysin presented a multimedia performance using sound Cut-ups and Dreamachines.

A Dreamachine is another ridiculous Beatnik invention that sells for \$49.95 on eBay. One of Burroughs' boyfriends from the Beat Hotel, Ian Sommerville, invented it with Gysin in the 1960s and it soon took off with the new era of psychedelics and drugs. A Dreamachine (or Flickermachine) is a cylinder of cardboard with slits cut into its side

and a light bulb in the centre. The cylinder sits on a record player and rotates in time with the music, so that the light flashes through the slits. To gain the full effect of a Dreamachine experience, you have to sit with your eyes closed, allowing the pulsating light to stimulate the optical nerve and create a series of bright colours, patterns and shapes. It is, apparently, an addictive, intense and hypnotic situation. I have instructions from the internet on how to build my own, but I sadly lack the required 78 RPM record player.

I take a Colour Walk north, like Bill Burroughs used to do. Out of all The Beat Hotel inventions, Colour Walks are the easiest to recreate by simply walking around Paris, focusing on one shade at a time. I see the ridiculous blue of the sky, the royal blue of street signs, the strong navy in a school tunic. I see orange in more places than ever before, at traffic lights, on magazine covers, in the shaggy fur of a gingery spaniel. And then I see the reds, a cashmere scarf ruby red around a pale neck, flushed cheeks on a fat baby, the flash of my shoes as they pound their way toward the Luxembourg Gardens.

In Luxembourg Gardens the old men play boules and the children scream in the playground. I am overwhelmed by the colours and cannot isolate them anymore and I stand on the green grass and see the grey people as I spread my arms out and spin and spin. The world is black and white and it feels as if everything slows down as I turn, black trees, white leaves, black swings, white sand, black hair, white teeth. When I stop spinning Jack is standing in front of me grinning, still lugging his huge canvas bag in one hand and a delicate pear in the other. He looks happy, kind of sober and slightly cleaner than before. The careful rows of deck chairs surround the fountains and we wait to

one side patiently for a sweaty seat to become free so we can join the masses in tanning our shoulders and upper arms.

'You wait over there Jack,' I tell him, 'If you find a free chair shout out to me and if there's only one then we'll have to share it.'

So we sit together with me balanced precariously on his lap and I lend him a pair of my large Gucci sunglasses so he can lean back and embrace the sun. We pass the pear back and forth, devouring the sticky flesh.

'So where have you been? I haven't seen you since that poetry reading.'

'Well it took me four hours to find a room, on foot with this full pack – in the skid row sections numerous frowsy dames said 'complet' coldly when I asked for unheated cockroach rooms.'

I laugh, 'Me too! You should see the dump I ended up in; it is either too hot or too cold and has slimy bathroom walls. I feel like the poorest person in the world in that hotel, I don't feel like I should own the kind of expensive shoes I do.'

And Jack Kerouac looks at me like I'm ridiculous and says, 'My family motto is Love, Work and Suffer.'

A podgy sunburnt girl sits down opposite us and loudly talks on her mobile phone, complaining about all the cream in French food to her mother in Essex.

Jack says without a trace of sarcasm, 'The most beautiful women in the world are definitely English, unless like me you like them dark.'



Things I know about Jack Kerouac in Paris: he comments consistently on women and young girls and sniffs their perfume trail to figure out if they're prostitutes. He likes to use words like 'boucherie' and 'boulangerie' because they make this place seem like his beloved hometown Lowell. Also, Jack uses the word 'gay' in an old-school way, to talk about groups of singing schoolchildren and factory workers leaving for the day. In Jack's novels, his love for Paris (like most things) is fleeting and spontaneous. I understand why; my experience in this city has been one of tourist monuments, hideous wallpaper and divination experiments with cockroaches and disco balls.

Today though, Paris has really put on a show of its stereotypes in loveliness. It is a summertime Parisian scene before us, sun, fountains, people and crepe stands. Dozens of tiny, yappy dogs trot around the park ignoring each other. And I am so pleased that Jack actually made it to Paris, even though he missed the experimentation of Bill and the creative mess of Gregory and the sense of home that Allen fostered. I realise more than ever that Jack is made for America. In America he thrives.

When we leave the gardens it is the end of my last fantastic day, so Jack steals a bicycle and I climb onto its handlebars, unsteady and laughing. Just like a terrible old movie we take off down the street, following the Seine sending pigeons flying in our wake. I half close my eyes and Paris flickers past in a mess of colours and lights, it is my own private Dreamachine happening. There are people on the street who in the grey light remind me of stooped Burroughs. And there are groups of hip young folk that remind me of Kilometer Zero. We fly along the grey footpaths scattering canines in our wake and I do a

horrific thing by actually snatching a baguette out of a woman's basket and then whacking passersby comically on the head with it. This madcap madness, this high energy foolery, this silly Stella and Jack in the greying city of diets and fashion and neat pathways by the Seine. And somewhere around Pont Neuf we ditch the bike and Jack says, 'Paris is a place where you can really walk around at night and find what you don't want.'

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In 1963 the final guest Brion Gysin packed up his paintings and letters and vacated 9 Rue Git-le-Coeur. The Beat Hotel was sold, the paintings burnt, flowered wallpaper pressed over the murals. Burroughs left with completed novels and a new way of creating them. Gregory took his blue cape and collection of poems that would become *The Happy Birthday of Death*. Allen simply took a love of Paris that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

In my final Parisian moments, I search for a pastry that Jack told me he always ate during his last hours in Paris, a cream and almond cake, but it doesn't exist in this airport and I have a coffee instead which is watery and weak and sad.

And as I board the plane I think of what Jack said in *Lonesome Traveler* 'All that hitchhiking, all that railroading, all that coming back to America.'

So I go.

## New York City September

'I think of New York City lost in stars.' – Gregory Corso<sup>32</sup>

Hello America! Ahoy! We're crossing a bridge and diving and weaving through your grand thoroughfares. America, do you recognise me? I'm your long-lost daughter, but let me tell you we've been communicating via the written word and Felicity for all these years. Now I'm back America and I'm all yours. Fill me with fried cheese and adorn me with corny baseball caps. I'll take anything you throw at me America. I'll sit alone in the front row of an off-Broadway matinee of *Footloose* and I'll take your subway all the way up to Harlem just to see what it's like. And then I'll stroll through streets that I know I shouldn't be in to feel that secret thrill of running out in front of traffic and being honked at. When I stumble across a grand High School I will wander past its raised classrooms and loiter on the edge of the field during football practice as those young black men streak back and forth across the pitch. And back downtown where I might belong more I will sit in outdoor cafès with a glass of overpriced wine and a copy of the *Village Voice* and circle books I need to read like apartments I need to rent. I will remember to tip 20 per cent and I will be charmed by the waiter as he notices my accent. I will go to the grocery store and buy Reeses Peanut Butter Cups and Hershey Bars because they taste different here, they are from here. I will buy a big deli sandwich and hip-hugging jeans from the Gap where I will be thrilled with the difference

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<sup>32</sup> Corso, Gregory *The Happy Birthday of Death*, New York, New Directions Books, 1960, p. 62.

in sizing and note that I am a 'Petite'. You see America, I've been here before but this time it's different because this time I'm at your centre, the core of all civilisation, a beautiful and chaotic melting-pot and that is New York City.

My New York is the one of television and movies; edgy and enthusiastic, thrillingly arrogant. For some reason, in the New York of my head I am confident, I think of the word 'sassy' and I can associate it with myself. The New York of my head is tainted with *Sex and the City* episodes and unrealistic fantasies wound during sessions of listening to The Beastie Boys and Talking Heads. I see Patrick Bateman in every bar and Woody Allen in every theatre. In short, my New York is nothing like Jack Kerouac's.

When I get on the bus that will take me from JFK to The Port Authority Bus Terminal, I think of Jack's *Desolation Angels*, where he arrives in New York after months of isolation on a mountain followed by months of crazy wandering over America and Mexico. And in New York the thing that first struck, the thing that was most important was that it was *cold*. Convinced he had TB, convinced they would die penniless and skinny on the cold lonely Manhattan sidewalks, he and Ginsberg stood outside the window of two girls called Helen and called up to let them in.

I too have arrived in New York after months of wanderings in Europe and Mexico and yes it is September and freezing. Autumn is coming in a way that only happens in countries with four complete seasons and I find myself travelling by bus from JFK, entranced by the leaves orange and full, hanging on delicately to the huge oak trees. I have TB-like

asthma, induced from the smoky Parisian air and my credit card is, as ever, sadly worn and tired. My stomach is flat from dysentery and I lean against my backpack, taking up two seats on the bus and watch those trees in a fiery blur and say hello to America again and again.

When I step off the bus the full thrill of the cold hits me and I drag my bag into the terminal and sit on the hard plastic seat rubbing my hands and watching carefully for my friend Karen to come and find me. I watch the people stream in and out of the heaving glass doors, with suitcases and some with plastic bags full of carefully scavenged newspapers. And amongst the black, white and in-between faces, one open-mouthed scoundrel comes through those doors, his hair carefully combed and notebook peering out of his shirt pocket. He raises his eyebrows and hollers a loud 'Om!' as he sees me and I can picture the photograph Ginsberg took in fall 1953 which he described as Kerouac's Dostoyevsky madface. I stand up and he greets me with a bear hug and lifts me up off the ground; I feel the spirals of the notebook jab into my chest. He puts me down and takes my freezing hands and rubs them between his mittens.

'Well,' he says, 'New York gets god-awful cold in the winter but there's a feeling of wacky comradeship somewhere in some streets.'

And then he lets go and joins the stream of people falling down the stairs to the Subway. Karen's blonde head pops up in front of mine and she takes my outstretched hands and cries, 'You've arrived!'

For Jack New York began in 1939 when he moved from his childhood home in Lowell Massachusetts to attend Horace Mann prep school in the stylish and wealthy area of Riverdale, NY. Horace Mann was a world of money, ivy walls and football practice, but Jack stayed with

his Aunt in Brooklyn and used the daily two and a half hour subway ride to read and do his homework. The school pushed Jack intellectually and physically, but it was the city of New York that gave him the sense that his life was only just starting. On only the second day of school, Jack skipped class and took the subway to Times Square to watch the hookers and junkies and breathe in that first corrupt, scandalous air of the great city. That year at Horace Mann was formative and important. That year saw Jack smoking dope for the first time, losing his virginity to a whore and being introduced to what would be his life's great love and passion – jazz. He and his classmates popped up as the only pale faces in the crowds at the Apollo, Savoy and Golden Gate clubs. The football star also had short stories published in the Horace Mann *Quarterly* and wrote jazz reviews for the school newspaper. That year at Horace Mann opened up the world of New York City to Jack Kerouac, a place he returned to over and over again to get rolling drunk with Ginsberg, to get high with Burroughs and to look for love once more in the back of a dark jazz club with a pretty girl who knew his name already.

Queens doesn't feel like New York. In Queens at night you can actually hear crickets in between the flooding of airplane landings. I sleep on the floor of Karen's apartment, eyelevel with two cats who cough up fur balls at hourly intervals. She has a drawer of carefully prepared itineraries and maps for guests like me. I have a pile of Beat books and a highlighter and scratch out my own bizarre itinerary on the back of the aeroplane sick bag. Queens is not the centre of New York and Karen tells me that when she says Queens in Manhattan it is sometimes met with a smirk or a sympathetic frown. I like Queens because there are pizza shops where the servers know the children by

name and pharmacies full of old people and a bar that sells shrimp jambalaya in great steaming bowls. It is a neighbourhood and it is easy to feel a part of it, even in just a few hours. I've been sitting in her apartment for two days reading *Desolation Angels* and watching more than five hundred channels of TV, trying to get rid of my Tangier/Mexican sickness. It has been raining in short heavy bursts and each time the water rattles against the windows the cats jump up to the glass as if to defend the apartment. When I look through the window at Queens, I see sidewalks, bicycles, neatly parked cars in front of neater yards and I cannot imagine Jack Kerouac living here. But in another part of Queens there is the house at 133-01 Crossbay Boulevard where Kerouac wrote his first book, the breathy and heavy *The Town and the City*. It is also where his father Leo Kerouac ended his battle with stomach cancer in 1946. And it is where he first ran away from, to begin the journey that became *On the Road*.

*'And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell.'* – *On the Road*<sup>33</sup>

On day three I finally leave the apartment and take the train from Queens to Union Station. I spend a good fifteen minutes wandering around, protectively clutching my purse, trying to figure out where the subway is. And in those fifteen minutes I acquire a slice of pizza, a milkshake, three magazines and a packet of novelty condoms. Even underground, there is just so much to buy in New York. I get on the subway and I don't get off for a long time. This is my New York ritual,

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<sup>33</sup> Kerouac, Jack *On the Road*, London, Penguin Books, (1955) 1991, p. 9.

begun during a visit in my teens when I was too scared to check the map for which stop was near Saks 5th Ave; terrified of being branded a mugging target by doing so. Now, I like riding the subway to watch the people and pick out their stories. The car is filled with the obligatory white headphones and I bring my own to my ears to give the ride a soundtrack of Ginsberg reading *Howl*. The girl in front of me is twirling her tongue piercing as she reads a *Village Voice* over the shoulder of a suited middle-age man. A twelve-year-old girl has a baby rabbit settled into a hat on her lap; her mother slaps her hand away every time she tries to pull it out. And Ginsberg says in his rich voice, 'A lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon.'

In my mind there is a map not unlike the New York subway – of interconnecting and separating coloured lines weaving through a grid pattern. It is a map of Beat relationships and it begins just above New York in Lowell and then I can see this map maybe stretching out all over the goddamn world, shooting lines through Europe and down below South America. In the map in my mind I see New York as a starting point – a giant bold destination on the reddest thickest line. And when I zoom in close I see the New York friendships filtering around Columbia seventy years ago and I start to look for the right names. And of course the map starts with Jack Kerouac then flies through Lucien Carr and Ginsberg to Burroughs and deviates to allow for Neal Cassady, but the next stop on the line is of all things a woman. And her name is Edie Parker.

The only picture of Edie Parker I have is taken decades after the end of her relationship with Jack, yet she stands to attention with frizzy



white hair clutching a straw hat next to the Kerouac Commemorative in his home town of Lowell. Edie Parker was Kerouac's first big-city girlfriend – and also his first wife whom he married on the proviso she would bail him out of prison. It mustn't have been easy being Edie Parker or any other Beat girlfriend in 1944. A woman in the Beat Generation is an extra, a muse, a wife or a mother. In Beat literature there is no room for the women's stories and little thought for their poetry; they are the characters who form the framework for the men to cheat, drink and fight around. But the women of the Beat Generation were more than this; they were strong, independent and fiercely driven. Because they had to be, often more so than the men.

