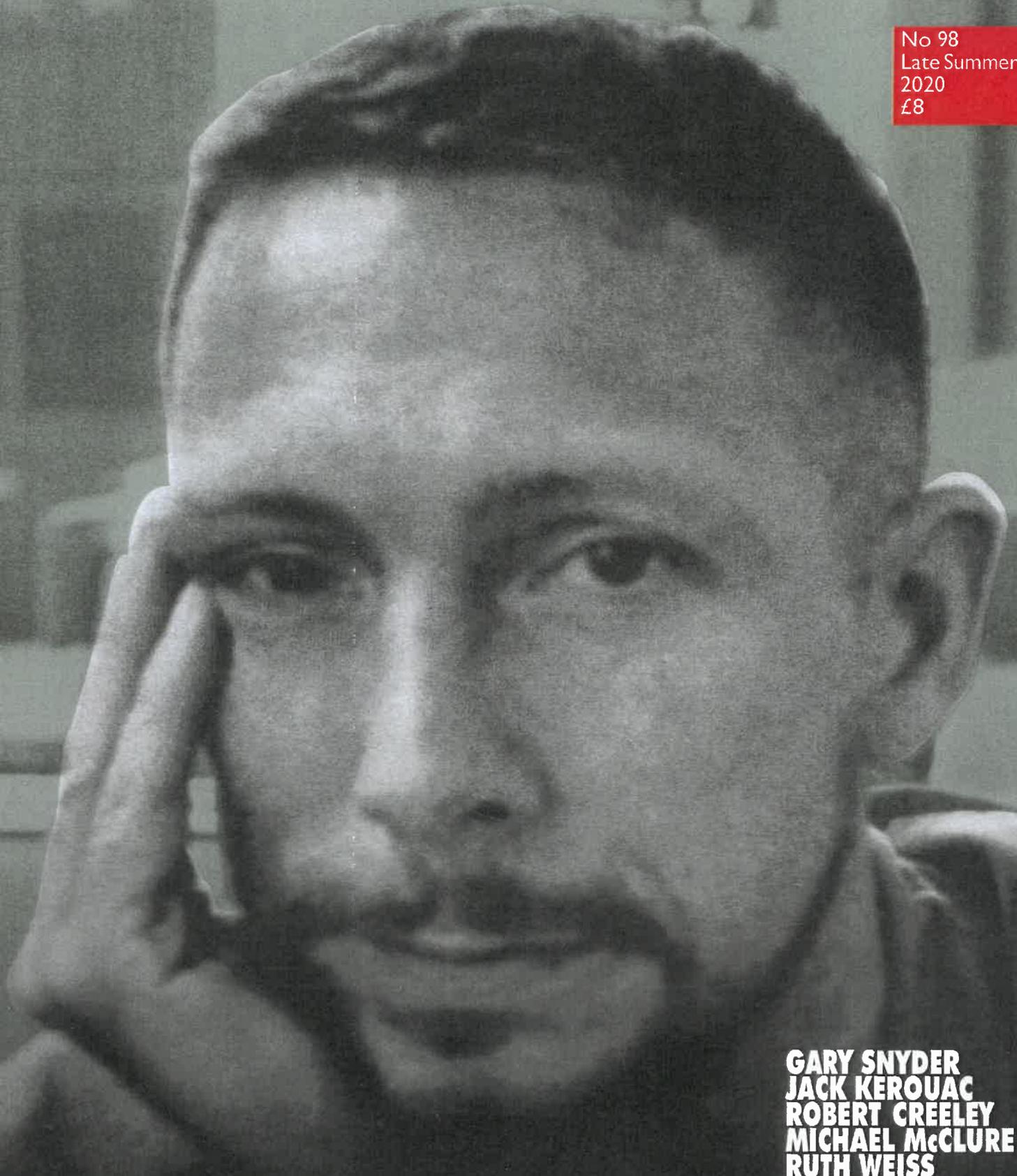


BEAT SCENE

No 98
Late Summer
2020
£8



**GARY SNYDER
JACK KEROUAC
ROBERT CREELEY
MICHAEL McCLURE
RUTH WEISS
JOHN MARTIN
KENNETH PATCHEN**

THIS IS THE BEAT GENERATION

BEAT SCENE

"The rocket wobbled on, like the lonely sensation of thinking"
Jack Kerouac - from cityCityCITY

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Bobbie Louise Hawkins and Robert Creeley in 1963

BEAT SCENE 98

Late Summer 2020

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Thanks this issue - M.Ring - mask, gloves, intrepid as always. A little gem.

