

mysterious, delicate thing which might vanish like a snowflake if you tried to catch it. It wasn't solid like comfort, which you could sit on or wear or chew or grow used to or do without. It was like a delicate flower that unexpectedly blooms on a plant you've nurtured for its leaves: at once offshoot and seed. As with luck, you'd be foolish to pluck it: better simply to rejoice in it. It was a charm, as Luxemburg said, but only if you didn't count on it.

Still, at that moment, basking in the pride of having won one more draw from my old adversary Leo Stern, I knew that if ever a teacher could be inspired, it would be I, that day.

Those beats!

MARILYN COFFEY

Imagine me in 1959: I was 22 years old, living in Nebraska where I'd lived virtually all of my life, renting my first apartment, starting to earn my living by writing headlines for society-page stories on the Lincoln (Neb.) *Evening Journal*, nursing wounds received from discovering that I was not going to get married and live happily ever after, like my mother and Cinderella. I was a member of the so-called Silent Generation, and silent many of us were, back in the fifties, in the aftermath of Joe McCarthy and the Korean War. Speechless. A strange condition for a woman who aspired to be a writer. I had trained in journalism and creative writing at the University of Nebraska, worked as a political reporter on the school newspaper, and followed, as a discipline, Joseph Conrad's adage that a writer, above all else, must make a reader see. I practiced the fine art of observation, posting myself on the edge of events and mentally translating images into words: that, and eating and fucking, were my extra-curricular preoccupations. I was terribly distraught that I was still living in Nebraska. The state, at that time, seemed to me to be the epitome of hypocrisy and sterile living. Behind the habitual midwestern smile lurked, I believed, a judgment as harsh as that of the Bible-belt Jehovah on which it was based. Living seemed largely a question of minding your P's and Q's, something I was not particularly adept at. Something I resented.

Then chance, or fate, or serendipity dropped Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* into my hands. I read the book avidly, its words pouring directly into my veins as fast as they must have flowed out of Kerouac's fingers: nonstop

onto an unbroken roll of United Press teletype paper. I read so rapidly I didn't half understand what I was reading, but something of the life being described was comprehensible to me, foreign as it was to the young woman who'd been born and bred in the conservative Midwest. Yeow! The words shot through me like a fusillade of bullets. I was undone, a changed person. I immediately went out, bought myself a straw-covered bottle of Chianti, a candle, and a pad of paper. Then I went home and, slightly inebriated, began to write by candlelight, scribbling words onto paper as fast as my hand could compose, following instinctively Kerouac's model of Spontaneous Prose. My classes at the University were forgotten. The novel liberated me as it did many others of my generation. There was that instantaneous recognition of self. For the first time since I began writing in 1948, I felt free to say anything I wanted to. Kerouac obviously felt free to; why shouldn't I? For I, in those blissfully naive pre-feminist days, felt the equal of any man.

Kerouac's impact was lasting. Delightfully troubling as dark rich chocolate in a cavity, I worked him over and over, finally writing one journal entry: "You have made one error in your interpretation of Kerouac's *On the Road*. His characters are not fleeing from life nor running away from something. They are on a search more deeply spiritual than the quest for the Holy Grail." Kerouac sees, as William Carlos Williams put it, "with the eyes of the angels." Quite a contrast to Conrad.

By September, I had a good idea of Kerouac's weaknesses as seen by his critics. I wrote, "Even if Kerouac propounds no more than a single idea—I like people who are enthusiastic—I have a feeling I shall become one of his devoted disciples. Although I must agree that as a writer Kerouac is loose-jointed; his material, ill-constructed; yet I feel he has something to say that should be said to this generation. Should have indeed been said long before now.

"Listen: 'Man, wow, there's so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even *begin* to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears . . .'"

Still, the contrast between my life and that of Kerouac's characters was almost too much for me to bear. "I must admit I was in an excellent mood to absorb the man [Kerouac] tonight," I wrote on Sept. 14. "For this afternoon, to my utter horror, Gil, my boss, told me that I was to work permanently on society copy. Man, wow, I mean like nausea! The thought quelled me, even though I knew it was coming. But so soon, so soon. I hadn't even had a chance to learn the market page, namely because I'm a girl, blast it. What a crime to be born with a few brains and a bosom in this country! I was depressed like nothing before. I couldn't even work. I spent all afternoon writing 1-14-1's for society filler and dreaming about my exit from the dull, dull, dull routine of the place. I went to Bourbon Street, via a

bicycle, with my blue jeans, my heavy shoes, my baggy shirt, my red sweatshirt and a pair of leather gloves. I mean I traveled. From Louisiana on to Florida and beachcombed to my heart's delight."