I am not a Beat Generation girlfriend but I'm the closest thing to it that Jack has right now. For how many months have we played this ridiculous game, dodging around the world in a great dance of insecurity? If he called me up to bail him out of prison I wouldn't be surprised, but I wouldn't think of marrying him. Edie Parker clung to her few months of being Mrs Kerouac up until the last moment; running towards the grave as Jack was buried in 1969, crying 'I'm the only wife of Jack Kerouac!'

Out of the subway at 116th Street and walk two blocks up Morningside Ave and stop on the corner of 118th Street. The wind blows straight towards me in an angry assault and the trees tilt their grey limbs in my direction like a horror movie that is telling me to stay away. It looks like a street that anyone would expect to see in New York City or on a New York set. Grey smooth steps in sets of fours and sixes lead the way up to careful square apartment buildings, most with green and red awnings leading to the doors. Through the heavy glass I catch a

glimpse of still, ageing doormen in cool beige lobbies. Sitting on one of the stoops there is a gentle figure hunched over a hardcover book, his lips moving in time with his eyes. He is in a t-shirt and high-waisted khaki pants and the whiteness of his shirt is like a beacon in the grey street. Young people walk straight past him; they are shiny and carefully put together students straying a little off campus.

I walk along 118th Street towards Columbia University and I try to keep my gaze nonchalant like one of the other 23,000 educates. I have flared jeans that are dragging on the sidewalk and picking up golden leaves in their extra wide cuffs. I walk purposefully, like I know where I'm going and I try not to stare upwards at the brownstones and apartment buildings that make this street like a movie set. I walk towards the white t-shirt and sit down softly, noting that the book is Shakespeare and a copy from the library. He is so involved in the text that he doesn't even look at me and I take my hand and run it along the smooth skin above the t-shirt's collar, feeling the goosebumps rise as he finally looks up.

'Hey you,' I say, 'what are you doing just sitting here reading a play for?'

He looks thoughtful and says gently, 'Hitch-hiked a thousand miles and brought you wine.'

A haiku for me as he brushes a leaf out of my hair and sure enough takes an opened bottle from the paper bag at his feet.

I can already taste the cheap burgundy in the back of my throat, but he doesn't offer it to me, he just looks at the bottle in one hand and the Shakespeare in the other as if there is a mammoth choice to be made. I turn around and see this is the stoop of number 421 and

suddenly I want to grab that wine, run up the steps and find a record player to dance along to. I want to drink it until I'm in danger of half passing out in the tub and holing up a stranger on the cold tiles to talk about our dreams and I will smoke tea and take bennies and press myself up against a dirty-smelling kid in a suit because just for that night he told me he'd put me in a poem. If someone else was naked in the room I could probably take my top off just for a laugh and let a guy who is definitely gay draw a quick sketch of my boobs. And I can imagine seeing Jack Kerouac for the first time across a smoky room of leotards and football sweatshirts rifling through the papers on the desk in the corner searching for a letter he started to write to himself. And just for a second, like it is every time, the world will slow down when I lock eyes with him. But he would ignore me I think because I'm not blonde enough or Polish enough or mysterious enough or possibly even because I'm not unavailable like Edie Parker was when he started dating her.

Edie Parker and Joan Vollmer's apartment in West 118th Street was a centre for drinking, poetry, drugs and contraband. It was here that the core group of friends first came together; Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, John Clellon Holmes and Lucien Carr. It began with Ginsberg living across the hall from Lucien Carr; Carr introducing Ginsberg to Burroughs; Lucien meeting Edie Parker and Edie hooking up Lucien and Kerouac; and Lucien taking Ginsberg to meet Jack. This is the tangled mess of my subway line. A knot of people that almost came undone when Lucien murdered his gay admirer David Kammerer in 1944 with a Boy Scout knife on the grassy bank below Riverside Drive. After pushing the body into the river, Carr went first to Burroughs to tell him what happened and then to Kerouac to have a

final drink, see a movie and wander through the Museum of Modern Art. Finally he confessed and was charged with second-degree murder.

Still on the steps and I tug the wine away from his hand and place it out of reach. It's never too early to drink, but probably too early to finish drinking.

'Have I told you about the book?' he asks me and for a second I think he's talking about Shakespeare.

But out of nowhere he pulls a tired old notebook and waves it in front of me.

'I'm going to call it *The Sea is My Brother*,' he tells me and I want to take it from him and browse through the tightly wound writing, painstakingly penciled during a 1943 stint with the Merchant Navy. It is his first full-length piece; his first attempt at capturing his life and his view of the world on paper. He presented the book to the psychiatrists at the Merchant Marines in order to receive an Honorable Discharge and took the notebook to Edie Parker's apartment and probably sat on the steps in 1943 like this, reading up on a large literary quote to present to Ginsberg later.

Calmly we sit in 118th Street, with a Shakespeare and a still-unpublished debut novel and he doesn't touch the wine again. I find myself looking up and down the street, waiting for a familiar face to turn the corner or appear from behind a tree – a nervous seventeen-year-old Allen fresh faced from New Jersey or the tall, thin figure of William Burroughs. When you see a picture of these characters together in 1943, lined up in buttoned overcoats, cigarettes in hand; there is an obvious camaraderie in the cheeky lowered grin of Jack and the tilted bemused expression of Bill Burroughs. Ginsberg has both

hands in his pockets and has his eyes closed and mouth pursed as if he is about to begin a sensual opera. In the dim rooms of Edie Parker's apartment they pulled the literary establishment apart, they touted 'A New Vision' for modern literature; they examined the dirty, the thieves, the junkies. Although they weren't sure what they should be creating and what was to be expected of this new movement, there was a certainty that something had to change and they would all be a part of it.

For these formative years, Burroughs became the teacher. At thirty-three he was the oldest and most experienced member of the group, who had travelled and studied and returned to New York to explore the fringes of society. He set reading tasks for the Allen and Jack and mediated the intense discussions about the material afterwards. With the books, dope, ideas and glasses, Lucien, Jack, Bill, Allen and Edie were all but a literary gang until the David Kammerer fiasco. Although they were initially brought together by Columbia University where Carr, Ginsberg, Parker and Jack had all attended, they ultimately set out to pull themselves away from the campus and higher learning and educate each other.

The sun finally floats out across Manhattan and hits me as I walk through the campus known as CU. The grass, clearly as the sign states, is not for sitting on, and that seems pretty fair when Morningside Park is only blocks away east. I pause in a square with the Butler library straight ahead and then follow the line of buildings in a semi-circle. The bookstore, the chapel, the halls of residence are all still around, but the atmosphere is bright and busy and there is no sense of 1943, like that which looms over 118th Street. I am

surrounded by the Halls of Residence: Hartley, Livingston (now called Wallach), Hamilton Hall– each once the home for a young Jewish virgin fresh in from New Jersey with the intention of becoming a labour lawyer.

The students today are plentiful, shiny and round. They lounge on the granite steps in front of the Low Memorial Library, soaking up the sun and calling out to each other. I, with my tainted accent, have not yet been able to buy a bottle of water and I'm dehydrated. Each time I ask a hot-dog vendor for a bottle I am met with confused stares and Mexican mutterings. I cannot think how else to phrase my request and I cannot bear to just reach over and pluck a bottle from the cooler myself. So I leave Columbia and I start walking down Broadway where the buildings pack the heat in even closer and the people look more and more expensive. The street numbers get lower as I'm parallel to Central Park and still I keep walking. Each time I come across the beautiful red M that signals the subway, I am tempted to throw myself down the deep stairs and take the train all the way to the safety of Union Station or another landmark.

How is it that in New York, everything seems so familiar, yet so daunting? I walk the whole of the Upper West Side until Broadway veers sharply at W 77th Street and tilts its way over to the corner of the park. I search my mind for New York geography to understand where I am and where I could possibly be going. I keep walking. There are no Beat landmarks in the area that I know of and nowhere else I can think to go, so I make my stride long and brisk like everyone else, hold my head up and push through the crowd.

I find the only place that feels like home, the great Moby-Dick-inspired institution that is Starbucks and settle in at a counter by the window with a giant frozen milk drink. It is so nice and safe inside. The laptops lined up next to me, the casual jazz on the stereo. Is it wrong that this feels so comforting? From Mexico to Rome to Paris to Sydney I have sat on stools like these and calmed down with a Mochacchino. From where I am perched at West 51st Street and Broadway, I see the climaxing, flashing signs of the Stardust Diner. I was seventeen years old in 1999 and crept in there terrified each day, ordering a hamburger and a cherry coke because it seemed like the right thing to do. I am a bad traveller, I think to myself, I do not deserve to go anywhere with Jack Kerouac.

Another name from the subway map lived only blocks from here at Lexington and 55th St, in a building which no longer exists, in a time that is captured forever in the original Beat novel. How would it feel to be John Clellon Holmes, who managed to perplex, engage and isolate his friends with his debut novel *Go*? Holmes had the idea, before Kerouac could manage it, that this was a group whose words, actions and ideas needed to be captured in a semi-autobiographical novel. *Go* is an amazing account of the parties, conversations and relationships of all the major New York characters who became the Beat Generation years later. Holmes was a young, married, struggling writer who befriended Kerouac at a party one night and was pulled into the frenetic scene of poetry and madness. His book, first published in 1952, is a sober and straightforward account of their New York life without any of the language and style that accompanied typical Beat works later on. *Go* uses Beat Lit's trade pseudonyms; with Kerouac starring at the mother-complexed Gene Pasternak and Ginsberg as the

poet Stofsky and the novel is a conventional tale of a remarkable period in time. Holmes and Kerouac experienced a conflict and a competitiveness about who first had the idea for such a book, with Holmes's being published just three weeks before Jack sat down to write *On the Road*. Holmes is also responsible for introducing the world to Beat via print. When writing an article for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1952 Holmes asked Kerouac to describe their group of friends and the lifestyle they represented and immediately Jack replied with 'Beat Generation'.

In Times Square even the sign for Bank of America is lit up in flashing computer-generated blue and red lights. It is the Disney version of a sleazy block, where Hard Rock Cafés and the Army recruitment centre face each other off over MTV t-shirt giveaways. I pitch myself from corner to corner, drunk on the lights and the shopping. My credit card is hot in the palm of my hand and I'm mesmerised by some kind of consumerist mantra to keep spending keep spending. I sift through clothes, I try on makeup and I do not question wasting \$200 in a shaving store called The Shaving Store. Finally I stand in the centre of the square with the medals of the afternoon displayed at my feet, Gap, Sephora, Nine West, MTV. The whole world is surrounding me a bubble of colour and engines. People do not bump me in the middle of the square but on the sidewalks they brush past each other and yell to one another and whistle to stop a cab. And to me they are all extras from *Sex and the City* and *Seinfeld*. Is there anything more New York than Times Square?

I reach into my bag for a camera to grasp this image and when I do, my hand brushes against the spine of the well-worn copy of *On the*



*Road.* I take it out and flick through the pages, past my highlighting and post-it notes and there it is: Kerouac's return to New York after a grand long trip. It says: '*Suddenly I found myself on Times Square. I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair among themselves, the mad dream – grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City.*'

Rush hour in Times Square and the only things mad and grabbing are the awful packs of tourists. And just like that I come down from a commercial high when I think of the other Times Square that isn't in movies and television; that doesn't have its own selection of webcams and a singing topless Cowboy. Once it was the seedy, brothel-ridden, pickpockets' playground; rimmed alternatively with X-rated movie theatres and wholesome Broadway musicals. Once, a teenage Jack Kerouac stood on the edges of the square and gaped at the whores and grim addicts, fascinated by the dark reality of the place.

I, with my rustling bags and empty Starbucks' cup suddenly want nothing more than a dose of dirt or drugs.

I want to find a subway bathroom to crouch in and scribble poems like Herbert Huncke, but they don't exist in New York anymore. Instead I buy a soda and ask for the key to the Burger King bathroom, figuring it must be at least a little damp and filthy. But they are sparkling clean and shine UV lights to prevent me from shooting up if I so wished. The blue ink of my pen disappears on the page. And all I can think of is to

write Huncke's name in big curly letters, over and over as if that would bring back the right atmosphere.

Herbert Huncke's name rhymes with Junkie, all the more appropriate for the hustler and addict who used Times Square as his domain for thieving and pimping. With his heavy-lidded eyes and pale pock marked skin, he was a shadowy and thrilling character who served as an inspiration for the group. Huncke was bisexual; a petty thief and a writer who used the alleyways and public toilets to sleep, have sex and scribble down his daily journals in. His writing is fragmented, automatic, brusque and seething with tales of those he has duped and those who have hurt him. There is a raw energy and directness to his work that makes his short autobiographical pieces evocative and moving and establishes him as a natural storyteller.

Huncke, even at his most pathetic, was fascinating to Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac because he represented the seedy underbelly of America that they were so hoping to capture and represent in their work. It was Huncke who introduced Burroughs to morphine one uncomfortable night when a friend invited him over to help offload some syrettes. He was also responsible for Ginsberg being arrested after convincing him to store stolen goods in his apartment. But Huncke had the key to the Beat Generation swimming in his head. He had a word: 'beat' – a term he used to mean exhausted and run down. Kerouac saw this word belonged to the homosexual, the outlawed, the addicted and the outcast; he realised that beat meant poor, black, rejected, emotional, crazy and lost. He took Huncke's word and gave it to his generation.



*'Everything is going to the beat — It's the beat generation, it be-at, it's the beat to keep, it's the beat of the heart, it's being beat and down in the world and like oldtime lowdown and like in ancient civilizations the slave boatmen rowing galleys to a beat and servants spinning pottery to a beat.'* – Jack Kerouac<sup>34</sup>

Out of Burger King I rush, the notebook tucked away and although Huncke's gaunt crazy eyes no longer watch from each alley, I feel a sinister something in New York. The sun has dropped and the flashing lights are no longer energetic and representing some overall good in America – they are evil twinkling eyes that follow me down 42nd Street. I have been in Manhattan for only half a day and I have already seen three men, in dashing grey and black business suits stumbling drunkenly down side-streets. Are they unemployed, are they celebrating, are they disabled, are they suicidal, are they suffering from underestimating that final one p.m. Martini? Early afternoon and I follow the theatre signs away from Times Square where I mutter their names under my breath like a spontaneous Beat poem. Fame Becomes Me Footloose Urine Town Grey Gardens Rent Spamalot The Drowsy Chaperone Wicked Jersey Boys Losing Louie.