FIRSTWORDS

Ruth Weiss gone at 92. Her death is reported as 'natural causes.' Ruth was a friend to this little magazine, someone who reached out to phone, to write letters, send her poems, her books, films. No internet. Old school. And Gary Snyder. Ninety years old. A survivor, enduring. Constantly evolving, stretching himself. Not simply a poet, handy with tools, practical things, student of the East, now and historically. An almost politician at one point, working on environmental concerns. If ever there was a man who tried to live out those 'back to the land' notions of the late 1960s it is Gary Snyder. He never got close to a really old age - but Charles Bukowski would have been one hundred years old this year. He lives on in his books. We include more on Bukowski and the man behind him, John Martin. The second issue in this perfect bound format. Long overdue. Expensive for us but think it looks so much better. As always, please tell your friends.

Kevin Ring

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Front cover image of Gary Snyder in Kyoto, Japan in 1963 - thanks to Paul Hillery for extra work there.

Back cover photo - cover of the Italian 2004 edition of Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*. -Translated as *L'Isola A Della Tartaruga* published by Stampa Alternativa. The book is both Italian and English language.

THE SINS OF SENTIENCE JACK KEROUAC'S STRUGGLE with the DHARMA

Charles Shuttleworth

In all that's been written and will be written about Jack Kerouac as artist and man, many causes have been attributed to his alcoholic breakdown, descent into bigotry, and early death, foremost of which has been the whirl of celebrity precipitated by the publication of *On the Road* labeling him as the paragon and voice of a new, Beat ethos, the first literary superstar of the television age. Many other factors have also been examined, all of which can reasonably be said to have contributed: his Oedipal attachment to his mother; the psychic damage inflicted by both of his parents, who were chronically unhappy, bigoted, and alcoholic, blaming their problems and misfortunes on everyone but themselves; Kerouac's strict Catholic upbringing; his sexual ambivalence; the suffering inflicted by years of poverty, rootlessness, and publishers' rejections; the strain and burnout caused by his prolific output; and the viciousness of the critical reception when his work was belatedly published. Underlying all these factors is the deeper truth of Kerouac's mental illness, which was diagnosed by the Navy in 1943, when Kerouac was 21, as "constitutional psychopathic state, schizoid personality" (1) and would likely today be categorized as bipolar disorder. In my research, which has particularly focused on his Buddhist period, from 1953-'58, Kerouac's writings, particularly in his journals, poignantly elucidate this personality problem, revealing an internal struggle that tore at his psyche – his effort to live up to a Buddhist-inspired code of ethics, the failure of which left him spiritually bereft.

At least from the time of his Navy hospitalization and psychiatric examination, Kerouac was acutely aware of the problem. In a letter from the

hospital to G.J. Apostolos, Kerouac writes about his "dual mind," that according to him was half-normal ("the halfback-whoremaster-alemate-scollion-jitterbug-jazz critic side," in other words outgoing and, arguably, manic) and half-schizoid ("the bent and brooding figure sneering at the world of mediocrities [...]; the introverted, scholarly side; the alien side"), and that "all my youth I stood holding two ends of rope, trying to bring both ends together."⁽²⁾ In his early fiction, Kerouac utilized this schizoid nature by endowing its disparate elements in multiple characters: Wesley Martin and Bill Everhart in *The Sea Is My Brother*; Joe, Francis, and Peter Martin in *The Town and the City*; and Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise in *On the Road*. The character Dean, based on Neal Cassady, embodied Kerouac's manic side more completely than Jack himself ever could without alcohol. Then, after focusing even more intently on Cassady in *Visions of Cody* and on his boyhood fantasies and exploits in *Dr. Sax and Maggie Cassidy*, Kerouac for the first time made his own dual nature a primary subject in *The Subterraneans*, training his eye directly on himself. It is a startlingly honest and revelatory novel, as Leo Percepied ping-pongs between manic partying episodes and isolated periods of writing and recuperation; his love affair with Mardou Fox and life at home with his mother; his heterosexual and homosexual leanings; his sensitive, open, humanistic feelings and flashes of paranoia, sexism, and racism.

It was immediately after his writing *The Subterraneans* and losing the love of Alene Lee (Mardou) that Kerouac sought and found solace in Buddhism. In two separate unpublished accounts

1...Kleiman, Miriam, 'Hit the Road, Jack!': Kerouac enlisted in the U. Navy but was found 'Unfit for service.'" Prologue Magazine Fall 2011, Vol 43. No.3. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/fall/Kerouac.html>

