

American BOOK REVIEW

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The Last Day by Rosebud Pettet

April 4 Friday

evening—Peter Hale calls and asks me to come quickly, Allen is in a coma, dying. Pull on my sneakers and taxi down, trying to keep calm breathing, trying to arrive in a state of peace. 15 minutes after Pete's call he opens the door to the loft, and I go in to join those already gathered. I went in and embraced big Peter—Orlovsky— and Eugene, Allen's brother. About 20 friends talking in low voices, looking lost, comforting each other.

After being diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer the previous Friday at Beth Israel Hospital, Allen had been told he had maybe 2-5 months to live. When I heard the news, for some reason I felt strongly that it would not be that long—I felt that he would go very soon. He had come back home Wednesday in good spirits, organizing things as ever, making plans for the coming days. But someone (I forget who; perhaps it was Bob) had said Allen personally felt that he had very little time left. A month or two, he thought. So Wednesday he was busy, writing and making phone calls to his friends all over the world, saying goodbye. Amiri Baraka said Allen called him and said, "I'm dying, do you need any money?"

But Thursday he was much weaker, he could hobble from bed to chair only with difficulty. There was a phonecall from Italy, in the middle of it Allen begins to vomit, throws up right there on the phone! "Funny," he says, "never done that before." Said he was very tired and wanted to go to sleep. He fell asleep and later that night had a seizure and slipped into a coma. He was alone.

In the morning Bob Rosenthal discovered him unconscious and called the Hospice doctor who came and told him that Allen most likely had a stroke and had hours to live. The task of notifying the family and friends began.

Everyone had feared that, as word spread, there would be a huge throng appearing at the loft, but that wasn't the case. People came and went quickly during the afternoon. Bob, Pete Hale, Bill Morgan, and Kay Spurlock, the office staff, were busy constantly at the phones making and receiving calls. Shelley Rosenthal and Rani Singh helping with everything that needed doing. Eugene and several nieces and nephews of Allen's consoling each other. Larry Rivers down from his apartment upstairs, wandering around forlornly in his pink, white, and blue striped pajamas. George and Anna Condo and their little girl.

Francesco and Alba Clemente, beloved friends of Allen's. Patti Smith sitting in tears with Oliver Ray and her young dater. Bob and Shelley's sons Aliah and Isaac. Mark Israel and David Greenberg, two of Allen's young boyfriends. Philip Glass and June Leaf. Robert Frank. Simon Pettet. Andrew Wylie. Roy Lichtenstein. Steven Bornstein, who had flown up from Florida. A few others, I don't remember who all was there.

... [T]hese were the final moments ...

I went to the back of the loft, and Raymond Foye stood looking pale and so sad. I told him he must be very blessed, he had spent so much time giving support and love to the dying—Henry Geldzahler, Huncke, Harry Smith. "Yes, but this is the big one, the hardest," he said. Allen lay in a narrow hospital bed beside the windows overlooking 14th Street. There were two almost invisible tubes coming out of his nose, attached to a portable small oxygen tank on the floor. His head was raised up on a couple of big striped pillows, and he looked tiny and frail, thin arms with bruised veins from hospital tests sticking out from his Jewel Heart T-shirt. Head to the side, slight shadows under the eyes. I had walked through the loft, people whispering greetings, hugging, telling me all that had happened. But still not really prepared for the sight of him. The windows were open, curtains waving softly. His breathing was deep, slow, very labored, a snoring sound. "Hey, Allen, wake up!"

Joel Gaidemak, his cousin and doctor, was there constantly, and a young lady nurse sat in the corner reading, occasionally getting up to check on heart and pulse, or administer morphine for congestion. Gelek Rinpoche said he thought Allen might last through the night. Joel didn't think so.

A few chairs were set up nearby, and there was the big white leather Salvation Army sofa of which he was so proud. People sat, or at intervals went to sit beside the bed and hold his hand or whisper to him and kiss him, his hand or cheek or head. An altar had been set up along one side of the loft and Gelek Rinpoche and the other monks sat chanting and praying, the sound so soothing constantly in the background, bells tinkling. A faint scent of flowers and incense hung in the air.