One block north to 43rd Street and on the corner I look for the Angler bar, the main haunt of Kerouac, Burroughs, Edie Parker and co in the mid -1940s, the bar that Kerouac refers to in *Vanity of Duluo* as 'vile' and Burroughs uses in *Junky* as the setting for a stabbing. All over the world I have scrambled around streets searching for these stamping grounds in areas that have been developed and cleaned up, often left

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<sup>34</sup> Kerouac, Jack *Desolation Angels*, New York, Riverhead Books, (1965) 1996.

without even a tiny feeling of Beatnik about them. My first day in Manhattan and I've only had sugary drinks and a nice chat on a stoop with the one person who isn't real. Suddenly it feels as if New York is falling down on me, the buildings too tall, the streets suddenly too narrow, the people coming in closer and closer and I freeze in the middle of the sidewalk. I am bumped, a young man puts his face close to mine and mockingly shouts, 'Oh yeah you've got suuuumthin,' and salutes me with an umbrella. New York claustrophobia or New York agoraphobia? It is too big, I tell myself, it is not marvellous, it is just big and dirty. I am pulled with a gush of pedestrians into the Port Authority bus terminal and marvel that only days ago I sat here excited and eager for a grand New York adventure to begin. I take the same seat and I gather my shopping bags around me as protection and I wait for Jack to walk back through those doors. And I wait.

Until the damn dusk is setting over the city and I find a subway entrance and reverse the motions of the morning, taking a hot, packed train all the way back to Queens.

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That night Karen and I eat fajitas and rice pudding and talk about how there is so much pride in being a New Yorker. Karen says, 'New York has it all, there is a big attitude of why would you want to go anywhere else, when everyone is dying to come here?' Karen tells me that as a person born in New York you are acutely aware of how your city is touted as The Capital of the World and you have to believe it or the dirt and traffic and rudeness will start to get you down. New York does appear to have every dream and desire only a phone call or cab

ride away; there is every kind of food, sport, fashion and language available. There is also a strong idea that this is the place of opportunities, an idea that like Disneyland, New York can make your dreams come true. The energy and enthusiasm of this city is what makes people pack up and move here, the idea of being a citizen of the greatest city on earth is what keeps them working, pushing, flattening each other. Karen is a jaded New Yorker who has seen the rest of the world and doesn't think she fits in with the materialism and sensationalism of her home city any longer. Karen lives alone with her cats in Queens while she searches for a way into Australia short of marrying me.

I settle back on the floor and fall asleep listening to the cats scratching and hocking. A horrible dream where I wander through a doorway and into a room of sandy coloured sheets and the smell of strong nasty perfume mixed with nastier alcohol. In front of me I see the frantic kicking of young smooth legs and below them a rhythmic wiggling of tireder pale legs. I am witnessing the loss of Kerouac's virginity to a Times Square hooker in 1939. I cannot help but smile at his helpless moaning. It feels right that I should see this rite of passage, this classic brush with manhood. I lean on the wall and watch as the scene unfolds. And then I look closer and something is familiar about the rounded upper thigh of the whore. Closer still and the auburn hair he is clutching has a dullness and weight that is oh so familiar, and then I catch myself breathing shallowly in a mocking gesture of pleasure, until I realise that I am underneath him ... and I am a dirty whore.

I wake up tugging my own hair, feeling the weight of a teenager on me, knowing what it's like to be fucked by a boy.

On the way into the city the next day, I share a seat with a young black man in a glaring orange puffa jacket and enormous silver framed sunglasses. He rests one of his legs against mine and taps the floor with an out of context snake-skin Italian loafer, in time with the beautiful opera that blares on his iPod. This is someone Jack would understand, I think. A man utterly involved in music that seems so out of context with his appearance. When New York first provoked the great love of Jack's life, he would creep across Morningside Park to the thrilling unknown of black Harlem. And there he would sit enthralled by the likes of Lester Young, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, miming an instrument along with them, focused and filled with the energy of the music. One of the few white faces in a dark crowd, he saw jazz music as an opening to the hipness and rhythm that black life seemed to contain.

I find myself, as usual, scanning the train for his dark hair and broad shoulders. I want to uncover the layers that New York has pressed onto Jack Kerouac, the college footballer, the seaman, the eager literary revolutionary, the man who awoke one morning to find a review that would change his life for a book that would change the world, the drunk who can't keep up with the piano player. The writer. If I cannot see him, I decide I will read him.

*'I'm going to marry my novels and have little short stories for children.'* – Jack Kerouac.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000.

As I approach the library from 42nd Street, I step into Bryant Park with its wrought-iron garden furniture and New Yorkers sitting in the sun. It is a little bit of Paris, with its greenery and white flowers but at the same time it's very New York with its office workers, cell phones, iPods and three hot dog stands on the perimeter. I like the parks in New York; I like parks in any city. I like to be able to sit on wet grass and flick through a magazine and eavesdrop on conversations and occasionally get asked for dope or sex. I flop down on the patchy green and take out the book I am currently working my way through – Diane Di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. Di Prima was the quintessential Beat chick who lived in New York in the 1950s wearing leotards, having affairs, writing poetry. Her book captures the energy and uniqueness of the time like no male-centred autobiography could. Jack saw the book in my bag once, way down in Mexico, scoffed at the title and threw it down on the floor with such force that my carefully placed post-its slipped from their holdings.

The library is full of grace and dignity and makes me walk straighter and quieter through the marble hallways. It is cool and pale like a giant bathroom and when I clear my throat I am hushed self-consciously by the echo. I have no idea where I'm going and walk from one tall-ceilinged room to another, awed by the towers of books and even more excited by the productiveness of the place. This library is alive. And as I move through it I feel sudden respect for all the learning that is taking place under its roof and cannot imagine a more perfect place for Kerouac's archives to live; I can think of them hushed up in a wood panelled saloon.



It takes me two hours to figure out how to get to them and then another two hours of questioning and application forms before I am allowed into what is known as the Berg Collection. It holds the major collection of Kerouac and Burroughs archives and is considered an even greater compilation than the one I saw in Berkeley. I am handed a copy of four neatly typed rules related to the handling of the materials and my passport is photocopied and placed in a manila folder. The last step for gaining entry is completed and I sign the form with a flourish as my entry card is handed over. The Librarian studies me closely, 'Will you be needing an interpreter for your studies?' he asks.

'It's in English right?'

'Yes but maybe you'll need help translating.'

I start with the notebooks that are scary to touch – they look so normal, so scrawled. Kerouac's handwriting varies from wildly childish loops to tight pencilled blocks. One whole notebook has lines of writing in diagonals cutting across the pre-ruled lines. Often he breaks into French for half a page. Sometimes it is witty. Sometimes it is boring. This is what it must be like in his head. This is not the first time I've seen his journals in their original copies, but each time it is still the same spine-chilling heart-thumping experience. Halfway through my poring, a politician comes into the archives and asks for a tour. He stands over my shoulder for a few moments and poses for a photo taken with his cell phone. The librarian takes great pains to make sure none of the documents are captured in the picture.

I find myself skimming the journals, but it's too hard to grasp anything, there's just too much there. What are you trying to say, Jack? And this is all I can get from him:

'How come a monkey's little toes curls under?'

'I was a human spy.'

'Name for a nightclub: the Leer of The Cat.'

'Poetry is Lamb dust.'

I copy a recipe for Banana orange pudding and admire the baby blue shade of the spiral notebooks that contain a draft of *Mexico City Blues*. There are letters too. To his agent Stirling Lord, to the editor of *Time Magazine* and to a critic where he thanks the gentleman for his 'scholarly insight into [his] own envy'.

I am reading, involved and quiet when I feel a hand grip my calf and fingers dip their way into my shoe to tickle the underside of my foot. I yelp, and then recover with a coughing fit that has the librarian scanning me in alarm. When they turn back to the cabinets I take a peek and see the grinning monkey faces of Jack and Allen curled up impossibly under the oak desk. I cannot say anything, I cannot draw attention to them so I scowl and kick faintly and think What the fuck do they want and where did they come from? Allen's gentle hand passes a piece of paper into my lap and I unfold it ever so quietly and all it says is, 'I came home and found a lion in my living room'.

Alarmingly Jack's hand stretches from beneath the desk and like a snake searching for prey, pats its way across the edge of the table until it finds some kind of paper and then pulls a letter from Allen to Bill down underneath the table with them. I have horrible visions of

the two of them giggling and madly rescuing their own material, stuffing books, dream journals, diaries and poems into their pockets and down their pants and fleeing down the quiet hallways hollering and leaping. I will be held responsible for the loss of these world treasures and I will be deported from New York never to grace a Beat conference or festival or even an inspired poetry reading again. I take a deep breath, fix an anxious frown and look back under the table and they are gone. The note from Allen is scrunched tightly in my sweaty palm until the ink runs.

The librarian is surprised when I hand the journals back and says, 'You're a fast reader,' as I pack up my things. There are other journals that I want to see, but am forbidden, as they are being held until a new Kerouac biography is being released. I ask with a smile when they might be available and am told that it is not up to the library, but the power for the Kerouac archives rests solely with the literary executor John Sampas. After all the drama and security-consciousness associated with even entering this room I am too exhausted to question their rights to be withholding the books. I slip out of the collection and take my locker key and loose-leaf paper down the hall to find the rest of my things.

I leave with an aching damn hand from pressing with a dull pencil on the thin notebook sheets over the top of green felt placemats. How did Jack manage to create those millions of words often without a typewriter? I will ask him the next time I see him: how did he keep his pencils sharp in Mexico?

When we do meet he is moody and sullen. I'm in a woodlined bar nestled under a brownstone with one bartender taking the afternoon shift. I sit in a booth with the *Village Voice* and examine apartment rental ads just out of curiosity. The bartender brings me a heavily foamed beer and notices what I'm reading and tells me, just like in some movie, that he's looking for a roommate, that he lives around the corner, that it's only \$900 a month. And I, bizarrely, agree to take a look at the room when he gets off his shift at seven p.m. I don't know why, but this comes so naturally and I find myself almost believing that this will happen, (like all good New York stories I will move here, do it tough for a little while, meet the love of my life, and rise the social ranks to retire on the Upper East Side).

Then Jack enters in pyjama pants and a dark wool overcoat and the whole plan falls apart. He stares into my beer and taps on the table with a dull toothpick.

'You've been looking over my shoulder all day,' he tells me.

'You've been looking up my dress,' I counter with.

'It's the best way to know somebody.'

I remember the journals, the scribble, the soft pencil lines running over the imported pages. Could reading be the closest I'll ever have to being in his mind? We talk and we wander, but do we know each other at all? And I think, Isn't that what the books are for?

'We're going to play one of your favourite games, Jack,' I tell him.

'Which one is that? Baseball? Fucking?'

'The one where we read each other's minds.'

*'I really believe, or want to believe, really I am nuts, otherwise I'll never be sane.'* – Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac<sup>36</sup>

An old Beat game played everywhere and over the years, but especially in the atmospheric New York days where high or drunk or overtired after midnight, Ginsberg and Kerouac would face off and try to work their ways into each other's minds. Sharing dreams, thoughts, childhoods, drunken and stoned insights. The conversations were recorded or scribbled down in order to be analysed and shared. To do this we can't be in a bar with a guy who thinks I'm about to rent his apartment so I take the inappropriately dressed Jack and walk him up the stairs to street level. Where do we go from here? I think Karen's place, I think the park, I think the library, I think Starbucks, I think a motel, I think the Chelsea Hotel.

I mean where else would we go but 222 West 23rd Street? The Chelsea Hotel is the rock star and rebel of accommodation, with an impressive history of housing the fucked up, the addicted and the creative. I've seen the website which is plastered with the phrase 'A rest stop for Rare Individuals.' And if nothing else, that is what Jack and I will be today. We charge through the lobby and take a single room for \$210 that I don't really have and go up to room 103, where I am sure no one desperately famous has ever stayed or died in before. Jack looks overwhelmed and confused by the dim lighting, the dark red bed, but is placated when I raid the mini-bar for the tiny bottles of vodka to get us started. And when I explain that this hotel is known for bohemian atmosphere and creative roots, he looks sceptical until I tell him that old Bill Burroughs also had a room here for a while. I do

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<sup>36</sup> Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000.

not mention Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin or Sid Vicious, nor tell him that it is where Herbet Huncke spent the last two years of his life.

We sit on the bed facing each other with our legs crossed like Buddhas and I look at his face and place him in the late 1940s, returned to New York after a fling across the country with Cassady.

'You used to do this, all the time,' I tell him. And then I see something in his reaction that means he must remember how to do this, but maybe he's not prepared to do it with me.

I set a good mood for a mind exposure treat. The mini-vodkas are easy to drink and we close the dark curtain so that only a vague afternoon light peeks into the room in straight yellow parallels that Jack ducks his head into every now and then as if illuminating a particular idea. If he was with Allen or Neal the words would be flowing by now in a rush of exclamations and insights, but with me Jack just sits there looking pensive, working his way through the booze and refusing to make eye contact.

I close my eyes and tell him a dream I had two nights ago where I couldn't understand where I was going but needed to pack as many clothes as possible and the more I jammed into the bag, the more I would find that needed to fit. I was panicking and anxious and kept thinking I was going to be late for something, even though I still had no idea where I was supposed to be going.

When I open my eyes he is still sitting there frozen, but has an unlit joint in one hand and thank God The Chelsea Hotel is liberal enough to supply lighters for their guests.

I swear 'I Cover the Waterfront' is playing, Billie Holiday's torturous lyrics stretching out the afternoon. Her voice places a layer over our minds that floats like the smoke haze settling just under the ceiling. And Jack starts to speak, heavy and slowly between drags on the joint. He says, 'I love Allen Ginsberg, let that be recorded in Heaven's unchangeable heart.'

He passes it to me and I press it to my lips in a practised fashion and say, in keeping with the nature of the game, the first thing that pops into my head.

'There needs to be a word for when you reach into a bag to grab something, like keys or wallet or glasses, but you can't find it. And then when you actually look down, it's right there. If you look up and keep digging around, it's not there. Look down and there it is. There needs to be a word for that.'

Jack takes the joint back and glowing ash drops mid pass and floats in slow motion like an autumn leaf caught in the tension and breath of our moment and I swear it is suspended over the pale red quilt, frozen and glowing. Only when it drops in a sudden movement that Jack begins to speak and he says 'Pull my daisy, tip my cup, all my doors are open. Cut my thoughts, for coconuts, all my eggs are broken.'

