The Birds

for Jane and Stan Brakhage

I'll miss the small birds that come
for the sugar you put out
and the bread crumbs. They've
made the edge of the sea domestic
and, as I am, I welcome that.
Nights my head seemed twisted
with dreams and the sea wash,
I let it all come quiet, waking,
counting familiar thoughts and objects.

Here to rest, like they say, I best
liked walking along the beach
past the town till one reached
the other one, around the corner
of rock and small trees. It was
clear, and often empty, and
peaceful. Those lovely unsin'y
pelicans fished there, dropping
like rocks, with grace, from the air,
headfirst, then sat on the water,
letting the pouch of their beaks
grow thin again, then swallowing
whatever they'd caught. The birds,
no matter they're not of our kind,
seem most like us here. I want
to go where they go, in a way, if
a small and common one. I want
to ride that air which makes the sea
seem down there, not the element
in which one thrashes to come up.
I love water. I love water—
but I also love air, and fire.

Fathers
Scattered, aslant
faded faces a column

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a rise of the packed
peculiar place to a
modest height makes
a view of common lots
in winter then, a ground
of battered snow crust
at the edges under
it all, there under
my fathers their
faded women, friends,
the family all echoed,
names trees more tangible
physical place more tangible
the air of this place the road
going past to Watertown
or down to my mother's
grave, my father's grave, not
now this resonance of
each other one was his, his
survival only, his curious
reticence, his dead state,
his emptiness, his acerbic
dge cuts the hands to
hold him, hold on, wants
the ground, wants this frozen ground.

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1. Town in Massachusetts, just west of Boston.

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ALLEN GINSBERG
b. 1926

"Held back the edges of your gown, ladies, we are going through hell." William Carlos Williams's introduction to Allen Ginsberg's Howl (1956) was probably the most auspicious public welcome from one poet to another since Emerson had hailed the unknown Whitman in a letter that Whitman prefaced to the second edition of Leaves of Grass one hundred years before. Howl combined apocalyptic criticism of the dull, prosperous Eisenhower years with exuberant celebration of an emerging counterculture. It was the best known and most widely circulated book of poems of its time, and with its appearance Ginsberg became part of the history of publicity as well as the history of poetry. Howl and Jack Kerouac's novel On the Road were the pocket Bibles of the generation whose name Kerouac had coined—"Beat," with its purring overtones of "beaten down" and "beatified."

Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926, son of Louis Ginsberg, a schoolteacher in New Jersey, himself a poet, and of Naomi Ginsberg, a Russian emigree, whose madness and eventual death her son memorialized in Kaddish (1959). His official education took place at Columbia University, but for him as for Jack Kerouac the presence of William Burroughs in New York was equally influential. Burroughs (b. 1914), later the author of Naked Lunch, one of the most inventive experiments
in American prose, was at that time a drug addict about to embark on an expatriate life in Mexico and Tangier. He helped Ginsberg discover modern writers: Kafka, Yeats, Céline, Rimbaud. Ginsberg responded to Burroughs's liberated kind of life, to his comic-apocalyptic view of American society, and to his bold literary use of autobiography, as when writing about his own experiences with addicts and addiction in Junky, whose chapters Ginsberg was reading in manuscript form in 1950.

Ginsberg's New York career has passed into mythology for a generation of poets and readers. In 1945, his sophomore year, he was expelled from Columbia; he had sketched some obscene drawings and phrases in the dust of his dormitory window to draw the attention of a neglectful cleaning woman to the grimy state of his room. Then, living periodically with Burroughs and Kerouac, he shipped out for short trips, as a messman on merchant tankers and worked in addition as a welder, a night porter, and a dishwasher.

One summer, in a Harlem apartment, Ginsberg underwent what he was always to represent as the central conversion experience of his life. He had an "aural vision" of the English poet William Blake reciting his poem: first "Ah! Sunflower," and then a few minutes later the same oracular voice intoning "The White Rose." It was life, bearing the doom of the whole universe, and at the same time the inevitable beauty of that doom." Ginsberg was convinced that the presence of "this big god over all... and that the whole purpose of being born was to wake up to Him..."