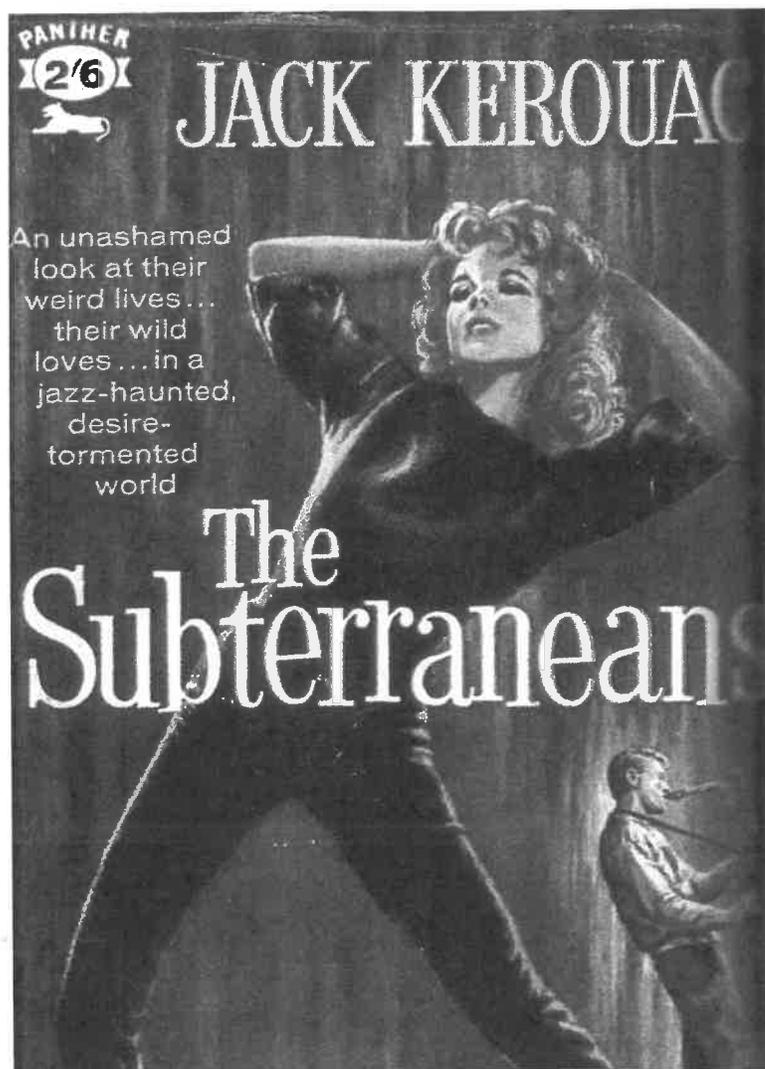
2...Selected Letters 1940-1956 60.

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regarding that time period—November 1953—Kerouac states that he was saved by this discovery, stating in “On the Path” that he was “contemplating painless suicides” (3) and in “Avalokitesvara” that “Now I want to die—I will sit in my room and wait to die—.” (4) He found immediate solace in Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths: All life is suffering, the root of suffering is desire, and the escape from desire is the elimination of attachments, which can be accomplished by following the Eightfold Path. True to his obsessive nature, Kerouac then immersed himself in intense Buddhist study, transcribing passages from the scriptures he read and recording thoughts and reactions in a series of notebooks that he periodically typed, creating a book-length work, *Some of the Dharma*, finally published in 1997, 40 years after completing it. It is a fascinating text for what it reveals about Kerouac—his sense of sinfulness, his intense fear of death, his earnest desire to live a pure, righteous life—as he attempts to heal himself and stop his suffering. At the same time, he sought to proselytize, addressing his thoughts to Allen Ginsberg in particular, wanting to share his discoveries, enlighten, convert. But given his divided nature and conflicting impulses, he was unable to live up to his precepts.

The standards he set for himself were impossibly high. Early in *Some of the Dharma* (through 1954) he refers repeatedly to his “Triple Decision”: to have no friends, to not drink alcohol, take drugs, or smoke tobacco (“Remove all attachments to the body save refreshing food and beverage”) (5), and to limit himself to one “tasteless” meal a day (“The destruction of the craving to satisfy the craving for tasty meals will be easier when you cook your own tasteless meals”) (6). He also vows to abstain from sex (“No sexual lust, no adultery, even thoughts and

cupidities thereof”) (7) and to practice vegetarianism (“Eat no meat. I, who hopeth to become a deliverer to others, myself living on the flesh of human beings?”). (8) He yearns to live in seclusion in a desert hut or forest shack, to escape all temptations “For purity’s sake.” (9) And at times he also contemplates no longer striving for publication of his writing, stating, “the sooner I give up literary



attainment the sooner Enlightenment will come to me.” (10) But in other moments he hedges, realizing the extremity of such vows. He states, “I want to go inward in Mind but cant leave my good mother

3...Berg Collection 18.9 Holograph draft “On the Path, Aug. 19, 1955, Mexico City.”

4...Berg Collection 56.3 Diary #3. Holograph diary “Feb. - May ‘57.”

5...Some of the Dharma 7.

6...Ibid 25.

7...Ibid 163.

8...Ibid 163.