I join in. 'Jack my Arden, gate my shades, woe my road is spoken. Silk my garden, rose my days, now my prayers awaken.'

I know the words because it is a poem that Jack wrote with Allen and Neal in 1949 called *Pull My Daisy*. I never knew all the words to it before, but suddenly they come so easily out of my mouth. And we sit in the Chelsea Hotel chanting it together till the very end. And just like the lost thing in the bag, when I close my eyes, I can hear Allen and Neal joining in, the room filled with their naked voices, the solidarity of their chanting. The room smells of men, and their breath flutters back and forth, we all sit so close to each other; there is a bare knee pressed against mine and it is slick with sweat. I feel a hand touching my hair as we all say 'Start my halo bleeding,' the rough fingers stroke and get twisted in my knots and when we say 'Milk my mind and make me cream,' another hand from the other side (this one softer and gentler) draws long lines down the inside of my arm in careful strokes. Our voices become slower and deeper, my own gravelly and cracking. I say 'Drink me when you're ready,' and Jack's hands suddenly reach out and cover my face, his thumbs on top of my eyes.

And when I open them and look down, I am all alone in the room. I lie back on the bed, pull a book out of my bag and look at the three of them lined up on a city street corner, laughing, handsome and together.

*'I have thought of Neal as being a psychopath for quite some time. To me he is nothing more than a series of incidents.'*<sup>37</sup> – John Clellon Holmes

In 1946 young Neal Cassady and his child-bride Luanne rolled into New York and into Kerouac's life. Neal was introduced by an old

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<sup>37</sup> John Clellon Holmes in Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, Vintage, 2000, p. 129.



Denver pal to Allen and Jack and came with a hefty resume of fast times, thieving and sexual prowess. Unimpressed during their first meeting, Jack went to see Neal a second time and he answered the door to his Harlem hovel naked and unashamed and Kerouac saw an unbridled beauty and energy in him. He wasn't the only one, men and women all over the country were drawn to Neal and he charmed them all in a frantic, passionate rush of words. Allen, in particular, was in love with him from the very beginning, but had to wait a while before it could be consummated. And then remained tortured by Neal's complete lack of monogamy.

The following year Jack was all alone in New York for the summer trying to work on *The Town and the City* when he was distracted by maps and dreams of heading west to find Neal. It was the trip that he eventually turned into his classic and some would say, most popular novel. *On the Road* begins and ends in New York City. It begins with the expectations and enthusiasm of a young man's first great journey and the break up of Sal Paradise and a woman who was actually Edie Parker. It ends with the disruption to Sal and Dean Moriarty's friendship; a real-life shift that occurred between Jack and Neal due to the latter's unpredictability and fickle nature.

At the end of *On the Road* Sal Paradise trundles into New York from Mexico racked with dysentery and disease and finally meets 'the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes'; a girl who was Joan Haverty, Mrs Kerouac number 2.

Just two blocks south of The Chelsea Hotel I happen to walk to a landmark building. Married just weeks after meeting, Joan and Jack

lived with his mother for a while before moving into their first marital home, here at 454 West 20th Street. Joan was a dressmaker, the girlfriend of an old friend called Bill Cannastra who met a grisly death by subway train in 1950. Coming in from Mexico he found her in Bill's old loft making hot chocolate in a skirt and thought at age twenty-eight it was time for the domesticated, marital life he so craved. Jack lived with Joan in the West 20th St loft during the grueling marathon of writing that became *On the Road*. She fed him coffee and pea soup and watched him type around the clock only stopping to pee or to stretch and to make love at least once. Joan discovered she was pregnant in June 1951 and Jack first insisted she have an abortion and then claimed that the baby was the product of a night-time visit from a Puerto Rican busboy. Joan moved out, the marriage dissolved and the child and Jack did not meet until ten years later.

As it was once filled with cheap loft style apartments, many beatniks made Chelsea their home in the 1950s including Lucien Carr and the poetic and interracial couple LeRoi and Hettie Jones. Chelsea is now a beautiful part of New York that oozes bohemia in an expensive style with cafes, delis, pet shops and fitness clubs. A real estate magazine I swipe from a newsstand tells me that Chelsea has long been the home of filmmakers and photographers and is now turning into a neighbourhood of lawyers and doctors. I am warned that I won't see many small children. It is true, but just like Paris, I do see a lot of small dogs. I am overwhelmed. Can there be something about New York that has you up one minute (high in a hotel reading poems with a ghost) and then down the next (wandering wealthy neighbourhoods in gum-sticky shoes)? There is an undeniable villagey feel to this area,

but it seems to come at a great cost. Even the hot-dog stands are shinier and cleaner, but twenty-five cents more expensive.

On the corner of Seventh Avenue and West 20th I try in vain to hail a cab, but I have neither the whistle nor the gumption to take one, it seems. It is five-thirty and the city is warming up for a flood of peak-hour traffic and all occupied taxis must be filled with the childless lawyers and doctors heading home for a snack. I stand freakishly still on the corner and watch the suits get out of the taxis; they are replaced by young gay couples in debonair gym wear. This corner I have chosen because it is where the sad farewell of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty took place – Sal pulling away in his friend's Cadillac, unable to give Dean a ride uptown. All the taxis seem like Cadillacs and all the faces in them are Jack's pulling away from me.

My cell phone buzzes and it is Karen asking me to meet her uptown for drinks with a group of her work friends. I finally step off the corner, into the oncoming traffic and a cab is forced to stop and let me in.

*'I'd learned ... that just as girls guarded their virginity, boys guarded something less tangible which they called themselves. They seemed to believe they had a mission in life, from which they could easily be deflected by being exposed to too much emotion.'* – Joyce Johnson<sup>38</sup>

Very late in Karen's apartment, Jack appears in a classically clichéd way, by throwing small stones at the bay windows on the third floor. I hear the tinkling of them against the glass and sit up straight and rigid and remind myself it is Queens, not Brooklyn. The cats rush to the

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<sup>38</sup> Johnson, Joyce *Minor Characters, A Beat Memoir*, London, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983, p. 56.

window and I am just about to call out to Karen when I hear a familiar whistling and suddenly know I am being summoned, not to come outside and play, but to let him in to sleep. Jack must prowl all about the city whistling underneath girls' windows; this is how he met Joan Haverty and Joyce Glassman too. I open Karen's window and look down on his still full head of hair and the pout that lies beneath it and I don't have to say anything but sigh before he rolls up his sleeves and moves towards the fire escape. When he climbs through the window and starts to speak I shush him and whisper 'It's too late, everyone's asleep.'

'History is written by night, not by day, Stella.'

He clutches one of Karen's cats, a scared grey thing and gently whispers the name he gives to all cats 'Ti Gris'. He is not just drunk, he is wired, on Benzedrine probably, and there is a horrible intensity in his eyes. I make him a cup of coffee, poured from the silently brewing percolator that all American homes have. He shakily offers some to the cat. He clutches the cat in a way that it's not comfortable with; a tight stranglehold with both arms and he takes it to the window and presses its face against the glass.

'My happy little cat,' he murmurs softly. 'My happy little cat hates doors!'

Then he hands me the coffee and lies down on the couch and closes his eyes. The cat lies still. I watch him in what seems like sleep, but he jerks himself awake every few minutes with spasms from his legs or a huge hacking cough. There is nothing peaceful about Jack Kerouac sleeping, but at least I think there will be no trouble tonight.

My cell phone rings just before dawn, a shrill horror sound right next to my head. The Boy first tells me drunkenly that he loves me and then that he doesn't fit in with his friends anymore. It takes a sleepy moment to grasp what he's saying. There was a party of sorts where he hadn't seen anyone for a long time and apparently people were ignoring him. I melt to hear his voice and rush to tell him everything is okay, that I love him too and then I see Jack out of the corner of my eye shakily getting to his feet. While I'm placating The Boy, Jack reaches out and tries to snatch the phone out of my hand and pulls a face like a toddler lacking attention when I scowl at him. I quickly walk down the hall and go into the bathroom and sit on the edge of the tub. It feels so easy to calm him down and talk mushy to The Boy; it is nice to be needed by him.

I say, 'Baby I love you that's all that matters.'

Jack pounds on the door three times with his ham-size fist. It's a strong volatile Kerouac, I guess he's around twenty-eight. Alarm bells ring in my head. I whisper twenty-eight and the Boy says, 'I am so old, I know, I'm 28 and what have I done?'

Jack turns the handle too roughly to really mean it. I hear the sole of his shoe scuffing along the bottom of the door. The Boy breathes heavily 'I just love you.'

'I just love *you*.'

Kerouac interrupts with a howling 'But I looooooove yooooooooou...!' on the other side of the door in the mocking, nasty tone he knows makes me especially mad. I get up and pound back to him on the door as hard as I can without busting a nail and then I hold the rattling handle still.

The Boy is silent on the other end of the phone and then he asks carefully, 'Are you busy?'

'Not at all,' I say as the door handle jiggles loose and comes off in my hand. Jack pushes against the door and I put my back to it and push back. It is impossible to win and the door gapes open. And then a strong dark arm reaches through the crack and grabs the first thing it makes contact with— my left breast.

I squeal. 'Fuck!'

The Boy— 'Are you okay?'

'You were screwing the Puerto Rican delivery boy!'

'I have to go baby.' I hang up without waiting for him to reply and the hand suddenly retreats, the door slams back into place. I am left leaning against it with my hand clutch a bruised breast, tears stinging my contact lenses.

Soft footsteps outside the door, Karen's sweet New York drawl, 'Honey are you fighting with your boyfriend? Just don't break my door.'

A frightening thought at five a.m. while I toss and turn on Karen's floor — if Jack Kerouac is only here because I'm here, then am I only here because of Jack Kerouac? Could I come here without him? Could I be myself without him? Am I only myself when I'm with him? And then the most startling thing of all as I think of him sleeping, one of Karen's impatient cats somehow tricked into being held in his great bear arms — is he me? In this game I play with Jack there are complications about his personal time zones and his beliefs and if I do not respect that, then I am afraid of what could happen to him. When we travel together, I am not certain how much of the present day he is able to see and if he is able to acknowledge just where he is in space and time and place. If Jack Kerouac is my link to a world that is only on paper and in my head, then I must be his one tie to 2006.

The next day I wake up when Karen leaves for work and survey the damage in the bathroom, stepping on splintered wood. There is a creeping likeness to Kerouac when I look in the mirror. I could be his daughter, I think, or I could be his lost feminine soul. I take a sip of a two day old glass of wine that is stained burgundy around its rim and it's only nine in the morning. I am mimicking him because I miss him. I do not shower and slip straight into a pair of dark jeans. I borrow a white t-shirt from the masses in Karen's room and when I look in the mirror there is something rough and changed in me. I could be a New Yorker, or I could be that sad version of a Beatnik that I told myself I would never become. But right now I am feeling a violent itch to become anything other than the Australian visitor in New York. I am not far from pulling on a leotard and perching in a bar. How hard would it have been if I had been twenty-three in 1950? And could I fit pornographic photo shoots between the odd typing job like Diane Di Prima did?

Asked to define the word beat, Kerouac once said it was sympathetic. Asked to describe himself, he said he was a mystic. The two words swirling around in my head, nine a.m. and I'm tipsy already. I decide I will find something sympathetically mystic in New York.

*'Sure I'm old, and I'm evil, and I'm ugly, and I'm tired. But that isn't it. I've been this way for ten years, and I'm all down the main line.'* – Herbert Huncke<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000.

I spend a whole day wandering through Greenwich Village looking for trouble and finding only candle shops and a place where you can get three burritos for ten dollars. I end up in Washington Square Park, once the home of hipsters and students and beatniks and am startled that it has been taken over by a dachshund festival. There are sausage dogs everywhere, on lengthening leashes, greeting each other, the fat ones dragging their low-slung bellies across steps. Long-haired and speckled ones lounge on the edge of the fountain. There is an official photographer taking insanely serious pictures of the dogs who cusses at one owner for letting her foot slip into the frame. What the hell has happened here? I sit on a bench in the sun and am traipsed all over by a white fluffy thing without eyes; its owner apologises, 'You know she's only upset because it's not her out there today. She'll just have to wait until next time, but in the meantime I have to put up with this attention-seeking.'

I'm silent.

A fog of depression first appears in Sheridan Square where I watch from across the street as people carefully spaced along the intersection wait to meet other people. I follow a couple whose embrace is so heartwarming that it reeks of airports and weddings. They have the comfortable walk with their arms around each other's waists and they walk slowly by New York standards; casual and chatty. They stop out the front of a window and I'm forced to walk straight past them and I see them staring at a bunch of puppies in a pet store. At 92 Grove Street I see the fire escape of Lucien Carr's apartment that Jack, escaping to a bar in the middle of the night, fell from and cut his head open. And there only metres away is the site of Nick's



Jazz Club, the bar that Jack visited in that formative year at Horace Mann.

I am manically depressed, just like my horoscope predicted: it actually said 'racked with worry that you will not be okay.' I cannot think what will bring me out of this and I cannot think what I've done to deserve it other than being born in September. How can I be upset in New York? Because I fought with Jack Kerouac and he broke my friend's door. When I'm out of favour with him everything else falls apart. I doubt this mission, I doubt myself and I doubt his intentions. And when I am sad I can see all the grey in the buildings and the drag in people's faces and the remnants of Beat civilisation are not classic anymore; they are old and they are different. The Greenwich Village jazz bars are pet shops for lovers to look at. The fire escapes are to climb away from terrorists. The drug-selling parks are for dog shows. I am pushed aside by the strollers filled with tiny people clutching healthy snacks that form a heavy patrol on every sidewalk.

Children made Jack think of his own mortality. I wonder where Jan Kerouac first met her father. Nine years old and she saw him for the first time while he waited to take the paternity test that would prove they had the same blood type. For years he carried a picture of her in his wallet and would bring it out to show friends and girlfriends, not proudly, but to insist that she could not possibly be his. Jan grew up on the streets of the Lower East Side, skipping school to drop acid and slipping in and out of juvie hall. I remember how he found her old house in San Fran. Does Jack ever see her when he walks around New York now? I like to think of them haunting the same spots and making trouble with their matching dark eyes; sharing a bottle or a joint or

something more dangerous and maybe making an awkward peace with each other. They could huddle on the edges of Washington Square Park and wait for the dealers, the bums and the poets to slide in with the darkness.