Ginsberg eventually finished Columbia in 1948 with high grades but under a legal cloud. Herbert Huncke, a colorful but irresponsible addict friend, had been using Ginsberg's apartment as a storage depot for the goods he stole to support his drug habit. To avoid prosecution as an accomplice, Ginsberg had to plead insanity and spent eight months in the Columbia Psychiatric Institute.

After more odd jobs and a considerable success as a market researcher in San Francisco, Ginsberg left the straight, nine-to-five world for good. He was drawn to San Francisco, he said, by its "long honorable... tradition of Bohemian—Buddhist—Wobblie (the I.W.W., an early radical labor movement)—mythical—anarchist social involvement." In the years after 1954 he met San Francisco poets such as Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder (who was studying Chinese and Japanese at Berkeley), and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose City Lights Bookshop became the publisher of Howl. The night Ginsberg read the new poem aloud at the Six Gallery has been called "the birth trauma of the Beat Generation."

Howl's spontaneity of surface conceals but grows out of Ginsberg's care and self-consciousness about rhythm and meter. Under the influence of William Carlos Williams, who had befriended him in Paterson after he left the mental hospital, Ginsberg had started carrying around a notebook to record the rhythms of voices around him. Kerouac's On the Road gave him further examples of "Frank talk" and, in addition, of an "oceanic" prose "sometimes as sublime as epic line." Under Kerouac's influence Ginsberg began the long tumbling lines that were to become his trademark. He carefully explained that all of Howl and Other Poems was an experiment in what could be done with the long line, the longer unit of breath that seemed natural for him. "My feeling is for a big long clanky statement," one that accommodates "not the way you would say it, a thought, but how you would think it—i.e., we think rapidly, in visual images as well as words, and if each successive thought were transcribed in its confusion... you get a slightly different prosody than if you were talking slowly."

The long line is something Ginsberg learned as well from biblical rhetoric, from the eighteenth-century English poet Christopher Smart, and above all, from Whitman and Blake. His first book pays tribute to both these latest Supermarket in America movements from exclamations to sad questioning, is Ginsberg's melancholy reminder of what has become, after a century, of Whitman's vision of American plenty. In Sunflower Sutra he celebrates the battered nobility beneath our industrial "skin of grime." Ginsberg at his best gives a sense of both doom and beauty, whether in the denunciatory impatient prophecies of Howl or in the catalog of suffering in Kaddish. His disconnected phrases can accumulate as narrative shreiks or, at other moments, can build as a litany of praise.

By the end of the 1960s Ginsberg was widely known and widely traveled. For him it was a decade in which he conducted publicly his own pursuit of inner peace during a long stay with Buddhist instructors in India and at home served as a kind of guru himself for many young people disoriented by the Vietnam War. Ginsberg read his poetry and held "office hours" in universities all over America, a presence at everything from "be-ins"—mass outdoor festivals of chanting, costumes, and music—to antiwar protests. He was a gentle and persuasive presence at hearings for many kinds of reform; revision of severe drug laws and laws against homosexuality. Ginsberg himself had lived for years with the poet Peter Orlovsky and wrote frankly about their relationship. His poems record his drug experiences as well, and The Change, written in Japan in 1963, marks his decision to keep away from what he considered the nonhuman domination of drugs and to lay new stress on "living in and inhabiting the human form."

In The Fall of America (1972) Ginsberg turned to "epic," a poem including history and registering the ups and downs of his travels across the United States. These "transit" poems sometimes seem like tape-recorded random lists of sights, sounds, and names, but at their best they give a sense of how far America has fallen, by measuring the provisional and changing world of nuclear America against the traces of nature still visible in our landscape and place names. Ginsberg now lives on a farm near Woodstock, New York, and has added ecology to the causes for which he is a patient and attractive spokesman.

From Howl
for Carl Solomon

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,starving hysterical naked,dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection2 to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in thesupernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of citiescontemplating jazz,who bared their brains to the stars under the E1 and saw Mohammedangels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas andBlake-light3 tragedy among the scholars of war,who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes onthe windows of the skull,who covered in unshaved rooms in underwear, burning their money inwastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall.