9...Ibid 166.

10...Ibid 159.

behind—attached to her ...” (11) Therefore, given the necessity of coming out of seclusion from time to time, he imagines lowering his standards, having “no friends except disciples, smoke nice pipe, have girlfriends only, for loving (Here goes Jean-Louis confused again)” and drinking wine “only at home, and then only because of holidays & feasts or if for any other reason, like frantic sad madness, do it in your room and think ...” (12)

The precept that arguably caused Kerouac the most angst was that of respecting all sentient beings, accepting that they are endowed with consciousness and Buddha-nature; thus to kill or otherwise harm any creature is a sin. This concept lay at the heart of Kerouac’s desire for purity, and it’s central to his image of his saintly brother Gerard. In *Visions of Gerard*, written in January 1956 at the height of Kerouac’s Buddhist period, Kerouac tells the story of Gerard’s saving a mouse from a trap in front of a fish market and attempting to nurse it back to health:

The little mouse, thrashing in the concrete, was released by Gerard—It went wobbling to the gutter with the fishjuice and spit, to die—He picked it tenderly and in his pocket sowed the goodness—Took it home and nursed it, actually bandaged it, held it, stroked it, prepared a little basket for it [...]—I dont remember rationally but in my soul and mind Yes there’s a mouse, peeping, and Gerard, and the basket, and the kitchen the scene of this heart-tender little hospital—“That big thing hurt you when it fell on your little leg” (because Gerard could really feel empathetically that pain, pain he’d had enough to not be apprentice at the trade and pang)—He could feel the iron snap grinding his little imagined birdy bones and squeezing and cracking and pressing harder unto worse-than-death the bleak-in-life— (13)

Kerouac contrasts Gerard’s goodness with the insensitivity of common humanity, which in his diatribe befouls life on Earth:

For it’s not innocent blank nature made hills look sad and woe-y, it’s men, with their awful minds—

Their ignorance, grossness, mean petty thwarthings, schemes, hypocrite tendencies, repenting over losses, gloating over gains—Pot-boys, bone-carriers, funeral directors, glove-wearers, fog-breathers, shit-betiders, pissers, befoulers, stenchers, fat calf converters, utter blots & scabs on the face of it the earth—“Mouse? Who cares about a gad dam mouse—God musta made em to fit our traps”—Typical thought—I’d as soon drop a barrel of you-know-what on the roof of my own house, as walk a mile in conversation about one of them—I dont count Gerard in that seedy lot, that crew of bulls—” (14)

In *Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac includes a story entitled “IMLADA THE SAGE” in which Imlada, a homeless bhikku, “radiated his message of kindness of the essential mind of the universe to a former self of his, John Kerouac of America, who just then was sitting on the edge of a bed in despair. ‘Be kind,’ said Imlada, and his former self realized the message and almost cried for joy.” (15) Imlada enters a village with his begging bowl to obtain his daily meal. He sees a “beautiful maiden” but “to avoid the thought of lust ... he clenched his teeth and pressed his tongue hard against them” before returning to his houseless refuge in the mountains. As the story ends, “the moon rose high, white, bright, and bats cried in the tree above Imlada’s sleep, and little mice breathed and snored in the depths of the cactus grove.” (16) Three years later in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac repeated this depiction of a tranquil night in which a mouse snores peacefully “in the garden weeds,” (17) so it’s an image that resounded for him, epitomizing a happy, live-and-let-live sensibility. Elsewhere in *Some of the Dharma*, however, Kerouac wrestles with this precept in regard to insects. Is it a sin to kill a bug that’s biting you? He asks the Buddha, “Blessed Lord, how can I ever learn, will I ever learn, do I ever have to learn like Milarepa to let swarms of flies suck on me as I sit in meditation?” (18) He refers to his killing of bugs as a defilement, and several times commands against it. “[D]ont hurt the bugs—how can they hurt you?” he asks. (19) And “[d]ont kill that mosquito. It’s like throwing a red hot iron ball against a rubber wall,

11...Ibid 167.

12...Ibid 166.

13...Visions of Gerard 8. [Note: Kerouac echoed these passages at the time of their composition in a letter to Philip Whalen dated January 5, 1956.]

14...Ibid 9.

15...Some of Dharma 36.

16...Ibid 36-37.

17...The Dharma Bums 35.

18...Some of the Dharma 61.

19...Ibid 280.