The lowest, beatest ebb for Jack arrived in 1954 while Joan hunted him for child support. He struggled with shaping the novel that was to become *On the Road* into something for publication and fought a winter with alcohol, cigarettes and Benzedrine. He had no money, his legs were plagued with phlebitis and his friends were all on the other side of the country, having the grandest time it seemed in Old 'frisco. He wrote poems for them, poems where he daydreams for Ginsberg and has visions of Neal. It was a point when he realised that his dreams of becoming a great writer just might not come true. *The Town and the City* was not so successful and publishers were rejecting his Beat Generation novel and *The Subterraneans* for being too loose and unconventional. Alone, in pain and unable to write, he left New York for North Carolina to meditate. I consider doing the same.

It is hard to imagine that all I wanted a few days ago was to be alone. It feels impossible to be alone in New York, but it is always possible to feel alone. I feel the creepy loneliness as I walk down Hudson Avenue past a mish mash of clothing and drug stores. Amongst so many people there is so much room for loneliness. I suddenly notice the lack of smiling and my reluctance to meet people's eyes. I feel especially lonely as I swirl my french fries around in a swirl of ketchup in the basement bar on Hudson: literary landmark The White Horse Tavern. Fat tourist children sit with their larger Texan parents and complain about the lack of a ketchup bottle on their table. I casually lean over

and offer them my bottle. They ignore me and keep arguing, the youngest and plumpest child puffs out its cheeks and moans, 'What'll I doooooooooo?'

'Excuse me,' I say, 'take it.'

Nobody even looks up, but the father raises his hand to beckon a waiter. I give up and slide the bottle straight on to their table and when a waiter does appear there is a completely awkward silence as they all stare at the shiny ketchup bottle.

Then the older kid says, 'Well I wannanother.'

What did Jack Kerouac used to eat? Apple pies and baloney sandwiches. New York is the city of wives it would seem, housing two out of three Mrs Kerouacs. But following Edie and Joan came a young woman who had an equally enthralling effect on Jack; a beautiful blonde called Joyce Glassman, much younger and Jewish with a fat grey cat. She began her two year affair with Kerouac at a Howard Johnsons in 1957 when she bought him a meal of franks and beans.

She was just twenty-one to his thirty-four and took him home to her apartment that night. It was in her bedroom at 67th Street that he awoke one morning to find he was famous overnight thanks to a praising review for *On the Road*. All the way uptown, so many years ago, the world would never be the same for Jack Kerouac. Suddenly he was successful. *On the Road* had been circulating the publishers for around five years, being received enthusiastically, then postponed as minds changed and finally rejected. When it was picked up by Viking in 1955, Jack was forced by his editor Malcolm Cowley to seriously edit the manuscript by installing paragraphs, removing whole sections, changing the characters' names and giving some gesture of narrative.

The review of September 5th 1957 in the New York Times declared *On the Road* as 'the clearest and most important utterance yet made by the generation'.

As an instant literary celebrity he rode the wave recklessly and drunkenly. He gave interviews drunk, he gave readings drunk. Unprepared for this assault on his natural shyness, he hid behind the bottle and only hoped it would last long enough for his other books to be published and for him to make enough money to support his mother. In January he gave an interview to the *New York Post* in which he said 'It's a great burden to be alive. A heavy burden, a great big heavy burden.'

The burden had arrived towards the end of a decade. And it was the decade of travel, and meeting Neal and the rest of the gang, and marriages and writing writing writing. It took all those years for the name Kerouac to be on America's lips. New York for Jack in the late 1950s was the time when everything changed, a time of finishing *The Dharma Bums* in two weeks, appearing on talk shows and television, giving dead interviews in nervous seriousness knowing a pint of whiskey was waiting at the end, of being told that the Beat Generation has a new word – Beatnik. And you are one of them; in fact you are King Jack. King of the Beats!

Suddenly Jack, Mr American Boheme himself had cash – lots of it, from movie studios and publishing houses. The attention was what got him in the end. 'I'm a serious artist,' he insisted in a *Village Voice* interview in 1957. Poor Jack, the misunderstood leader of the

generation he set out to create, is drunkenly slumped on a stool shuffling through his tiny notepads and beaming when he finds the right junkie poem. Only fifteen minutes on stage and then he's done, thunderous applause and he can stumble down amongst the tables and join his fans/friends for a drink.

*'Beat? Well, you could say we're like anonymous messengers from another planet just roaming around in the electric-razor age. One way I figure we communicate with each other is through this poetry-jazz workout. This isn't just a gimmick for the unwashed cats and chicks on the marijuana network. We're trying to evolve a new dimension.'* – Kenneth Rexroth<sup>40</sup>

Out of the whirlpool of fame came a new vocation as Jack started to read his work to jazz. He was joined by David Amram, a composer – performer who played music along to Jack's readings or improvisations. Together they hit The Village Vanguard, The Brata Gallery, The Circle in the Square Theatre – all the usual East Village and Greenwich Village Haunts. Kerouac read parts of his novels, pieces of poems or even his friends' poems.

In The White Horse I pick at my food slowly and put my iPod back in my ears to listen to one of his improvs with Amram. The recordings are now digitally remastered and come in shiny CDs, but still you can feel the dark bars, whiskey breath and Jack humming and scatting along to Amram's piano. The watering-holes and jazz bars that he performed in sit in the Village like relics, The White Horse Tavern, The Village Vanguard and Chumleys. All three are still literary and musical

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<sup>40</sup> Maher Jr, Paul *Empty Phantoms: interviews and encounters with Jack Kerouac*, New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005, p. 106.

pockets that attract tourists and students searching for a little Beat action.

When the waiter comes by I take the headphones out and ask three times for a Coke. The first time he answers in Spanish, the second time he brings water, the third he brings Jack Daniels and I settle for that.

The Australian in New York can never ask for Coke, they should always try Pepsi. The Australian in New York is often mistaken for having a bad Mexican accent. They don't move fast enough. New York has a nice tidal flow of people from one stop light to the next and I can never seem to keep up with them. I am made to feel awkward by their distractions and indifference and they way that New Yorkers always talk to you as if they are about to get up and leave at any second. Karen has told me that every New Yorker always has an agenda, a necessary schedule to ensure that the city keeps moving forward and what we as outsiders would often think of as being rude, is actually just habits and rituals in order to not waste time.

I observe the ritual of tipping and leave a stunning 30%, not confident enough to ask for change and leave the dark wood of the White Horse, stepping into an afternoon that is almost over. I should go back into the subway to find the Long Island Railroad, Port Washington Line, all the way to Bayside Queens. I don't want to be alone anymore, but I don't want to be in Queens. I think of going back to The Chelsea Hotel. I think of just loitering here in case Jack rocks up for a reading, a drink or a fight.

Instead I walk a lengthy tour of landmarks that I have drawn in blue pen on my map and float by taverns, hotels and residences with Amram still on the iPod. The Cedar Street Tavern where Jack was banned for pissing in an ashtray, the lesbian bar Pony Stable Inn where Ginsberg first met Gregory Corso (neither of them lesbians, but both of them poets), the corner where the Howard Johnsons sat with its menu of franks and beans.

The Village that I wander in is full of ghosts. They are lined up on each corner beckoning with a needle, a book, a dark bottle, a camera. They creep through my headphones with a twinkling piano sound. I realise that although I've seen Jack more in New York than in the last couple of cities, I have seen only remnants of his life, pieces of his memories. I know he was huge and then he fell. I know he was afraid of death, commitment, being alone, not being able to write, children. Tomorrow I will leave New York and head to another town in America where I am sure to bump into him, but can't we have some conclusion to this particular journey?

I do the grand tourist thing and take a taxi to the landmark I have never seen before, The Empire State building; the tallest, most famous landmark in New York. From the observation deck on the 86th floor I look down on a grey city just melting into the dusk, waiting for all the lights to turn on. New York is beautiful and ugly. It is ferocious and shy. It is drunk and serious. It is the perfect city to birth the Beat Generation.

Explosively scary moment where I'm riding a glass elevator and his wanton face blares out through one panel just above the sixth floor.

When I reach ground level he is there in all his drunken swollen glory, in a suit fresh from somewhere smart with his tie all askew and greying whiskers on his chin. He takes my arm so I can steady him, but it is a gentlemanly act and I know we'll be okay. He hails a taxi and, ever courteous, opens the door for me to slip into the back seat. He gives an address that I don't catch to the driver and we go downtown for a while, but definitely west. In the back seat he takes my arm and rolls up the sleeve; he takes a ballpoint pen and digs it hard into the fleshy part inside my elbow and I cannot see what he writes. The cab stops and he slides a couple of bills forward to the driver while I peek out the window at the great hole in the cityscape where the World Trade Centre was demolished five years ago (in an attack that ruined my birthday party). It is still very much a part of the city; the memorial park is under construction even at this late hour and I hear the gentle grunt of a bulldozer as it passes us on Church Street. Jack does not even turn to look at this piece of world history, the traumatic reminder of a tragedy for New York. 9/11 is not a part of his consciousness; it is not a date that makes him shudder or tear up and this void in the city does not make him wonder. So we just walk straight past, his hand tugging mine and I feel relieved not to have to stop and look. He is still silent.

We walk east towards the water and the harsh wind comes off the Hudson River and Karen's white t-shirt isn't enough. Jack slips off his suit jacket and lays it across my shoulders and it is still warm and smelly, as good as a hug. When we have walked as far as the street takes us he motions to stop and then we stand there hand in hand breathing the Hudson stench, the wind stinging my eyes.



'I'm going to apologise,' he says and I am stunned, for this is a first.

'About the bathroom I ruined.'

'It's okay, Jack.'

'I hope I didn't leave crabs on your toilet seat.'

'It's not mine, remember, it's my friend Karen who you owe an apology.'

'Well anyway, I think they're from the back toilets of nightclubs and bars.'

'I didn't see any, but then I have no idea what they look like. I hope you didn't, Jack.'

'If so, I'm sorry.'

We stand under a streetlight, the water is in front, the city is behind, and a whole other state is straight ahead.

'I hope everything works out like it's supposed to,' I say and he plucks a *Desolation Angels* quote from his mind and looks at me mockingly while he whispers in a sing-song voice 'Hope is a word like a snow-drift, so shut up ...'

And I finish the quote in all earnestness '... live, travel, adventure, bless and don't be sorry.'

Then he hums softly a melody I know from my iPod, he hums it into my ear, his cold face pressed against mine, an eyelash flickering against my cheek, the rough stubble grating. The humming becomes a song made up of 'la dee da, la da dee' and he pulls me towards him tightly then breaks away roaring. He is off down the road doing a faux

Gene Kelly dance, belting out that song, twirling on streetlamps, kicking up his heels until he's danced off into the night.

Down on the waterfront I see New Jersey across the bay, twinkling and smoking away in all its productive glory. At the end of *On the Road* Jack sits here and thinks of Dean Moriarty and I sit here and think of old Jack Kerouac, the crazy bastard, the genius, old Jack Kerouac. When I roll up his jacket sleeve and look at my arm in tiny curled letters it says Amo I love, Amas I have loved, Amat I shall love. And for just once, New York makes perfect sense.

## Massachusetts October

*Lowell ... is always the place where the darkness of the trees by the river, on a starry night, gives hint of that inscrutable future Americans are always longing and looking for.'* – Jack Kerouac<sup>41</sup>

This is not how it is supposed to be. Holed up in a Hilton, flattened in a bed by tight-fitted 300 thread count sheets, peering at a teen movie straight ahead, the air-conditioning emitting startling noises every five minutes like it's revving up to run across the room. Dan in the bed opposite lying on his side, his eyes almost closed, refusing to get up. Dan is not himself. He is depressed and unsure; he has been running on a treadmill in an abandoned gym downstairs. He refuses to leave that bed.

We ventured out, about half an hour ago and must have left through the wrong door because we came to a highway that catered to dirty loud trucks and restaurants that catered to dirty loud men. We walked along the side of the highway and tried not to look through the windows of the trucks or the restaurants because only dead curious eyes looked back and Dan kept mumbling, 'We're gonna get freakin' killed, Thursday afternoon and someone is gonna freakin' kill us.'

It was so hot out there, a relentless Australian kind of sun that seemed to come from nowhere and I went to remove my jacket but Dan

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<sup>41</sup> Charters, Ann *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters*, New York, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 221.

stopped me hissing, 'Don't freakin' give them something to look at, put those titties away.' We went into the cool of a drug store so I could buy some contact lens solution and Dan scoured the aisles for candy bars he couldn't get in Canada. We shared a brief moment of humour when we witnessed an orange haired lady loudly complain that her household bleach wasn't on sale. This resulted in several yells over the store's loudspeaker calling for firstly a price check and eventually security. Dan and I giggled briefly during the incident and almost chuckled out aloud as the woman was removed from the store by a large black lady in a football shirt, but as the orange woman stared at us through the window, Dan clamped his hand over my mouth. He had this feeling that to draw attention to ourselves would somehow result in being harmed.

When we came out of the store we were caught up in a wave of fifteen-year-old highschool students just let out for the day. They called to each other in an angry language I didn't understand or recognise. I imagined they were talking about us. I needed to disappear. All the girls had the high rounded asses of South American women with the overflowing hip fat of talk-show contestants. I was swept up in the crowd and jostled by those asses and backpacks and whipped with fake braided hair. Dan pulled me out the other side. We were starving, but Dan wouldn't go into any of the fast-food restaurants that surrounded the drug store. He maintained that the safest thing for us to do was to go back to the hotel and wait for the lobby restaurant to open.

So now we are here at the Lowell Hilton. Hillary Duff is on TV and the TV is depressing me. Dan is depressing me. It occurs to me that his company was a bad choice; that he is somehow worse than Jack Kerouac. At least Jack would suggest drinking. Dan rolled down two days before from Toronto armed with a suit jacket and a million sad stories about his ex-girlfriend. We spent our time in Boston drinking in the same tiny corner bar every night and eating giant roast beef sandwiches with pickles. We were so hung-over one day that we slept in a Harvard courtyard outside the psychology department. We got so drunk that afternoon that I bought a pink digital camera off a small child and took pictures of Dan trying on old men's hats.

This morning we took a very early train from Boston and a very slow cab from the station. The driver's broad accent made Dan snicker and Lowell is making him think of more sad stories about his ex-girlfriend. He pops his head out from under a blanket to woefully say, 'I don't even remember what a vagina smells like anymore.'