I had a little throw-away Woolworths camera, and Gregory Corso asked me to take a picture of him with Allen. He knelt beside the cot and placed his arm over Allen

CONTENTS

July-August, 1997
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FEATURE: ALLEN GINSBERG

The Last Day	Rosebud Pettet
Kaddish	Bob Rosenthal
Singing the Body Electric	John Tytell
allen.com	Rochelle Ratner
"Police State Blues"	Allen Ginsberg
Requiem for a Co-Conspirator	Jon Surgal
Reality Sandwiches	Joyce Johnson

"like that picture, or statue, of Adonais, right?"

There was a medical chart, a picture of the human skeleton, hanging over the bed. Bob said Allen had put it there, half as a joke, half as a reminder. And Allen's beautiful picture of Whitman (that had hung in the kitchen on 12th Street) gazing down from the wall at the other dear bearded poet in the bed below. As it got late, many went home to try and catch a little sleep. It was around 11. Bob and Pete were just playing it by ear, deciding that anyone who wanted to stay would find a place, on the floor if necessary. Peter Orlovsky was taking photos and I felt a little uncomfortable, the idea of taking pictures at this time, but I figured, hey, if it was you, Allen'd be the first one through the door camera in hand! Eventually, Eugene leaned over, held Allen's hand, whispered "Goodbye little Allen. Goodbye little Allen. I'll be back later. See you soon." He kissed him and left. And Gregory—Gregorio!—too, telling us to call him at once if there was any change.

Joel had said that there was no way to know how long it would be, minutes or hours, surely not days. I felt from the minute I saw Allen there that it would be very soon. I sat at the foot of the bed where I had spent the last few hours, holding his feet, rubbing them gently from time to time. An occasional cigarette break—the little guest bedroom by the office area was set up as the smoker's lounge. Bob and Pete and Bill were as strong and remarkable as ever, supporting everyone, keeping a sense of humor, and constantly dealing with the dozens of phonecalls, (Continued next page)

Pettet Cont.

faxes, and the visitors as they came and went. They'd had a few days for the news to sink in, but they were dealing with—literally—hundreds of people over the phone or in person who had just found out and were in the first stages of stunned, disbelieving grief.

I had remained at the bedside and it was now after midnight. I could not believe he still hung on, the breathing so difficult, the lungs slowly filling with fluid. Labored breathing (gulps of air—like those gulps he'd made when he was singing—almost like he was reciting poetry in his sleep). Those who had been there all day were exhausted. It was down to a few now. Bob and Pete and Bill Morgan. Peter Orlovsky bravely dealing with his pain, strong Beverly holding his hand. David and Mark. Patti and Oliver, there together all day, trying to be brave and sometimes giving way to red-eyed tears. Simon Pettet sitting beside me for hours.

Allen's feet felt cooler than they had been earlier. I sat remembering the 33 years I'd known him, lived with him, my second father.

And still he breathed, but softer now.

Around 2 o'clock, everyone decided to try and get some rest. Bob and Joel lay down in Allen's big bed near the cot where he lay, everyone found a sofa or somewhere to stretch out.

Simon and I sat, just watching his face. Everyone was amazed at how beautiful he looked—all lines of stress and age smoothed—he looked patriarchal and strong. I had never seen him so handsome. The funny looking little boy had grown into this most wonderful looking man. (He would have encouraged photos if he had known how wonderful he looked!) But so

tiny! He seemed as fragile as a baby in his little T-shirt.

The loft was very quiet. Most were resting, half-asleep. Suddenly Allen began to shake, a small convulsion wracked his body. I called out, and Joel and Bob sat up and hurried over. I called louder, everyone else came running. It was about 2:15. Joel examined him, pulse, etc., and said that his vital signs were considerably slower, he had had another seizure. The breathing went on, weaker. His feet were cooler. Everyone sat or stood close to the little bed. The loft was dim and shadowy; only a single low light shining down on him. It lent a surreal, almost theatrical look to the corner of the loft. Peter Orlovsky bent over and kissed his head, saying, "Goodbye Darling."