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it'll bounce right back at you. Leave the red hot iron ball alone and there will be no Karma bouncing back." (20) Later he confesses, "LAST NIGHT I deliberately killed a mosquito because it wanted to bite my face—I killed it only because I saw my chance—For this, may I be reborn as a mosquito & pay my Karmic debt—The reason was fear of pain—" (21) This story contrasts with the idealized one in *The Dharma Bums* when Ray Smith meditates "in such perfect stillness that two mosquitoes came and sat on each of my cheekbones and stayed there a long time without biting and then went away without biting." (22)

Ultimately, the sentience of bugs was a more intellectual dilemma compared to the sentience of more advanced creatures, which for Kerouac was a deeply emotional issue. In particular, he had a lifelong love of cats. In *Book of Dreams*, he records eight separate dreams involving cats, which I will only summarize here. In each of the first five, the cat is in peril and, he fears, about to die—one being choked, another "soaked in cement," a third in a mouth of a giant hound, etc.—revealing his love and concern for their vulnerability. He is fearful—in one he screams—and in each case he's relieved when it turns out in the dream that the cat is unharmed. In the sixth dream a cat speaks to him in a sad, "pitiful little voice like Gerard's" that also reminds him of his mother's and stimulates feelings of guilt: "my heart was moved just by the sound and loneliness of her voice, I'd left her alone the whole Labor Day weekend ..." (23) Then in the two other dreams, he cradles a cat in his arms, giving him a feeling of safety and security, the first when he's falling from the sky with a parachute and the other when he feels that a female love interest is rejecting him. (24)

In *Big Sur* the news of the death of his cat Tyke precipitates a drinking binge, as "it was exactly and no lie and sincerely like the death of [a] little brother." (25) He admits that "my relationship with my cat and the other previous cats has always been a little dotty: some kind of psychological identification

with my dead brother Gerard who'd taught me to love cats when I was 3 or 4 and we used to lie on our bellies and watch them lap up milk—" (26) Like St. Francis of Assisi, Gerard also had a special affinity for birds "that neighbor and relative could swear did know him personally, they came to his windowsill in the time of his long illnesses ..." (27) And Kerouac explains that, seemingly to emulate Gerard, in his youth he defended birds from other boys, although he states this while reflecting on his own dark impulses: "EVIL IS IGNORANT HABIT-ENERGY—I saw a birdsnest today and the old thought of stoning it down flashed somewhere in me, although as a child I used to stop gangs of kids from doing this, by scolding them at the cost of my own safety—" (28)

A major turning point in Kerouac's Buddhist phase and in his life was his experience in the following summer, in 1956, when he spent two months as a fire lookout atop Desolation Peak in the North Cascades. He went there with high hopes, expecting it to be a job he could tolerate and that he'd be able to "work every single year from now on" to fund his "bhikku-ing" lifestyle: "Summer in the mountains earning livelihood, Falls in Mexico (going thru Bay Area en route), holidays and Winter with family in Florida (where they're going to live now) and Springs back in Mex." (29) He'd also fully blossomed artistically and spiritually, having written in the past year, along with his Dharma journals, *Mexico City Blues*, *Visions of Gerard*, the first halves of *Tristessa* and *Old Angel Midnight*, and *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*. It was the fulfillment of a long-held wish to live in isolation in nature. Seven years earlier, in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, he'd declared his wish "someday to become a Thoreau of the Mountains ... to go away in the mountains forever," escaping society's evils and "be left alone." (30) In his journals he'd written repeatedly about this desire ever since, and in terms of his spiritual aspirations, he fully expected the experience would lead him to final enlightenment. He told Lucien Carr in a letter, "If I

20...Ibid 235.21...Ibid 313.

22...The Dharma Bums 188.

23...Book of Dreams 82-83.

24...See all eight dreams in Book of Dreams 21, 33, 52-53, 54, 58, 82, 99, 152.

25...Big Sur 42.

26...Ibid 43.

27...Visions of Gerard 19.

28...Some of the Dharma 223.

29...Selected Letters 1940-1956 547.

30...Ibid 193-94.

31...Ibid 564.

don't get a vision on Desolation Peak my name aint Blake." (31) Even more tellingly, in a journal entry that he omitted from *Some of the Dharma*, written three-and-a-half months prior to the job start, he wrote a summary for an intended book that would add to the Duluo Legend, chronicling his life "from Pa's death in 1946 to the Vision on Desolation Peak 1956." (32)

The reality was far different than what Kerouac had imagined. Over 63 days he suffered terribly from mood swings, the isolation exacerbating his bipolar nature. Almost instantly he recognized his mistake: he simply wasn't equipped to live in such extreme conditions, sitting alone on a mountaintop completely disconnected from family and friends: Yes, for I'd thought, in June, hitch hiking up there to the Skagit Valley in northwest Washington for my fire lookout job "When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules and I'm alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain" but instead I'd come face to face with myself, no liquor, no drugs, no chance of faking it but face to face with ole Hateful Duluo Me (33)