From the hotel window I can see a sad canal carrying litter towards the city centre. Next to the water there is a sign that says 'Lowell - America's Venice!' Nobody walks alongside the canal. Further up there is the unopened Textile Factory Museum. I read a newsletter thoughtfully placed next to the bed - *The Lowell Senior Citizens Gazette*. It helpfully directs me to the town's three Dunkin' Donuts.

This is not how Lowell is supposed to be. It just isn't.

Where is the great childhood hero that Kerouac had loved and boasted about? It is not in the drug store and it is not in the children and it is not in the starched soulless Hilton.

When Kerouac was born in 1922 Lowell was an industrial, multicultural, working-class town on the Merrimack River. His father ran a printing shop and there was a shoe factory and cotton mills for the Greek, French-Canadian, Irish and German workers to toil in. Lowell is the setting for many of Kerouac's novels and it is the town that served as a backdrop and character in his first Wolfen drama *The Town and the City* (Lowell being 'the town'). Lowell is the thought in the back of Sal Paradise's head as he hitches across the country in *On The Road*. Lowell is in all fourteen books of the *Duluoz Legend* – the series of short biographical novels that Kerouac saw as his opportunity to tell the whole goddamn truth of his life. It is his first love with the older married woman in *Maggie Cassidy*. It is the haunted resting place of his eternally nine-year-old brother Gerard – who is widely regarded as a saint (and some are still petitioning for it to be recognised). And it is in Lowell that every year a week of Kerouac is celebrated in the fittingly named 'Lowell Celebrates Kerouac!'.

I am here for a conference at the University of Massachusetts on Kerouac and his influence on the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. I am tired. Fed up with Dan. And have come out in a startling red rash across my shoulders and neck. It is hot and prickly and I can feel it creeping towards my face where it will plant itself like an evil spontaneous birthmark. 'I'm leaving this stupid hotel,' I tell Dan and he moans from across the room. Through all of this I keep thinking and for once hopefully, Where is Jack Kerouac? I leave the hotel and

walk another way, like I should know. Hot main streets and generic shops and fast food. I come to a small concrete square in between two main roads and breathe a sigh of relief.

At the Jack Kerouac Commemorative in Kerouac Park he is crouching behind the stone. Great granite slabs reach no further than my head – bearing Kerouac’s words- quotes from *On The Road*, *Mexico City Blues* and *Satori In Paris* gently engraved into their sides. The sun falls down the smooth blank edges and splashes onto Kerouac’s head, flattening his cowlick with sweat. It is a tiny park, no wider than a median strip and it is empty here, cold. Jack is leaning against one of his dreams. It is about being back in Lowell, written when he hadn’t seen his home for a very long time and it is easy to feel the urgency and longing in the dream.

‘Well hello, Jack,’ I say loudly. He looks up and straight at me.

‘About time you stopped here, I really need a drink.’

Above his head is the edge of the dream. And everywhere else is just Lowell.

We walk back down the highway to the main streets of the town, past a Barnes and Noble where a book signing is taking place. I look in the window and see the enthusiastic audience lining up at the end of a reading and I think about my own reading that night and the rash starts to feel hot and prickly again. We swing into the first pub we come across, Irish and dirty, and after a drink crawl to the next one along, just for the hell of it.

I soon realise the bars in Lowell are hollow and tired and are just the kind of places that Jack usually likes to be lost in. To sit in a corner and torment a poor barman, to find an old drunk to toss coins with, to sleep happily in the back of a bathroom always around six o'clock. We take up position in a corner booth and take long gulps of Sam Adams so that each beer is downed in less than a minute. We follow the beer with whisky and water. We follow that with another three beers each. Now I am calmer. Now I can focus. 'Tell me what you're here for,' says Jack sending fragments of peanuts flying into my face. I shouldn't say anything, but I am tipsy and reckless.

'It's like San Francisco,' I say 'It's something about honouring you and your work. And I wanted to see where you grew up, where you used to live, where you are ...' I won't say buried. 'And I brought my friend Dan. You'd like him, he's a good guy. He's a lot like you.'

As I say it, I realise it's true. Am I surrounding myself with Kerouacs? I have a sudden vision of wandering through my head à la *Being John Malkovich* and seeing a Kerouac head attached to every body.

'Is he lost?'

'Always.'

Over the table Jack's hands reach out to me, the black edges of his nails tapping on the table top, a tiny finger tap dance to lure me closer. 'At least I'm on sure ground here.'



'... I cannot write my native language and have no native home anymore, and am amazed by that horrible homelessness all French – Canadians abroad in America have.' – Jack Kerouac<sup>42</sup>

Jack Kerouac was born with a mouthful of a name, Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac, at 9 Lupine Road, Lowell. His parents, Leo-Alcide Kerouac and Gabrielle-Ange Lévesque, were originally from the Canadian province of Québec and had immigrated to New England to find employment. The family spoke French at home and Jack didn't learn English until he went to school at the age of six. As a child, Jack was known as 'Ti Pousse' (Little Thumb), then 'Ti Jean', then Jean, John, Jackie and finally just Jack. The friends that he played with on the edge of the swift Merrimack River had Greek, Irish and German surnames. They threw snowballs at the grand houses on Riverside and rode tiny bicycles too fast in the streets. When Jack left to go to Columbia in 1941 he didn't really leave any of it behind. He let his head stay in Lowell, wrapped up in a childhood just waiting to be written about. *The Town and the City*; his first great ode to Lowell initiated what was to become an obsession with his personal literary setting. And why not? For an author who so strongly advocated writing from experience and writing truth, he had a whole childhood to exploit.

Jack returned to Lowell over the next decades to visit and to live, always with the expectation that it would be exactly like it was when he was eighteen years old, because really, he was still living the life of a teenage football star. He never got a proper job or a proper wife or looked after his only child; he never had any money, real clothes or

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<sup>42</sup> Charters, Ann *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters*, New York, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 228.

much apart from a bottle and a typewriter. In 1962 he settled back in the tiny Massachusetts town, happily living with his mother on the cusp of forty years of age. But in Lowell, like everywhere from Paris to Tangier, Jack struggled to be himself and to be liked. The working-class town, which he loved so much and wanted to be loved by, had no heart for a self-proclaimed 'writer genius'. Lowell was a town built from immigrants' sweat and tears and could not fathom the popularity of the 'King of the Beats'. His efforts to dress like a mill worker in flannel and tan alienated him even more. The people of Lowell were confused as to how this sloppy drunk with a heavy paunch could be so famous for only putting words down on paper. Where was that fresh-faced football player setting off for Columbia? Jack was ridiculed when he passed out in the bars or stood on tables and shouted out nonsense poems. He embarrassed the bartenders when they had to call his friends or future in-laws to come and take him home. When interviewed on a local radio show one September, Jack showed up drunk and spent most of the time giggling, slurring and eventually crying. When asked the question 'what do you see in Lowell that has given you sources for your famous books?'

Kerouac growled 'It's a vast collection of Christians.'

And then proceeded to explain he was a Jesuit.

The Hilton is being overrun with Massachusetts families participating in an under-twelve soccer convention. The restaurant resembles something close to my version of hell. To get me ready for my speech Dan orders me a steak and crab cakes and nothing in the way of vegetables.

'I don't believe in green food,' he grunts, 'I get all my vitamins from alcohol.'

I blink a few times just to make sure it is Dan sitting across from me in the Hilton restaurant and not you know who. He also orders two bottles of red wine and pours me glass after glass, ignoring my protests. I am incapable of arguing with him anyway, my life-force is being sucked out by the Hilton air-conditioning. We have half an hour to eat and to drink the wine and I start to worry that I'll be too drunk by the time I get to the University and have visions of swaying at the podium and slurring my carefully composed twelve pages. Dan is here as my support team and although I am pleased he has finally heaved himself out of that bed, I am dubious of his support. While I shove the red meat into my mouth in the final five minutes before our ride gets here, Dan looks around the room and speculates just who else might be going to the conference with us.

'Look at that four-eyed weirdo, he's definitely in the bunch,' he mutters.

I force him to lower his pointing hand. When we are loaded into the car for the seven minute trip the four-eyed weirdo declares, 'I'll sit up front because I get car sick.' I suddenly realise he is the key-note speaker for the entire event.

At the University of Massachusetts library we mill in a small area behind some stairs with orange juice and cookies. Dan frantically stuffs cake into his pockets for the bus trip to Toronto the next day. I spy posters on the walls with my name in bold print transposed over a close up of a black and white Kerouac. I've never been more nervous and I cannot figure out why. Is it because I'm about to be assessed in a roomful of experts and academics and Neal Cassady's relatives? Or is it the way Dan comes up behind me to whisper evilly 'If you fuck it up you can pay my bus fare.'? I look at the other people eating their cake

and most of them are twenty years older than me, although there is a group of students present for the extra credit in a Lit. class. The rash is happily spreading its way across my chest and shoulders and I have a sudden fear that it is a belated Mexican sickness, a hot-dog allergy lingering from New York, a sign from God that it is a bad idea to speak about the dead when they are almost certainly loitering nearby.

Five minutes until I'm on and I have to pee my share of the two bottles of wine. I race down an empty hall past banks of computers and abandoned coffee carts. A guy loitering outside an empty classroom shouts at me, 'Hey! There you are.' He is in a brown wool cardigan and scuffed up jeans, a backpack sits at his feet. I race on, desperate to pee and ignore him. 'Hey!' he shouts again and waves a bottle of something and I think damn you fucking Jack, now is not the bloody time. 'Hey!' his bare feet slap down the library hallway; I hear them and realise it's my brother, Simon. He has wandered all the way over from Europe to hear my ridiculous speech. The relief is so absolute that I almost pee right there. And by the time I stand on the podium, the redness is fading and I break out into giggles when I look into an audience of ageing academics, my brother's beaming smile, Dan's impatient scowl and not a protesting Kerouac in sight.

After the reading we are driven to Café Paradiso by Jeannie, a professor from UML who is by far the nicest thing about Lowell. She tells me that her father used to work with Kerouac's father in the printing press he once owned and she is pretty sure her neighbour is Jack's illegitimate daughter. I hope that everyone in Lowell has a Kerouac story for me. She bundles us up in her car, takes us directly to the bar and hands me a twenty-dollar bill to 'buy some fun'. Even

Dan is buoyed by her goodwill and generosity; as we step out of the car he says solemnly, 'I could be related to her you know, I have that feeling about some people.'

The bar is old-school and Italian with flashing lights and awful peach coloured glasses lining the walls. It is open mic night and a small group has pulled their chairs into a semi-circle to listen to a man hit a tambourine against his leg while a nervous girl reads her poem standing behind him. This is just one event listed in the program for Lowell Celebrates Kerouac! There are also Kerouac walking tours, jazz performances, film screenings and a high-school poetry competition. The crowd at this event is a mixture of local people in Lowell Celebrates Kerouac! t-shirts and young kids who have driven cross country to sit on their hero's grave. One teenage boy even gets up to recite a quick poem called *Sitting on Kerouac's Grave* in a lazy Californian drawl.

It has been years since Dan, Simon and I were even in the same room and we order martinis to celebrate, ignoring the poetry for a series of loud, rambling toasts. The last time we were all together was at a party in Sydney where I vomited on the balcony and Dan directed a three-way in Simon's dark red bedroom. When I mention this it releases a flood of reminiscing about the solidarity and socialism of the seven bedroom house we used to share. There was a giant yellow duck in the backyard, the walls were covered in chalk drawings and the stairs were lined with underwear trophies from a season of illustrious one-night stands. I am filled with nostalgia for those days and the invincibility of the twenty-something phase. We may not have been the foremost creative influence on our generation, but like the Beats

we drank and screwed each other and wrote long painful e-mails after too much pot, and if someone picked up a guitar it was to strum along with made-up lyrics and a knife and glass drum kit. Now, Simon works as a doctor in Europe, Dan mows lawns in the winter and cleans pools in the summer and I have The Boy waiting at home for me to finish this Cut-ups journey.

With the burden of my speech finally over and 25 ml of pure vodka surging through my veins I feel energetic, I am excited. I do not care that Lowell is not living up to my expectations and when I see an ageing hippie take to the stage with a harmonica and a picture of Jack plastered across his chest, I feel a rush of pure Kerouacian naughtiness. I do not want to be quiet, I want to heckle these poets, and I want to throw olives at them. I want to be the silly, wild Jack on a return visit to Lowell; embarrassing and bad and foreign. I down another martini and take up Dan's as well and for once his face has broken into a beaming grin and he doesn't mind. Organisers from the festival approach the table and we are offered 'Lowell Celebrates Kerouac!' t-shirts for \$25 each or membership to the LCK! Society for another twenty bucks. At some point I knock my glass off the table and it smashes in the middle of the hippie's haiku. He stops reading. The entire audience shifts in their seats and turns to glare at me. The waitresses stop serving and glare as well.

Dan yells, 'Fuck yeah buddy!'

I think, If they were real Beatniks they would fit glass-smashing into their act.

I bump into an old lady as I stumble to the bathroom. I say sorry and she, delightfully plump with beautiful grey curls, notices my accent

and asks me what I'm doing here. I tell her that I am here to read at a conference, she asks me what I write about, I say Jack Kerouac and she puts her soft old hand on my arm and gives it a gentle squeeze. 'Oh he was a lovely man, my brother-in-law.'

I take Mary Sampas' hand in my own and try to see her sister in the kind old face with its welling eyes and sad little smile. I look past her head and see that it's raining outside and the windows are fogging up, all misty and grey. Then a furry glove – a paw – rubs a path in the glass in one big sweeping motion and I see Jack's puffy red face peering through window. I smile at Jack and nod to his wife's sister and he rolls his eyes and sticks out his tongue. Then the poets in the corner catch his attention and he blows a big raspberry on the window.

*'But you must be my lucky leadingstar.'* – Jack Kerouac in a letter to Stella Sampas<sup>43</sup>

As his travel mate and sometimes partner in crime, I have a surge of sympathy for all of Jack's wives, and now that I'm in Lowell, Stella Kerouac especially. Wife number three lies eternally next to him in the cemetery on the other side of town. Stella Sampas was the sister of his best friend Sebastian growing up and the girl who Jack liked to claim over the years was sitting and waiting for him back home. He married her just after his mother suffered a stroke that paralyzed half of her face and, unable to look after her properly, he melted into her doorway saying, 'I came here to marry you, Stella.'

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<sup>43</sup> Charters, Ann *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters*, New York, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 390.