For Kerouac certainly romanticized the journey as adventure. As soon as I could, I followed in his footsteps. From Nebraska, I went to Denver where, in the Greyhound Bus Depot, I twirled a girlfriend, eyes closed, arm extended, in front of a gigantic map of the United States. She pointed, and we set off—to New Orleans, and eventually across Texas, etc., to the West Coast, up the Coast to Portland, Oregon, and from there, to New York. Like Ed Sanders, who abandoned Kansas for New York, I came with a copy of *On the Road* in my hand.

But not even Kerouac prepared me for Allen Ginsberg. The opening lines of Ginsberg's "Howl" exploded in my brain like a fireball. Again, the material was completely foreign: I'd never heard of a fix. But on another level, the words struck home: hadn't I seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by conformity? Hadn't I howled myself through black streets at dawn? Certainly I knew the dark night of the soul he seemed to be describing.

Then I encountered Moloch; I had to look him up to discover that he was a deity to whom parents sacrificed children. The ensuing lines begat a kind of terror in me, as I fell further under the spell of Ginsberg's chanting, his rhythmic repetitions. This reading was like listening to music, utterly satisfying on some sensual level. By the last refrain, I was mesmerized. I didn't know who Carl Solomon was to him, but on some other, deeper level, I knew! I knew! The electricity flowed to me; I was dazzled.

"It's the Holy Ghost comes through you" when you write, wrote Kerouac. And now more than ever I knew what he meant. I released myself to my own Holy Spirit, which seemed to exist in me although I was no longer a Christian. And the impulse to write, which had been with me since I was eleven, seemed to take on a more tangible form, become more heated, move in me and through me in ways that I could never have foreseen. I decided to trust it completely.

But Ginsberg worked on me not only as a writer; he appealed to me on a human level as well. Much as I had been influenced by Kerouac, I couldn't imagine ever wanting to meet him. I knew his kind: either we'd go to bed or I'd be ignored, perhaps even put down. But Ginsberg was another case. For one thing, he was homosexual, so that allowed the possibility of sexual interaction to be set aside. For another, he seemed to be accessible, as I found indeed he was.

As a member of the Silent Generation, I had fallen in love with the Beats, that bearded bunch of Falstaffs. Not only was there Ginsberg and Kerouac, there was Michael McClure whose "The Beard" I saw produced in New York, whose recreation of Jean Harlow and Billy the Kid left me with a legacy of "Stars! Stars! Stars!" And Gregory Corso, whose outra-

geous antics on the stage never failed to amuse me. And The Fugs, that putrid outgrowth on the edges of the movement. I loved them all. “Honest” was how they seemed to me; “anti-intellectual” was the critic’s charge. But this crew seemed less against the intellect than proposing a new one, an intellect that would encompass passion and humor. “Ideas gripped with intensity become powerful,” I wrote in 1959, and certainly the Beatniks’ ideas seemed gripped.

As I’ve aged, I’ve watched the Beatniks spawn the Hippies, as the Bohemians once spawned the Beats, and I wait, impatiently, for the next manifestation of this urge in American literature, this transcendental thrust, which dates back to Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, which interconnects with the Romantic movement in Europe. Ah! fascinating. How life goes on! How it refuses to be put down.

Outside readings

FRED PFEIL

Three kinds of texts and/or ways of reading ran without resolution through virtually all my 60s experience. One kind came out of the small factory town I am from, born into a working-class family on my mother’s side, petit-bourgeois on my father’s. For my present purposes, though, these class specificities are less important than the overall white working-class character of the entire town, defining both itself and the world as a place where you worked hard for little, took it gratefully and kept your mouth shut; where you voted Republican because they were right, and expected nothing for it; where in fact you expected nothing for anything, especially nothing in the end. That was the way the clenched world read in that poor drab region of silent Swedes, and still reads, for as far as most of the people there are concerned nothing has changed. Nor does this view or reading have anything to do with the papers or TV, except insofar as certain news stories bear out its hopeless truths, e.g. the crucifixion of hard-working, graceless Nixon at the hands of the Democrats and smart boys of the Press, or the loss of the Vietnam War. It is a viewpoint which in fact does not require reading at all in the narrow sense of the word, and since it does not know how to respond to any music either it is silent, no jukeboxes in bars, no hit stations on in cars on the way in to work at the plant. Yet it does produce its own texts now and then nonetheless, stories and jokes which can