Kerouac stayed sane primarily by absorbing himself in writing, altogether producing at least 90,000 words including the first section of *Desolation Angels* (originally titled "Desolation Adventure") and the journal that he utilized for 'The Dharma Bums' concluding chapters as well as his *Holiday* magazine article "Alone on a Mountaintop" later included in *Lonesome Traveler*. The journal is a vitally important still-unpublished work that reveals Kerouac's tortured psyche more viscerally than any other, and his most traumatic experience involved the mice that were in his lookout shack upon his arrival. The shack was filthy with their droppings and bits of paper that they'd torn. His first assignment was to clean up, and he worked without serious complaint: "spent all day cleanin shithouse mess in here—not yet serene but know I'm rejoicing." (34) He heard them scratching about but at first left food out for them. Soon,

however, his feelings changed: the mice were keeping him awake at night and threatening his food stores. By the end of the first week, he'd had enough, writing "MICE keep me awake at night, ... and I water-trapped one already, abandoning Buddhist principles for practical agnostic comfort—should I say "nihilistic," because I don't care—" (35) He remained unperturbed through all of that entry—Wednesday, July 11—on the high of having begun writing a new novel that day, entitled "Ozone Park," which he commented was "Swinging right along [...]. Feel very good on Desolation Peak now + oughta make it," he asserted. He wrote "I don't care" three more times in that entry, once in capital letters, proclaiming that he was "Feeling, now, happier than in years—is it Solitude or the absence of liquor? At red dusk, now, the mountains are covered with pink snow, the clouds are distant and frilly and like ancient remote cities of Buddhaland Splendour—The wind works incessantly, whish, whish, booming at times, rattling my ship—The new moon is prognathic + secretly funny over the monstrous shoulders of haze that rise from that valley lake—sharp jags pop up from behind slopes, like childhood mountains, I grayly drew— [...] somewhere a golden festival of rejoicement is taking place but I'll say no more than that [...] O I'm happy! (36)

He justified having drowned the mouse by remembering his father's actions; and demonstrating just how much this was on his mind, it was the way he began the "Ozone Park" manuscript:

I remember the morning my father got up and found some baby mice in the closet and there was nothing else to do but throw them down the toilet. Red sun in Ozone Park, June. He had to go to work to his job on Canal Street as a linotype operator.

"Poor little beasts," he said, "but you gotta do it." (37)

As the narrator of "Ozone Park," Jack Duluo returns to the issue of killing of the mice several times in the first chapter, revealing his mixed feelings, and then his parents discuss it further while sitting at the kitchen table over breakfast:

"The poor little dolls. It's a pity though."

32...Berg Collection 49.10 Holograph notebook "Dharma (9)."

33...Desolation Angels 4.

34...Berg Collection 56. I Diary #1. Holograph diary "Dharma/(1956)/Desolation Peak/Desolation."

35...Ibid.

36...Ibid.

37...Berg Collection 18.21 Holograph draft novel untitled. (Begins: "Begin Here. I. I remember the morning my father got up and found some baby mice in the closet...").

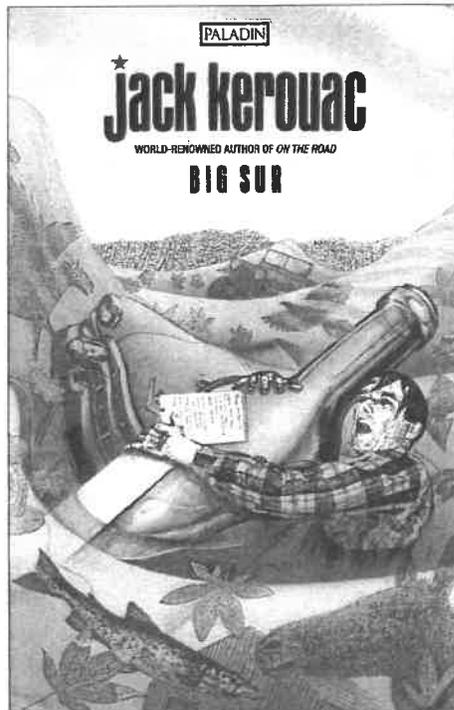
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"They were so cute!" said my mother in a little baby voice [...] carrying in it infinite and genuine child-regret that such little creatures with their tittery noses and moustaches carried such a heavy weight of diseasing filth, drippin, indeed, with bacteria, down to their very drowned tails. The commiseration of my parents for the drowned mice, for their little bodies awash and forsaken, yes the little helpless white bellies, the hairs streaming back from scrawny necks I've seen them drown in water and it's a sight that hurts tho nobody had asked them to feel that way, just like nobody asks flowers to grow, and certainly nature feels the pity when a piece of it is transformed [...] Their pity was what it was and that's all it was. Who cares about interpreting under such an empty sky—? Yet blessed be they for pity. If there's a hell, I shall go to it. (38)