They were married on November 18, 1966 by a Justice of the Peace, with Jack proudly claiming at the wedding that forty-eight-year-old Stella had saved his virginity for him. They settled in Lowell initially and despite Kerouac's great hopes to live in the house on Beaulieu Avenue where his brother had died, they bought a house on Sanders Avenue. When I see Jack lick the window with his grey-yellow tongue, I have a clear picture of what life as Mrs Kerouac in Lowell was like. I sense the desperation of Stella hiding his shoes and clothes to prevent him from leaving the house to go drinking and instead, watching him wander off to the bar in pyjamas and slippers to sit in the corner like a bum. Being unable to convince him to bathe or shave for weeks on end. Knowing that he was drinking in her brother's bar with hookers until he passed out, only waking up to shout familiar insults to the other clientele. It was pure Kerouac; it was the act that he pulled in every city, but somehow sadder because this is the place he claimed he loved the most. They eventually moved to St Petersburg, Florida in 1968 when the cold Massachusetts weather began to affect his invalid mother.

Jack doesn't come into Café Paradiso and when we leave to walk back to the hotel he isn't waiting outside like I expected. We sit in the stuffy room and Simon pulls out treats from his backpack. He has brought one moderately priced bottle of Chianti and three terrible and cheap bottles of Cabernet that bear tiny purple elves holding little apples on their sad beige labels. His logic is that we will be drunk enough after the first bottle to not notice the taste of the other three. Mid-way through bottle number two, my brother asks me how it is to be a writer and why is that all writers are as he puts it, 'Fucked up on drugs and booze and homeless.' I have no explanation for this, only a thin



stream of indignity that runs down my throat as I nod and tell him that you need to feel this way to create something amazing. I finish the bottle all by myself and think, Do I need to drink so much? Do we need to feel cold? Do we need to feel poor? Do we need to feel crazy enough to become Rimbaud, to bow to the addict habits of Burroughs, to crawl after Corso, to sit outside Ginsberg's apartment? And I want Jack to be in the room with us, to steady my spinning head with his big hands and explain his Rules for Spontaneous Prose to Simon.

It may not be The Beat Hotel or the San Francisco Renaissance, but we are communal and we are drunk and we are old friends. We are crowded on hotel blankets and cushions spread out like a fluffy picnic on the floor. And we lie about, red wine at fingertips and wonder what will happen to us. My body feels old suddenly. As old as the last Beatniks; calling out their undangerous poems in the middle of San Francisco festivals. And I fall asleep, listening to Dan tell another sad story about his ex-girlfriend and wondering if I should have coughed up the \$25 for one of those t-shirts.

*'Kerouac opened a million coffee bars and sold a million pairs of Levis to both sexes. Woodstock rises from his pages.'* – William Burroughs.<sup>44</sup>

To mention the LCK!, to talk about Lowell, to even think about writing a book on Kerouac is impossible without referring to Kerouac's illustrious in-laws, the Sampas family. Similarly it is impossible to not think of Gerald Nicosia, Jan Kerouac and Johnny Depp when mentioning Stella's brother John Sampas. I say Johnny Depp, because

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<sup>44</sup> Burroughs, William *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*, New York, Arcade Publishing, (1985) 1993.

he is currently in possession of Kerouac's raincoat, a nice piece of vintage apparel that I hope he gets his US\$15,000s' worth of wear out of.

When Jack died in 1969, he was strangely outlived by his elderly and sick mother Gabrielle. When she passed away in 1972, Stella Sampas inherited the entire estate, which at the time amounted to not much more than a few dollars and the notebooks that Jack filled with the drafts and notes for his novels. Upon Stella's death in 1990, her brothers inherited everything at a point when Beat was experiencing an expensive revival and Kerouac was posthumously making a fortune. At the moment, the Kerouac estate is controlled by Stella's youngest brother John who has the final say in any Kerouac biography, tribute, quote or conference.

In 1990 at a memorial for her father, Jan Kerouac suddenly realised that she might be entitled to a share of the royalties from Kerouac's books. While she eventually did gain a small portion of these royalties, she continued to fight for the right to her father's estate, claiming that Gabrielle Kerouac's will was an obvious forgery. She was also extremely upset about John Sampas' penchant for selling off her father's possessions and archives including his notebooks and that lovely celebrity-bound raincoat. Jan Kerouac died in 1996 before the case could go to court. She appointed Kerouac biographer Gerald Nicosia as her literary executor and urged him to continue her fight.

The story of Gerald Nicosia and Jan Kerouac versus the Sampas family is twisted and tiring. The internet is full of backwards and forwards accusations. Nicosia is banned from attending any Kerouac

conferences and claims that John Sampas has bodyguards that would prevent him from even entering Lowell. When I contacted Nicosia once for an opinion on what I referred to as 'the battle' between him and John Sampas, he bluntly cut me down by writing back:

*'P.S. I do not have a "battle with John Sampas." I supported Jan Kerouac's right to retrieve her father's estate, and now I support Paul Blake, Jr., Kerouac's nephew, who as far as I know is still carrying on the legal case to have Gabrielle Kerouac's will thrown out. However, John Sampas has sought to blacklist and destroy my literary career, and I have had to fight against that, if you want to call that a "battle."'*

For now, the 'battle' for Kerouac's estate is being fought by Kerouac's nephew Paul Blake Jr., the son of his sister Carolyn. Blake, a recovering alcoholic who lives in a broken-down truck on the edge of a wrecker's yard in Northern California, is the last surviving member of the Kerouac bloodline. His main argument is that the day before Kerouac died, he sent his nephew a letter claiming he was about to divorce Stella and wanted to leave his entire estate to him. If Paul Blake is successful, then he stands to inherit millions of dollars, mainly from the merchandising industry that the Sampas family has so successfully in place.

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Dan leaves early in the morning, quickly stopping over my bed to hug me and rub his hungover face on my cheek. When he is gone and it is just me and Simon in the room I strangely miss the depressive air that his company brings and the somehow comforting grumbling and

complaining that he takes with him everywhere. The hotel is quiet and cold without him.

A car is sent to take me and the four-eyed weirdo to the lectures at the University of Massachusetts. Simon hops in with us and I gently push him into the back seat before anyone complains. The route is familiar from the night before and I watch from my back seat window as we pass blocks of concrete and cross the roaring highway that scared me so much yesterday. There is a point in the drive from the hotel to the University when the streets suddenly hold trees and the houses fresh paint. As we drive in through the gates we are greeted with the stereotypical American College dream, teenagers in jeans tossing their hair, clasping thick tomes, lounging on a lush lawn. I thought I had carefully packed for this week, but each day I toss through an enormous pile of clothes that all seem to be dark straight jeans or sequin-embazoned dresses. Amongst the seriousness of academia I feel like I've entered the wrong cocktail party.

A Beat Conference produces a curious mix of people. Surprisingly they are curious because they are so straight. There is none of the glorious colour, craziness, black hats and women in purple that I found in San Francisco. There are no retro t-shirts like Kilometer Zero sells on its Paris-based website. I realise that this is a conference not for Beat appreciators and participators but one for Beat Academia. The other speakers are in dark suit and ties. The women are all sensibly middle aged and come from Nebraska, Wisconsin and Alberta. Disappointingly there is no wine served in the lunch breaks and there are no joints sneakily passed around before we take to the podium. I do not have to worry about Jack gate-crashing.

I am the youngest but not the only one without a North American drawl. There is a young Greek – Australian guy called George who has a lazy eye and a limp. I try to make friends with him and with the naivety of a backpacker I assume we can be because of our antiPodean accents, but George is here with a stack of folders and pens in his pocket. He takes the business of Kerouac very seriously and he is intent on getting as much as possible out of this conference and that doesn't include making small talk with a Sydney girl. He scribbles furiously during each lecture while I'm lost in the cultural-studies speak and sink lower and lower into my chair to look at my nails or sneakily text message The Boy to complain that I don't understand anything. During the quick breaks between lectures, George brings out a laptop and steadily types out his hand written notes, while I try to peek over his shoulder. I wish I could have a copy of them, and then maybe some of the lectures would actually make sense. I sit through hours of stone-faced sermons about mental health, the Cold War and the death of Hollywood in relation to Kerouac's work.

Throughout each speech I see the bald head of John Sampas in the back row of the lecture theatre, peering out from dark framed glasses, absorbing every word that's said. At various points in the day he is thanked and acknowledged by the conference organizers or speakers. I think about Gerald Nicosia who showed up in the midst of the 1999 LCK! Conference, despite being warned to stay away and repeatedly questioned each lecturer as to why Kerouac's archives were not being made available to the public like Sampas had promised. Nicosia ranted about the Kerouac biographers and scholars, saying they no longer

had a voice and were slaves to the approval of John Sampas, until he was forcibly removed from the building by University staff.

There are two parts to the conference – academic lectures and writers reading their own work inspired by Kerouac and The Beat Generation. I am in the latter group and my reading on the first day was greeted with smiles and concerned frowns directed at the rash. While I do not hold a Doctorate in the Literature and Poetry of Kerouac like most of the attendees, I feel that I am adequately informed. The academics don't see it this way and make a strong point of distancing themselves from the few writers that are present. Before each lecture they huddle together on one side of the room and save seats for each other in a horrifically high-school way. At lunch they sit at their own table and when I try to join them and introduce myself I am greeted with the hostility of teenage girls – turned backs and whispers. I sit down anyway and listen to them argue in witty politico-literary jargon, quoting huge chunks of their own theses to prove a point. The conversation turns to the Kerouac archives in New York and I eagerly tell the group that I'd just visited them last week.

George looks sceptical. 'I do not see how it is fair that these things, these diaries and notebooks are being made available to the public.'

Someone else pipes up, 'I mean seriously how could they even begin to understand those documents?'

Now everyone starts yelling in excitement.

'Who do they think they are?'

'Not just *anyone* should be allowed access to these resources.'

'What context do they possibly have to place them in?'

'Some of the people who have access to that stuff don't even have a PhD!'

When George passes his notes around for them to criticise and doesn't hand me a red pen, I realise I should be at the other table with all the quiet men in slacks and waistcoats and the four-eyed weirdo – they are the nervous writers. That's where I'm supposed to be.

These academics may be feisty, young and arrogant, but they have one defining feature – almost all of them are disabled in some way or another. It is Simon who points it out to me when I sulkily walk outside and join him. He has been napping in a very Jack-like way under big oak tree by the library with his battered shoes tucked under his head so no one can take them. 'How the hell did they all hook up here?' he asks in amazement and proceeds to list their varying disabilities. George has a hunchback slump. Another guy, a smart cocky fellow who punches out arguments over the lunch table, only has half an arm – it ends at the elbow and sprouts little wriggly fingers which he gestures with. There are at least two other people with a kind of palsy and they have half-frozen and twitchy faces. This makes me feel better about my rash. Simon goes into the library looking for a free lunch and I decide to go for a walk before the next lecture.

I stroll through the beautiful campus and my feet crunch over the orange fall leaves. Somewhere near the psychology building I think I see Simon napping under a tree again, but when I get closer I realise it is Jack this time. His eyes are shut and his mouth is smiling lazily and I stand over him and realise he is pretending to be asleep. I cannot help but stare at his beauty, he is shiny-haired and clean-cut today, with the unlined face of a teenager. He reaches up while I stand there staring and pulls me to the ground in a great tickly hug. I'm screaming, like a delighted child and we roll into a huge pile of orange

leaves that have gathered at the base of the tree. I hear his breath hitting my face and maybe he calls me Mary, but it doesn't seem to matter. 'Whaddya wanna do?' he is breathing all over me, I am shivering. I can't bear to go to another lecture.

'I want a big American hamburger,' I say.

We just leave the campus and although I feel bad for leaving my brother behind, it feels as good as skipping school. And it seems we float downtown and find an old-school-looking Diner and I say, 'Yes! This is where my great American Hamburger must live.' I settle into a squeaking booth and look over the laminated menu.

'This feels like a date.'

Is this where he took his high-school girlfriends Mary Carney or Peggy Coffey after school? He was such a gentleman that they had to kiss him first. He gazes up at me boyishly and shy, like the eighteen-year-old football player almost headed for Columbia. He has the smoothest complexion I've ever seen on him and his eyes are brighter than ever. More than anything he smells brilliant. I want to reach across the table and fold myself into his chest, pull his shirt collar upwards and just breathe in his scent. I sit there and stare dumbly and feel a bubble in my chest. Oh, this is the great Beat hero, I realise. This is who I loved in the opening paragraphs of *The Town and the City*, who I followed to Lowell to find the last bit of his life's puzzle.

'You're all starry today,' he tells me.

I am. I am giddy. Lowell out the window of the diner is sunny and brilliant. I can see families strolling and young women giggling together at a bus stop. I have the old Lowell for a second.

'I think I get Lowell,' I tell him.



He sips his coffee gently and pushes the cup towards me, 'Do you need a drink?'

And when I taste it there is no whiskey burn.

And then I remember that who I am with is the innocent small town Jack, pre-Columbia, pre-Times Square wanderings, pre-Bexedrine, pre-Mexican whores, pre-Ginsberg, pre-bloated alcoholic legacy. This Jack is in love with Mary Carney, an older neighbourhood girl who is immortalized in the book *Maggie Cassidy* as the first great love who all women will be compared to. This Jack spends hours in her living room trying desperately for her to give something more than a kiss. Her inconsistencies, their love-hate relationship all drive him crazy. This teenage Jack is torn between marrying the love of his life and following his dream of being a writer. I say her name and his face goes soft. 'Adult love torn in barely grownup ribs,' he says.

And I do see a tear roll across one downy cheek.

Jack had the choice of going to college in either Boston or New York. He eventually chose Columbia to make his mother happy, but his father, whose business printed materials for the University of Boston, lost his job because of the decision. He took his guilt along with those brains and long legs to Horace Mann and Columbia to make Lowell proud of him. I think about the academics' conversation at lunch and I swallow a bite of the delicious hamburger and ask Jack what he thinks about education. His face changes and suddenly we have travelled in a diner-time vortex, he is grizzled and unshaven, his eyes heavy dark reflected in the black coffee. I already know his answer and can almost say the line from *The Dharma Bums* along with him.

He says, 'Colleges being nothing but grooming schools for the middleclass non-identity which usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time.'

I leave him and go back to the hotel hoping Simon is there. I walk along the main drag of Moody Street, where the cafés sit empty and the storefronts are dull. As it gets darker, I check for Jack's childhood ghost, the night-time caped crusader Dr Sax in the corner of my eye. I wonder if Lowell really is the home of werewolves and vampires looking to snatch up stray children when no one is looking.

At the Hilton on the way up to my room a girl in the lift – a four-foot academic who I recognize from the lectures smiles at me and I am so happy to be recognised.