And then suddenly a remarkable thing happened. A tremor went through him, and slowly, impossibly, he began to raise his head. He weakly rose until he was sitting almost upright, and his left arm lifted and extended. Then his eyes opened very slowly and very wide. The pupils were wildly dilated. I thought I saw a look of confusion or bewilderment. His head began to turn very slowly and his eyes seemed to glance around him, gazing on each of us in turn. His eyes were so deep, so dark, but Bob said that they were empty of sight. His mouth opened, and we all heard as he seemed to struggle to say something, but only a soft low sound, a weak "Aaah," came from him. Then his eyes began to close and he sank back onto the pillow. The eyes shut fully. He continued, then to struggle through a few more gasping breaths, and his mouth fell open in an O. Joel said that these were the final moments, the O of the mouth the sign of approaching death. I still continued to stroke his feet and thin little legs, but the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is to

not touch the body after death, so I kissed him one final time and then let go.

At 2:30, Joel checked for vital signs and announced that the heart, so much stronger than anyone knew, had stopped beating. A painless and gentle death. The thin blue sheet was pulled up to his chin, and Peter Hale brought over a tiny cup and spoon, and placed a few drops of a dark liquid between Allen's lips. It was part of the Buddhist ritual—the "last food." Bob put his hand over Allen's eyes and said the Sh'ma. We all sat quietly in the dim light, each with our own thoughts, saying goodbye.

Rosebud Pettet was Allen Ginsberg's close friend for 33 years.

allen.com by Rochelle Ratner

For whatever else the Internet and the World Wide Web might be, it is a drawing together, a place for national and international communities to exchange information. And because it combines the up-to-the-minute capabilities of radio and television with the storage and accessibility of a top library, its abilities to present literature are at times astounding. This was nowhere more in evidence than just after the death of Allen Ginsberg. Within a few hours, one could read the full obituary from the front page of the next day's *New York Times*. At the top of the article were links to three other *Times* articles published since 1984. One especially interesting piece to read at this moment was a 1991 feature on the poet and his brother, lawyer and minor poet Eugene Brooks, reading together at the Walt Whitman Birthplace.

From the bottom of the article, there were links to two other sites: "Allen Ginsberg—Shadow Changes Into Bone, a collection of photos and Ginsberg's poetry" and "Bibliographies, Interviews, and Research Sources and Information pertaining to Allen Ginsberg." The first site, though obviously not new to the Internet, has undergone stark transformation. Greeted with a solid black screen, bits and pieces from Ginsberg's poems on death, and links to Ginsberg's poems on the Web, plus drawings and photos. The second site, "Bibliographies, Interviews, and Research Sources..." is more extensive. While there's far too much here to list, a few samples are: Ginsberg's FBI File, accounts of and introductions to various readings Ginsberg gave from 1955 to the present, a Hot Wired feature on his collaboration with the artist Francesco Clemente, and the transcript of a Canadian Broadcasting interview focusing on Buddhism. The page closes with a listing of books, CD's, and tapes by or on Ginsberg, available through Amazon.Com. Click on the title and you're taken immediately to the order screen; what could be simpler? And an indication that, despite all these electronic resources, people still want to hold books in their hands and read.

Rochelle Ratner, Executive Editor of ABR, is a novelist, poet, critic, and quickly becoming an Internet junkie.

Kaddish

by Bob Rosenthal

*Words Given at the Allen Ginsberg Tribute,
April 12, 1997, at the St. Mark's Church
Poetry Project*

There are going to be tributes and memorials for Allen Ginsberg all over the world, but here, East Village, he was a homebody, he was somebody who loved the Polish Restaurants, the Chinese food, Second Avenue, and everything, and I think this is what's so emotional about today.

Whatever it is that you got from Allen, you can give to somebody else.