By the next day, Kerouac's mood had plummeted. Overnight he'd been kept awake yet again by their scratching, and with a flashlight he'd cornered a mouse digging into a packet of his dried pea soup, then killed it by stabbing it with a stick. His report of this is harrowing: Caught the mouse in my basket of precious foods which I'd purposely hung from ropes—got a stick—it was a nightmare, something I never did, stalking it, bashing it, wounding it, its little eyes looking at me (at the flashlight), and the final knock on the little head and it lay there dead with its eyes popped out in the green pea powder (looking like a little green dry dustball)—I sat down trembling and sick at heart—Had to be done, those filthy tails ... and I hadnt slept since I got here— till tonight, no more mice I think except one baby I've trapped in the attic blocking hole with wet burlap—Threw the mouse over the precipice and then said to the sky "If there's a hell and bad karma, send me hell and give

me bad karma for doing this and may I be reborn a mouse"—and asked Gerard his forgiveness (tho, still, "I dont care" if there is a God, a Heaven, a Buddha, a Shining Suchness, an Avalokitesvara watching over us)—I dont know, I dont care, and it doesnt matter.

...
This degradation! (the way I wounded the mouse first, by stabbing it thru the envelopes of powdered soup, then it thrashed helplessly, hurt, and I removed the envelopes.—It hunched there looking at me, and I zonked it crying "Pauvre tite affaire!")—Oh I cant get over it—wasn't meant to be a human being—" (39)



Both of the preceding passages—from "Ozone Park" and Kerouac's Desolation journal—vividly demonstrate his bipolar suffering, torn between the mundane sympathy of his parents and the unearthly saintliness of Gerard; Kerouac's own wish for purity and his sense of unredeemable sinfulness for which he has to beg for atonement. More than his alcoholism, which for the time being was quashed (his two months without alcohol on the mountaintop was likely the longest dry period of his adult life, and yet his journal gives no indication that he suffered from withdrawal), this fundamental

failure of righteousness haunted him and, I believe, slowly sapped his Buddhist leanings, as it left him nothing but to pray for Christian atonement.

Kerouac included this story belatedly in Desolation Angels; part one of that novel, entitled "Desolation in Solitude," consists of the disparate sketchings of "Desolation Adventure," his writing while on the mountaintop dated after August 8 and separate from his journal. But it's the first thing he writes about in part 2, entitled "Desolation in the World," reflecting its worldly, sinful nature. That published version of the mouse-killing is equally

38...Ibid. [Note: The crossed out section is as such, but clearly visible, in the original ms. I've chosen to include it because it's so revealing.]

39...Berg Collection 18.21 Holograph draft novel, untitled. (Begins: "Begin Here. I remember the morning my father got up and found some baby mice in the closet...").

graphic, especially emphasizing the mouse's sentience: "agh—it had little eyes that looked at me pleadingly [...] 'human' fearful eyes (All living things tremble from the fear of punishment) ..." (40) He goes on to emphasize the sense of sinfulness he feels: "I asked forgiveness, tried to repent and pray, but felt that because I had abdicated my position as holy angel from heaven who never killed, the world might now go to fires—Methinks it has—" (41)

I remembered my father's pity when he drowned baby mice himself one morning long ago, and my mother saying "Poor little things"—But now I had joined the ranks of the murderers and so I had no more reason to be pious and superior, for a while there (prior to the mice) I had somewhat considered myself divine and impeccable—Now I'm just a dirty murdering human being like everybody else and now I cant take refuge in heaven anymore and here I am, with angel's wings dripping with blood of my victims, small or otherwise, trying to tell what to do and I dont know any more than you do— (42)

In *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac omitted this episode entirely, referring only to the mess he first encountered in the shack ("the floor littered with magazines torn and chewed up by mice and pieces of groceries too and uncountable little black balls of rat turd") (43) and then to "little diamond mice skitter[ing] on black feet" in the cabin, tacitly conveying holiness on their sentience. Kerouac's goal with *The Dharma Bums* was to convey a positive message: his "Buddhawork" (44) was to enlighten others and show the way to salvation, which he argues involves an escape from materialism, return to nature, and spiritual awakening. In this the novel was phenomenally successful, both presaging and instigating the "rucksack revolution" that began in the Sixties and has grown ever since. (In the two months that Kerouac sat on that mountaintop, not another person ventured up, whereas today, according to Jim Henterly, the current Desolation lookout, 500+ people make the trek every summer.) From his

journal it's clear that the episode continued to haunt him. In its penultimate entry, dated Monday, September 24 from Mexico City, Kerouac bemoans what is happening: his hoped for love affair with Esperanza (Tristessa) has flopped as her drug addiction has intensified: "Esperanza is full of hate + goofballs, keeps slugging gentle Bill—We had to hide the knife—She hates me worse—She is flipping—and still so beautiful—I came here for her love, what a fucking laugh." (45) "Bill" is Bill Garver, whose addiction has also increased. In its final entry the next day, Tuesday September 25, he begins, "Bill wanted to sleep in my new bed so Esperanza wont kill him (she is holed up in his room) so he does + takes overdoses of Seconal + pisses in my bed + on floor + spills everything + burns holes in sheets ..." Then the journal's last words are, "It's a land of vicious idiots—The whole world is getting sick—War coming—All because I killed that mouse + abdicated my position as holy angel of heaven— (46)