'You here for the conference?' she asks. She is tiny like a doll, kind of cute and I thank God that somebody is actually talking to me.

'Yes,' I say, beaming.

'Why?' she asks.

'Because I'm speaking ... well actually I already spoke.'

She looks at me sharply, 'When? When did you speak?'

'Last night, I read some stuff at the library.'

Her face relaxes and I think, She does remember me, now she'll comment on my piece, now I can sit at their table, now I can get George's notes.

'Ohhhh, you're a writer. We didn't go to any of those readings. We went to a bar instead. The whole day was too exhausting to hang around for something like that.'

And I get out of the lift and even though she is technically a midget I feel so, so small.

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Still, I go back the next day and Simon sits with me in a back corner drawing childish pictures of the academics. The lectures drag on and I stop paying attention until a stunningly dressed man takes to the stage. He has long grey hair and wears jeans and an open jacket that shows his neck littered with dozens of necklaces made from badges, shells, bones and beads. I realise it is Jack's jazz musician friend David Amram. He is here to present the 1959 film *Pull My Daisy*, a half hour black and white film written and narrated by Kerouac. It is an improvised mess that truly captures the spirit of the poem by the same name.

Simon thinks the film is shit, 'It's as if these guys were just mucking around and now it's being seen through a new filter and taken so seriously. I don't think it was meant to be raised to such a high level.' David Amram gives a brief talk after the screening and starts all his sentences with, 'Well Jack was to me ... well Allen said to me ...' Simon asks me if he does anything else except travel around talking about these guys he used to know. I swallow and think carefully.

'He wrote a book about it,' I say helpfully.

I am determined to idolise David Amram anyway, he is practically the last Beatnik left; he deserves to be worshipped in lecture theatres and wear strange jewellery and have young people stutter nervously when they ask him questions.

The spawn of one of the greatest literary heroes of all time is also in the audience. John Cassady, son of Neal, is tubby-ish, with a white fluffy beard and a tie-dyed shirt. I like him because of who he's related to and because he is still confident enough to wear tie dye. John travels around in a silver campervan delivering Beat-related lectures at schools and universities all over America. I don't fully understand why he is at the conference but he has a table set up outside the theatre with t-shirts and posters of himself and CDs of his singing for people to buy. I spend a lot of lecturing time simply looking for traces of Neal in his wide hairy face and the crinkling eyes when he smiles.

There is also a girl from Colorado who is wearing a business jacket with just a bra underneath and a baseball cap. I stare at her a lot too; intrigued by her outfit and the way she keeps swooping off the cap and bunching her hair up underneath it. She does this almost every two minutes and each time takes the opportunity to shake her long red hair out so it brushes the knees of the people behind her. She gives a lecture on, bizarrely, the commercialisation of Kerouac. She frequently stops her speech to call out to Dave and John, with a 'Hey there!' and a wink. When she makes a point, usually about the media and advertising using the King of the Beats as their unwitting spokesperson to sell the image of 'cool' to the world, she either shouts out 'That's right Cassady!' or moves forward to high-five Amram. I am intrigued by this pre-existing camaraderie and yes, slightly jealous. From the corner of my eye I spy a frowning John Sampas making notes in a thick notebook.

The final lecture is over and everyone is talking about going out on the town. An actor from *The Sopranos* is singing in a jazz performance

with David Amram. Amram rushes around telling people to come, thoughtfully saying, 'Jack would want you to be there.'

Outside the lecture theatre everyone makes the most of the last chance to purchase posters, John Cassady CDs, non-Beat poetry by people who happened to be born in Lowell, hats, bumper stickers and key chains. There is a mad scramble for the last of the 'Stop Bitching Start A Revolution' t-shirts. We are all assured that most of the items can also be ordered from the Kerouac.com website. I decide I cannot take any more of this cannibalism and when Simon says he wants to meet the *Sopranos* actor I leave him with David Amram and go back to the hotel.

*'Have you ever remembered, in the darkness of a midnight in some strange room, whole spates of crystal-clear time from your childhood?'*  
- Jack Kerouac<sup>45</sup>

When I enter the room it smells like pine cones and I know he's been here and he's been sleeping in my bed. I press my hands against the still indented pillow, tell myself that I have nothing to worry about. Jack has been good in Lowell, I tell myself, he's tried so hard to be nice to his town. He's swapped some of his clothes with Simon's and left hair clippings all over the bathroom sink.

I pick up his jacket; it is heavy and stiff like new and I drape it over my shoulders and huddle under its cozy warmth. I feel a package in the inside pocket and pull out a bunch of letters without their

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<sup>45</sup> Charters, Ann *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters*, New York, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 322.

envelopes. They are all for Stella – not me, the other one. It is the correspondence of the decades before they got married and I pull one out to see him write about coming home to 'O dark Lowell. O my Lowell'. There is another letter in the bunch written on different, newer paper. Its scrawl is dark and shaky like the notebooks in the New York Library and it begins with 'Dear sweet Stella whom I hardly know and yet do not know so very damn well.' And it tells me where to meet him.

So I fly through Lowell this afternoon. It is a day like any in 1939. As I run, I kick the fall leaves outside the old Bartlett Junior high and I following the railroad tracks and I clutch that jacket around me and head straight for Jack Kerouac.

I find him outside a bar and for once Jack doesn't lead me straight in. He stands leaning against the pale brick wall like the black and white photo on the cover of *On the Road*. He is nothing more than a grey and peaceful shadow, blending into the wall and I have the feeling that he is fading. The edges of him are fuzzy, there is something less solid about his face, his mouth looks as if it's sliding off and his eyes are no longer strong, blue, clear. For the first time I think about the rest of him lying in the ground only a few miles from here.

We are outside the old site of the Sportsmen's Athletics Club, formerly the Hi-Ball. It is the bar where Jack liked to be locked in after hours and sleep away on the couch by the door. In 1962 he began a ten day drinking binge here to recover from a bad review of *Big Sur*.

'Are we going in?' I ask gesturing at the door and I shiver suddenly. There is a coldness in Lowell; a misty rain has followed me across

town. He shakes his head and looks at his hands and when he does I see that they are shaking too.

We walk slowly away from the painted signs and flashing windows of downtown Lowell and cross the scary highway where I walked with Dan earlier this week. Past KFC and Subway and left by the drugstore. He takes me through narrow alleys behind clapboard houses where rubbish is left to sit outside all week and old mattresses grow mouldy in the cold. Dogs and children run in the street, black people sit on the grass. It is this area; in between the downtown Hilton and the shiny UML campus that makes me feel uneasy. Jack is whistling and it makes everything sad and somehow sepia toned. We plod down the sidewalk of a narrow road past the clumped together houses and the shifting curtains. Every step is noisy in my clacking sandals. I look for something to link us to this street, but this is not where Jack grew up and it is not where he has ever lived. 9 Lupine Road is heritage-listed by LCK! There is no way to miss it.

Finally at the end of the street we come to a grey cement building with the windows all knocked out and bushes growing up the sides. We walk right up to it and press on through the tangle of leaves and branches.

'What is this?'

I grab Jack's arm, I don't want to go any further, it's a junkie's den I think and if it has some meaning for my imaginary friend then I don't care. I'm not scoring for him.

'A church,' says Jack and he pronounces it in the awed and definite whisper of a good Catholic.

'No Jack, it isn't,' I say. I keep hold of his arm, I am feeling that if we go in this building we are not coming out. 'Maybe there used to be one here but it isn't anymore.'

'Can't you see the cross?' he asks me and tilts his head upwards towards the empty dark windows that look down on us unblinking and hollow.

'There's nothing here Jack, let's go, this is like an old factory or something. It's definitely not a church though, did there used to be one here?' He pulls his arm away from me and starts through the tangle of trees. 'Jack! Jesus I'm not going in there.'

And he turns and I see tears running down his cheeks and his mouth is open to an angry ugly hole. 'Blasphemous whore!' he spits. It is scarier because I know he isn't drunk.

I grab his arm again and he bites me. He sinks his soft 1967 teeth into the hard muscle below my elbow and actually chews on it a few times. I pull back, shocked, 'You just bit me!' I scream at him, 'I can't believe you fucking bit me!'

And down on his knees is Jack Kerouac begging me angrily to go inside with him. His hands grip the front of my jeans while I hold my hurt arm up in a weak Nazi salute. His knuckles are as pale as his face, his hair is sticking up and his pupils are huge.

'If you go inside with me,' he begs, 'I'll never ask you to do anything again.'

I think about being stoned in San Francisco, I think about the bathroom in New York and I think about the Eiffel Tower in Paris. I'm not afraid of Jack Kerouac, I whisper to myself and lower my hand to rest on his electric hair like giving an awful blessing.



Inside the building we make shuffling tracks through the dust, moving towards the far windows clutching each other. Jack's weight on my shoulder is as familiar as his jerky breathing but without the sour alcohol smell I have grown used to. There are empty packing crates piled up against the far wall and we walk straight towards them, Jack's head down and I see he is clutching a crucifix suddenly. He starts whispering, 'Gerard est mort. Gerard est mort.'

It is suddenly so obvious. We are here because of Gerard; the boy who died when he was nine years old of rheumatic fever. He was the weak child who was always in bed, always in pain, always so patient. I have read of course, *Visions of Gerard* – the small novel entirely devoted to the memory of his brother and the earliest visions of his childhood, but it has not prepared me for this. After Gerard died the nuns of Lowell petitioned for him to be proclaimed a saint, based on the wisdom he spoke from his deathbed.

Jack is kneeling and wriggling forward on his knees towards the altar of crates. He takes two candles out of his pocket and passes one to me. I have nothing to light it with and as I open my mouth to ask him for matches a cold breeze flows through the building and I see that the candle has lit itself.

I whisper, 'Don't let anything bad happen.' There is a horrible taste in my mouth. There is a horrible noise coming out of Kerouac's mouth; a low moaning combined with howling.

Suddenly I see a child perching on the edge of the crate swinging his little legs, close to Jack's head. Jack looks up and I see a look of

absolute desolation pass over his face like nothing before. He brings his fingers to his lips and makes the sign of the cross.

'How you see me, I see my brother,' he whispers.

I think he is a spooky kid.

'He is a saint,' he tells me.

I cannot look at his face so I concentrate on the pale swinging legs, Gerard says nothing and Jack pulls me to the ground.

So we kneel in the hot church, waiting for the candles to burn down; I'm not allowed to rise until they are hollow and dead. As soon as this happens I make him turn away so we are facing the door. I tug his arm to prompt him to move forward.

'I always thought he would come back, like Christ resurrected,' he says.

'What does he do to you?' I ask.

'He lets me feel guilty,' says Jack.

When we walk out I think of Jack's other ghost, Neal Cassady. After Neal was found face down and frozen on some Mexican railroad tracks in 1968, Jack never really accepted he was dead. For the remaining year of his life he pretended that Neal was still alive, still running around the country like it was 1947. From his television-watching chair in the house he shared with his mother and Stella, Jack made middle-of-the-night phone calls to his friends, insisting they tell him where Neal was. He watched TV, he used the phone and he drank, until one day in October 1969, he haemorrhaged internally on the toilet and died.

*'I went with him for no reason.'* – Jack Kerouac on Neal Cassady<sup>46</sup>

We walk for a long time. It soon gets dark in Lowell and I hold Jack Kerouac's hand, feeling his rough paw fold its way around mine. We say nothing and we just walk following the rush of the Concord River south and then turning in west just before Highway 495. We are tired but we still say nothing. We come to a gate and then we walk through the gate. We walk down a path and it feels like I have done it before, so many times before. We walk to the edge of a grave and just flop down on the ground.

Jan Kerouac's ashes are sprinkled beneath us. Before her death, she tried to have Jack's body moved to The St Louis de Gonzague Cemetery in Nashua, New Hampshire where his parents and brother are buried, but the Sampas family wouldn't allow it. I rest beside the marker that he shares with Stella. It says, 'He Honored Life'.

There is finally a moon in Lowell tonight and it is glowing down on me and illuminates the shining head of Jack as he hovers over his own grave. He studies the tombstone carefully and I see long rows of tears running down his face. I start to cry as well and put my arms out to him and I know that this time it is goodbye forever.

'I really love you, but this isn't working.' It is the worst goodbye in the world, something from an awful chicklit book.

He looks stunned and helpless as he slowly starts to sink into the earth. I watch his tired old face and through Jack's eyes in those last

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<sup>46</sup> Charters, Ann *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters*, New York, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 290.

few seconds I know I am that angel at the edge of his grave that he wanted to watch over him eternally. I have a still beauty, I have long long legs, I have pursed lips to be kissed. I have his energy in my breath. I am breathing for him. I am beautiful, I am Gabrielle Kerouac, I am Edie Parker, I am Stella Sampas, I am Mary Carney, I am all the other girls. I am Stella. I am one girl with a journal. I am impossible. His last words before he fades forever come quick and soft as he stares straight at me with a grin plastered across his handsome face. 'Pretty girls make graves.'

And he's really gone.

## Epilogue

At the edge of the world, which is actually Australia, which is actually a galvanised shed; the tin wall slowly glows with a shadow that looks like Kerouac. But when I get up to look closer I realise it is only a tree hovering against the side of the shed. I sit back down and flick through the notes and journals and photos from a year of wandering. I see myself carefully posed in front of earthy Moroccan streets, at grand Paris monuments and with a sickly Manhattan hot dog.

The pictures taken in Lowell are mostly out of focus as if the lens has been rubbed with Vaseline. This does not lend a porn-star element to the photographs, but makes them seem sad and the time in Lowell seem like it happened to someone else. In one photo, I am crowded onto the steps in the lecture theatre with all the other conference speakers – I sit in the front row with my legs together, safely on the other side of the crowd from the group that scared me. I am not looking at the camera at all, I am turning to look at David Amram and I am flushed and laughing. He is facing me and has one hand raised in the air and there is a beautiful similarity between the sequins on my shirt and the beads and bones of the necklaces around his neck. He was saying 'I love your shoes! Kerouac would have loved them!'

There is a pale yellow glow in the right hand corner of the photograph. It could be the shitty development, but when I sit in the faded light and examine it and I see the books piled up around me and the maps folded wrongly at my feet and the way my journals are in blue spiral notebooks with the date scrawled on the cover. And I hear the fire in

the background, The Boy snoring along with the Jazz music on the radio and I think here is all the evidence I have that any of this happened. My witness was an empty international sky.

There was a man who wrote and wrote.

And now I read and read.

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