What I want to say is that it is true that Allen made a big hole for himself in our lives, and he's gone, but it is also true that he left lots of things to put into those holes and for us to arrange in the way we want, and it is our job to learn from Allen. Not so much to tear at our chests, but to find those things in Allen, whether it was candor, whether it was mediation, whether it was the study of poetry, whether it was the study of poetry, whether it was the oratory, whether it was the generosity of spirit,

whether it was meeting everybody as if they were a potential Bodhisattva. Whatever it is that you got from Allen, you can give to somebody else. We can carry on.

In the Jewish tradition, saying Kaddish is a way to access ancestors, to carry on their good deeds, it's not to praise them, it is to carry them forward, and I think this is what we can all do. Allen has left so many ways to walk in his path, and I hope we can all take that as a small part of our life and be enriched for it. Allen was a Buddhist, and he died in the traditions of Buddhist ceremony and had a funeral and was cremated in that fashion. One part of Buddhism that he told me he never quite caught onto or viscerally believed in was reincarnation, but I thought after this period of him in the Bardo, when he comes either to be enlightened or to find a copulation couple and climb aboard: I hope that if Allen is reborn, he finds a nice couple, people who will be there for him and love him warmly and love him so much that he doesn't have to be stellar or exceptional, that he can just be a well-loved human being just like he made for himself with Allen Ginsberg.

Bob Rosenthal was Allen Ginsberg's secretary from 1977 until his death.

Requiem for a Co-Conspirator

Jon Surgal

Ginsberg was a hard-times prophet to two generations. He was the real thing. I spent a night in jail with him, and I know. Something like seventy of us were busted for throwing down our bodies outside the draft induction center on Whitehall Street, blocking traffic. Hauled off to the Tombs, we were crowded into a pair of cells each designed to accommodate no more than three prisoners. There was no room for most of us to sit down, and we stood there for an hour or so, deprived of our belts, gradually losing both heart and pants, until our spirits were abruptly revived by the cheerful sound of the finger-cymbals Ginsberg had smuggled into his cell. He played until morning, and the rest of us were bound together not only as transgressors but as audience. A standing room only audience.

For Ginsberg, solidarity never conflicted with celebrity. With his fellow generational crossover Tim Leary he shared a happy tolerance for media attention. Carolyn Cassady once told me about eating lunch with the two men at an outdoor cafe where they were beswarmed with paparazzi.

Thoughtfully, she moved her chair, interposing her back between the photographers and her companions, only to find them leaning as if phototropically to her right and left. Ginsberg was a prophet, after all, and a prophet is a messenger, and a messenger does not lightly forswear a means by which to transmit his message.

In his youth, convinced that he belonged to a chosen cadre of great writers, he frantically extolled the best minds of his generation, frantically pounded on the doors of publishing houses with one fist while waving the teletype manuscript of *On The Road* in the other. By the Sixties, he spoke the voice of becalmed assurance, and again was heard. He had become a God-knower, a Bhodisattva—a goatfooted Bhodisattva, to be sure—and he proclaimed and celebrated with us the best *intentions* of our generation.

I met him in my first week as a student at Columbia College in 1966. Walking for the first time into the West End Bar, legendary hangout of Ginsberg and Kerouac in their own Columbia days, I found him sitting at a beer-sodden table, surrounded by students doing their best to

disguise their awe. Recognizing a Bhodisattva when I saw one, I submitted for his comment the list of institutional inequities I had already observed at Columbia. Ginsberg nodded knowingly.

“This place,” he intoned softly, “has ruined a lot of good men.”

He had become a God-knower, a Bhodisattva....

It had certainly done its best to ruin *him*. He had been thrown out of Columbia during the university presidency of Nicholas Murray Butler for using his finger to write “BUTLER HAS NO BALLS” in the dust on his dormitory window. Arrested for receiving stolen goods during his early days in the Huncke junkie orbit, he had appealed to Columbia’s Lionel Trilling for a character reference, only to be told it was contingent on his undergoing a course of psychotherapy.