1. Ginsberg met Carl Solomon (b. 1928) while both were patients in the Columbia Psychiatric Institute in 1949 and called him "an intuitive Bronx Dadaist and prose-poet." Many details in Howl come from the "apocryphal history" that Solomon told Ginsberg in 1949. In More Mirages (1965), Solomon admits that these adventures were "compounded partly of truth, but for the most of ravings self-justification, crypto-bohemian boasting... effeminate prancing and erotic aphrodisia.

2. In one sense: a person who can supply drugs.

3. The elevated railway in New York City, also a Hebrew word for God.

4. Refers to Ginsberg's apocalyptic vision of the Englishe poet William Blake (1757-1827).
who got busted in their public beards returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York,
who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley,\(^5\) death, or purgatorial their torsos night after night
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,
incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson,\(^6\) illuminating all the motionless world of Time between,
Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of head a joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roasting winter dukes of Brooklyn, ashen rantings and kind light of mind, who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx\(^7\) on bendzetrine until the noise of wheels and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wrecked and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the dea light of Zoo,
who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford's floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in dissolute Fugazi's, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,
who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue\(^8\) to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,
a lost battalion of platonic conversationists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon, yackety yakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anec-
dotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars, whole intellects disgorge in total recall for seven days and nights with brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement,
who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall, suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerine bone-groundings and migraines of China\(^9\) under junk-withdrawal in Newark's bleak furnished room, who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts, who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night, who studied Plutarch Poe St. John of the Cross\(^1\) telepathy and bob kabbalah\(^2\) because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas, who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels, who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy, who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain, who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or

\(^5\) A tenement courtyard in New York's East Village; setting of Kershner's The Subterraneans (1958).
\(^6\) Ginsberg's hometown, also the town celebrated by William Carlos Williams in his long poem Paterson.
\(^7\) Opposite ends of a New York subway line; the Bronx Zoo was the northern terminus.
\(^8\) New York public hospital to which mental patients are generally committed.

\(^3\) In New Mexico, a center for the development of the atomic bomb. "Union Station" a gathering place for radical speakers in New York in the 1930s.
\(^4\) Wall Street, but also alludes to the Wailing Wall, a place of public lamentation in Jerusalem.
\(^5\) An allusion to The Ecstasy of St. Teresa, a sculpture by Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) based on St. Teresa's (1515–1582) distinctly erotic description of a religious vision. The three sages (line 48) in Greek mythology were gods who determined a wanted life by scraping out a length of thread and cutting it at the time of death.
\(^6\) Neal Cassady, hip companion of Jack Kerouac and the original Dean Moriarty, one of the leading figures in On the Road.
resides in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret
gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too,
who faded out in vast sordid movies, woke on a sudden
Manhattan, and picked themselves up out of basements hungover with
hearts' Toby's and horrors of Third Avenue iron drums & stumbled to
unemployment offices,
who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks
waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steamheat
and opium,
who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson
under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be
crowned with laurel in oblivion,
who ate the lamb stew of the imagination or digested the crab at the muddy
bottom of the rivers of Bowery,
who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and
bad music,
who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and rose up to
build harpsichords in their lofts,
who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowded with flame under the
tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,
who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in
the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,
who cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsh & tortillas dreaming of
the pure vegetable kingdom,
who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg,
who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of
Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,
who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were
forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old
and cried,
who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid
blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of
fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of the furies of advertising & the
mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the
drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,
who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away
unknown and forgotten into the ghostly demes of Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even one free beer,
who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street,
danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of
nostalgic European 1930's German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up growling into the bloody toilet, means in their ears and the blast of
colossal steamwhistles,
who barred down the highways of the past journeying to each other's hotrod
Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz incarnation,
who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you
had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,
who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver &
waited in vain, who watched over Denver & brooded & loned in Denver and
finally went away to find out the Time, & now Denver is lonesome for her
heroes,
who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other's salvation
and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,
who crushed through their minds in jail waiting for impossible criminals with
golden heads and the charm of reality in their hearts who sang sweet blues to
Alcatraz,
who retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit, or Rocky Mount to tend Buddha
or Tangiers to boys or Southern Pacific to the black locomotive or Harvard
to Narcissus to Woodlawn to the daisychain or grave,
who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with
their insanity & their hands & a hung jury,
who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently
presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaved
heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy.
and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin metasal electricity
hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia,
who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table, restning briefly in catatonia,
returning years later tru bald except for a wig of blood, and tears and fingers,
to the visible madrian doom of the wards of the madtowns of the East,
Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's footed halls, bickering with the
births and the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench
dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone
as heavy as the moon,
with mother finally *****, and the last fantastic book flung out of the
tenement window, and the last door closed at 4 AM and the last telephone
slammed at the wall in reply and the last furnished room emptied down to
the last piece of mental furniture, a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire
hanger in the close, and even that imaginary, nothing but a hopeful little
bit of hallucination—
ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the
total animal soup of time—and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of
the alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the
vibrating plane,
who dreamed and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the arcanum of the soul between 2 visual images and
joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness
together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus

3. A cemetery in the Bronx. "Southern Pacific" is a railroad company. The references in this line are to the lives of Kerouac, Cassady, and William Burroughs (an author and fellow Beat).
4. This and the following incidents probably derived from "Die prehistorische Geschichte der Medien" edited by Solomon to Ginsberg "Dadaism" artistic cult of absurdity (c. 1916-1920). "CCNY." City College of New York.
5. Three mental hospitals near New York. Solomon was institutionalized at Pilgrim State and Rockland; Ginsberg's mother, Naomi, was permanently institutionalized at Greystone after years of suffering hallucinations and paranoid attacks. She died there in 1916, the year after Howl was written.
7. All Powerful Father, Eternal God (Latin). An allusion to a phrase used by the French painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1906), in a letter describing the effects of nature (1904). Ginsberg, in an interview, compared his own method of sharp juxtaposed images with Gauguin’s shortening of perspective in landscape painting.
to re-create the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you
speechless and intelligence and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing
out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and end-
less head,
the madman burn and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here
what might be left to say in time come after death,
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the god horn shadow of
the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eli eli
lamma lamma sabachthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities
down to the last radio
with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies
good to eat a thousand years.

A Supermarket in California

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down
the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the
full moon.
In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit
supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!
What peaches and what penumbra? Whole families shopping at night!
Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes—and
you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old gruber, poking among the
meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.
I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What
price bananas? Are you my Angel?
I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and
followed in my imagination by the store detective.
We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting
artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which
way does your beard point tonight?
(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel
absurd.)
Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade,
lights out in the houses, we’ll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in
driveways, home to our silent cottage?
Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage teacher, what America did

you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking
bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Berkeley 1955

To Aunt Rose

Aunt Rose—now, might I see you
with your thin face and buck tooth smile and pain
of rheumatism—and a long black heavy shoe
for your bony left leg
limping down the long hall in Newark on the running carpet
past the black grand piano
in the day room
where the parties were
and I sang Spanish loyalist songs
in a high squeaky voice
(hysterical) the committee listening
while you limped around the room
collected the money—
Aunt Honey, Uncle Sam, a stranger with a cloth arm
in his pocket
and huge young bald head
of Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

—your long sad face
your tears of sexual frustration
(what smothered sobs and bony hips
under the pillows of Osborne Terrace)
—the time I stood on the toilet seat naked
and you powdered my thighs with Calomine
against the poison ivy—my tender
and shamed first black curled hairs
what were you thinking in secret heart then
knowing me a man already—
and I an ignorant girl of family silence on the thin pedestal
of my leg in the bathroom—museum of Newark.

Hitler is dead, Hitler is in Eternity; Hitler is with
Tamburlaine and Emily Brontë

Though I see you walking still, a ghost on Osborne Terrace
down the long dark hall to the front door
limping a little with a pinched smile
in what must have been a silken

4. Forgetfulness: In Greek mythology, one of the rivers of Hades. Charon was the boatman who ferried the
dead to hell.
5. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), many left-wing Americans—among them Ginsberg’s rela-
tives in Newark—sympathized with the Spanish loyalists who were resisting Francisco Franco’s (1939–1975)
efforts to become dictator of Spain.
6. American volunteers who fought against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War.
7. English poet and novelist (1818–1848), author of
Wuthering Heights. Tamburlaine was the Middle Eastern “scourge” and conqueror (hero of Christopher Mar-
lowe’s Tamburlaine, 1588).