In the aftermath, Kerouac was never the same. Despite his two months of sobriety and conclusion that "Yes, I learned it on Desolation, that I dont have to get drunk to feel good," (47) once down from the mountain he immediately returned to drinking and lived a mere thirteen more years, dying of a hemorrhage caused by cirrhosis at age 47. In a letter to Gary Snyder dated June 24, 1957, he asked, "why on earth (outside sickness and hangovers) aren't people CONTINUALLY DRUNK?" (48) And two years later, in June 1959, he wrote to Phillip Whalen, "Myself, the dharma is slipping away from my consciousness," (49) stating that he couldn't see life's purpose without heaven's reward.

His last attempt at redemption was in the fall of 1960 when he tried to sober up by replicating his experience on Desolation Peak, living alone in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's Big Sur cabin. During this stay he celebrated the sentient creatures around him, as chronicled *Big Sur*, Kerouac's last great novel. First

40...*Desolation Angels* 67. [Note: the quote within the quote is a paraphrase of Verse 129 from Dhammapada, a collection of teachings attributed to the Buddha: all tremble at the rod, all are fearful of death. Drawing the parallel to yourself, neither kill nor get others to kill.]

41...Ibid 68.42...Ibid 69.

43...*The Dharma Bums* 232.

44...Ibid 122.

45...Berg Collection 56.1 (op. cit.).

46...Ibid.

47...Ibid.

48...Selected Letters 1957-1969 46.

49...Ibid 206.

THE SINS OF SENTIENCE - JACK KEROUAC'S STRUGGLE WITH THE DHARMA

and foremost, there is the donkey he dubs "Alf the Sacred Burro," but also -

There's the bluejay drinking my canned milk by throwing his head back with a miffle of milk on his beak—There's the scratching of the raccoon or of the rat out there, at night—There's the poor little mouse eating her nightly supper in the humble corner where I've put out a little delight-plate full of cheese and chocolate candy (for my days of killing mice are over)—There's the raccoon in his fog, there the man to his fireside, and both are lonesome for God— (50)

After three weeks, becoming bored, he heads back to San Francisco, and from then on, in his depleted condition brought on by advanced alcoholism—the guilt of his extreme hangovers and delirium tremens—he mourns the deaths of a variety of creatures: a sea otter that he sees floating offshore; a fish caught by Dave Wain (Lew Welch) and then eaten; and both a mouse and a pair of goldfish for which he feels particularly responsible. He finds the dead mouse near Ferlinghetti's cabin on a return trip for a weekend party and decides that it died from eating the rat poison that he'd left open in the cabin: "and so this is my mouse [...] my own personal mouse that I've carefully fed chocolate and cheese all summer but once again I've unconsciously sabotaged all these great plans of mine to be kind to living beings even bugs, once again I've murdered a mouse one way or the other." (51) Then the goldfish die in Billie Dabney's (Jackie Gibson's) apartment in San Francisco. Jack has been sitting for days in a lounge chair near the goldfish bowl incessantly drinking and smoking cigarettes, and he blames either the smoke for their demise or else his feeding them cornflakes. He asks Billie, "Did I kill them ...?" and when she says, "Well I dont know what killed them," he responds, "But why dont anybody know? what happened? why do they do this? otters and mice and every damn thing dyin

on all sides Billie, I cant stand it, it's all my goddam fault every time!" (52)

Kerouac's killing of mice while living on Desolation Peak, which was meant to be his supreme spiritual experience, seems to have been an act for which he could never forgive himself, chafing at the core of his dual nature. For a Buddhist it was an act that can have karmic repercussions; for a Christian it was a sin, and for Kerouac it was both.



Postscripts:

(1) This essay's title, "The Sins of Sentience," was taken from a deleted phrase in original ms. of *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*. Section 4 of the published version reads, "I was awakened to show the way, chosen to die in the degradation of life, because I am Mortal Golden Eternity." In the original ms., located in the NYPL's Berg Collection, before Kerouac made the change, it read, "chosen to die for the sins of sentience."

(2) Many thanks to Jim Sampas, Literary Executor of the Estate of Jack Kerouac, for permission to include previously unpublished material, all of which is located in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

50...Big Sur 31.

51...Ibid 95.

52...Ibid 145.