My own generation at Columbia would, in condign retribution, depose its president and marginalize the authority of “Uncle Lionel”—he actually *was* the uncle of my roommate Billy—though the most aesthetically influential *group* we ever produced was Sha Na Na.

Ginsberg, in turn, went to the wall for us. At the March on the Pentagon, by means of incantation, he managed to levitate the entire building several inches into the heat-heavy DC air. Whether this neat trick was literal or metaphorical—or both—depends on whose account you credit. As for me, I saw the damn thing *hover*.

This of course was exactly the kind of thing that pissed off Jack Kerouac. Uncomfortable with the anti-war movement, he refused to embrace the Sixties or be embraced by them. In fact, he never made it out of them alive. I was in Montréal when he died (I was doing research for a film about US deserters), and Ginsberg came straight from the funeral in Lowell to fulfill a speaking engagement at McGill. He read “Kaddish” in Kerouac’s memory. Three or four of us from the audience went out walking with him afterwards. The end of the decade was closing in on us. Someone asked him about the nature of his relationship with Kerouac when they were students.

“Jack thought of me as a sensitive little flower,” he said, smiling. “And he thought it was his job to protect me.”

At that moment, we reached a corner, and I stepped off the curb into the path of a fast-moving station wagon. Ginsberg reached out quickly and pulled me back onto the sidewalk.

It occurred to me then, as it occurs to me now, that Kerouac may have had it backwards. Ginsberg gave him validation in his youth and comfort, such comfort anyway as was permitted, in his decline. (He certainly saved *me* from a bad-ass argument with a big-ass Buick.) The frenzied young press agent for his friend had become his caretaker, would in time become a caretaker of his reputation with the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Neropa.

Continued, next page

Reality Sandwiches

Joyce Johnson

I knew Allen Ginsberg from the time I was sixteen. He first surfaces, in my memories of him, in 1952 in an apartment on West 112th Street where I had no business being. It belonged to a Barnard psychology professor who had been Allen’s classmate at Columbia. Carl Solomon, to whom Allen would soon dedicate *Howl*, lived right around the corner. Wild stories preceded Allen’s arrival—an incident involving coat thieves and a stolen car, a commitment to the mental ward in Columbia Presbyterian. He’s a dark-eyed, curly-headed young man with a beautiful voice. The voice is what I notice most—a mellowness with an underlying fire. My best friend Elise Cowen promptly falls in love with Allen, and I am captivated by him, too.

This is why the Beat movement has refused to die.

He’s a messenger from the underground, from a cultural revolution in the making. But on this afternoon I have no inkling that Allen’s ideas and Jack Kerouac’s will profoundly influence the course of my life. My parents exist in a state of what Thoreau called “quiet desperation.” I want something much larger for myself, a life that isn’t merely safe. Even though I’m only sixteen and a girl, I want freedom, experience, a complete immersion in reality.

I get my immersion, sooner than I’m prepared for it. By 1957, when Allen arranges for me to meet Jack Kerouac on a blind date, I’ve gone

through a break with my family, a devastating love affair, and an illegal abortion. I never asked Allen why he decided to bring Jack and me together. I think it was a characteristic mixture of kindness and practicality and erotic mischief. Allen was always taking care of people, looking out for his friends. Jack was lonely, homeless as usual, and dead broke. I was lonely, and I had an apartment. Whatever ultimately happened between us, we’d dig each other for a while, have some interesting, illuminating moments. In the spirit of nothing to lose, I went off to Howard Johnson’s on Eighth Street one cold January night to meet the darkhaired stranger in the red- and black-checked shirt, who had recently spent 62 days in solitude in Desolation Peak. Young women were not supposed to have such adventures in 1957.

In the bland and sinister 1950s, there are thousands like me with longings we can’t yet articulate bottled up inside us. Allen and Jack will give powerful, irresistible voices to these subversive longings; they’ll release us from our weirdness, our isolation, tell us we’re not alone. This is what “Beat” still means to me. This is why the Beat movement has refused to die.

Allen Ginsberg was open in every way—generous-hearted, fearless. He made it his business to experience everything. As for death, he was always in training for it.

Joyce Johnson is the author of Minor Characters, which is just coming out in Germany.

Allen Ginsberg composed "**Police State Blues**" in mid-March 1970, while he was on the campus of Illinois State University at Normal to give a poetry reading. For the most part, the turmoil associated with America's high-60s had not yet reached ISU (Kent State would change all of that a year later), so the dance sponsored by the university's newly formed Gay Liberation Front was quite controversial. Rumor had it that members of the football team planned to disrupt the dance; in anticipation, members of ISU's S.D.S. chapter guarded the door (a fact referred to in the parenthetical coda to Ginsberg's poem). Ginsberg not only attended the event, he participated enthusiastically, and began to write the following poem before the playing of the last dance.

The poem is published here for the first time.

Police State Blues

Night meat lights

hypnotizing hungry autos, Iron bridges
crossing down Main
"Get a goddamned haircut!"
front window cry, Whose face drunk dark
beautiful-chiseled mouth kist by whiskey?

to Gay Liberation Front Dance Normal, Illinois
—black, guitar, soul-mate drum & mustached hairy organ
pounding majestic repetition
chords shake God bones
—that stripe-shirted boy's
belly flashing strobe-eternal
glimpsed
bright eyes & flying hair
soul open-mouthed, wide armed, thin scream ecstatic
thighs jazzed teen-ass
to guitar squeal, black electric high
prayer-shrieks thru matter-chairs—
A hundred bodies red-lit in circle, stomping
Afric floors in old Millenia
heavenly fists invoking Lord Holy Power
Give us Peace 0 Give us Bliss
Give us this Happiness 0
"Thank you for letting
Me be my Self again!"

I dance majestic-Mudra'd, weaponhanded, Wheel turning
Fingers Prayer-bead twined for Greeting
Supplication & Abhaya calm
breast breath humming Om Aing Gring Cling Chamunda Yei Vijay
Nameh Svaha!
my head extended in hashish fume-rays,
old man half-bald, beard gray streaked, eyes wine joy filled
two thousand years ago Anacrean
"gracefully drunk, & gracefully to dance among the young
& gracefully be mad"—
our bodies offered to Chango red cock-head Lord of Creation or
Kali-Ma stomping over Battlefields—
pounding earth skull, waking earth heart!
Beat after beat identical our body foot belly dance tribe cry,
boys and girls hand in hand groaning in a circle.

(Illinois State University Solarium, first G.L.F. dance, S.D.S. attending ticket door, Women's liberation & boyfriends, babies naked underfoot toddling where Black Coalition provided circle rock dance ritual.)

March 15, 1970

Surgal, continued

Look at his letters to Neal Cassady, and even to Carolyn. They are so full of enthusiasm, of advice, of encouragement. Of caretaking. And I know, because Jan Kerouac told me, that the time she spent with Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky (some of it, granted, in bed) was the closest she came to understanding her father. Maybe it was the caretaker sensibility of the Sixties that made them such a good stage for such a great second act.

Now Ginsberg is gone, the definitive exception, for those of us who came of age in the Sixties, to the dictum proposed (and, unhappily, proved) by Jerry Rubin, never to trust anyone over thirty. And he made it look easy. There he was smiling down at us, fullbearded, from a million posters on a million dayglo walls. There he was promenading the East Village, a permanent resident, permanently accessible. There he was, too, holding up handmade cue cards in bardic validation while Bob Dylan wailed from the alley at the top of *Don't Look Back*: "BASEMENT," "PAVEMENT," "LOOK OUT KID." Ginsberg was looking out for us. He spoke to us. He not only approved of us, he was complicit with us, and we not only revered him, we trusted him.

And we'll miss him.

Jon Surgal helped shut down Columbia University three times during the Sixties.

American Book Review on LitLine

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