Growing up in New Jersey, I plotted getaways. At seventeen, in June 1959, just after I was expelled from high school, I dyed my hair black, caught a New York-bound train and checked into a YWCA near Times Square under an assumed name. To my eyes, Times Square looked like a party, a party for all the people not invited to the other parties—this was the place where anonymity turned into excitement. When the detective my stepfather had hired found me in my room at the Y a few days later, I was armed with On the Road, "Howl" and a Gideon Bible, verging on what I hoped was existentialist psychosis and planning my career as a Beat outcast.

After I returned home, my life took a different direction. In the fall of 1960, I went to Harvard, a place without "beatniks," as authorities had recently informed the New York Post, because of "the impossibility of remaining at Harvard and being 'beat' at the same time." But there has always been another life, the one I began near Times Square, which has persisted in reshaping and disrupting my plans. Besides, I wasn't mistaken; being beat did mean making assignments with New York City.

In fact, the founders of the Beat movement, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and their first mentor, William S. Burroughs, picked up the word "beat" in Times Square in the mid-1940s, from

Hal Chase, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs (from left) hanging out on Manhattan's Upper West Side, circa 1946

ALLEN GINSBERG COLLECTION
Herbert Huncke, a junkie and, later, a Beat writer himself. They interpreted the word differently—Ginsberg and Kerouac said it meant exhausted, poor, beatific, while Burroughs, a master ironist, used it as a verb, meaning to steal or con. For all of them, however, it spelled a revolution in manners, one that made hitchhiking, jazz, gender-bending, left-wing attitude and high-style low life de rigueur for anyone aspiring to hipster status.

Refusing censorship or conventional revision, Kerouac and Ginsberg called their free-form, highly autobiographical style “spontaneous bop prosody” and advertised its affinities with the other path-breaking experiments in expressionist subjectivity going on in the city at the same time—Charlie Parker’s improvisational sound, Jackson Pollock’s explosive canvases and Marlon Brando’s turbulent Method acting. For the Beats, too, art was charisma. They, too, came to New York from the provinces, and found in the city their impetus.

“What a great city New York is!” Kerouac, born to immigrant French-Canadian parents in Lowell, Massachusetts, wrote a friend in 1947. “We are living at just the right time—Johnson and his London, Balzac and his Paris, Socrates and his Athens—the same thing again.”

Burroughs was a refugee from the “life-proof houses” of suburban St. Louis. In his novel Queer, he explained that he was drawn to New York, as to Mexico City, because it was a “terminal of space-time travel.” In other cities, “you are exactly so much dead meat,” but “by the fact of being” in New York at all, “you are traveling.”

Ginsberg, raised in an immigrant Russian household in Paterson, New Jersey, learned his craft amid the city’s “Vast human wilderness/Houses uplifted like hives off/the stone floor of the world.”

When the three men met in 1944, they were just starting their careers. Ginsberg was an eager, intense seventeen-year-old freshman at Columbia; he rushed around the city “in a perpetual sweat of emotional activity,” as Kerouac put it, brimming and flooding over with thoughts, delights, perplexities, catastrophes and discoveries.

The dazzlingly handsome and sweet-natured Jack Kerouac, a star athlete, had dropped out of Columbia at twenty in 1942 to work odd jobs and write. People found themselves telling him their life stories and secret thoughts in minute detail, mythologizing, confessing, sure he would never judge or condemn them. He hoped to capture the “ecstatic tomfoolery” of the age in a series of “true story novels.”

Burroughs, at thirty, thin, poker-faced and impeccably eccentric, was studying the city’s night life and developing his reputation as a connoisseur of horror. “I’m apparently some kind of agent from another planet,” he told Kerouac, “but I haven’t got my orders decoded yet.” The group soon converged at 421 West 118th Street, the apartment of Kerouac’s girlfriend, Edie Parker, where they talked for days and nights at a time, putting on impromptu psychodramas and improvising fresh identities from an intoxicating mix of Spenglerian gloom and absurdist comic timing.

In the mid-1940s, New York City was emerging from World War II, glittering with power, the most important metropolis in the world. For the Beats, however, this public New York, the “capital of capitalism,” as the historian Kenneth Jackson has called it, soon to be decked out with dozens of new steel-and-glass, slab-and-square modernist office buildings and caught in a tightening noose of expressways, was the mock-sinister mask of a new, frightening American empire. In his exuberant jeremiad “Howl” (1956), Ginsberg apostrophized it as “Moloch whose buildings are judgment!,” a “sphinx of cement and aluminum,” devouring its young.

The neighborhoods that gave the Beats their inspiration were the ones then visibly on a downward slide: the Upper West Side of Amsterdam and Columbus avenues, where the first SRO opened in 1939; Harlem’s vagrant streets and jazz
clubs and, of course, Times Square, once the heart of the posh theater district, but now a honky-tonk of peep shows, seedy all-night cafeterias and porno movie houses, all catering to a host of servicemen, drug addicts, petty thieves and male and female prostitutes.

Interested in downward, not upward, mobility, the Beats were among the first to grasp the nature of the city’s new fascination. New York’s influence was expanding just as its economic and political health was declining. In 1943 a commission had reported that New York was economically outmoded and overextended, a victim of premature obsolescence, with spreading “ghost” neighborhoods. The growing defense industry favored the towns and cities of the South and the West Coast. Manufacturers, jobs and the white middle classes moved to the suburbs, themselves heavily subsidized by the funds the federal government took away from the cities.

As prosperous whites left, however, poor people of color arrived; 375,000 blacks came to New York between 1940 and 1960, and the number of Puerto Ricans more than quadrupled. East Harlem between 90th and 125th Streets was known as “El Barrio,” and Spanish became the city’s second language.

Under Mayor William O’Dwyer in the mid-1940s, the rackets took back City Hall. Crime rates soared. This was the Beats’ New York, the crossroads of “mongrel America,” as Kerouac called it, a film noir kingdom rife with farce and catastrophe. In their eyes, the city’s vitality lay in its subterranean life of creative decay, its status as a place, in Ginsberg’s words, “too vast to know, too/myriad windowed to govern.” The Beats aspired to be at the bottom of the world looking up; the angelic could never be separated from the sordid.

Perhaps appropriately, the Beat movement began with a story of ruin and decline, a murder case that made the front page of the New York Times as well as the Daily News, and inspired the circle’s first literary efforts. About 3:00 a.m., on August 14, 1944, after a night of heavy drinking, a Columbia sophomore named Lucien Carr killed David Kammerer, a thirty-three-year-old gay man, in Riverside Park at the base of 115th Street; Carr stabbed Kammerer in the heart with his Boy Scout knife, then rolled his body into the Hudson River.

Carr, the son of a distinguished St. Louis family, was an intimate friend of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs. Kammerer was also a member of their circle. On that fateful August night, as the friends entered their favorite haunt, the West End bar on Broadway between 113th and 114th streets, a hit song of the summer, “You Always Hurt the One You Love,” was playing on the jukebox.

When Carr turned himself in, no one could believe that this “slender, studious” young man, as he was described in the Times, had killed anyone. But Carr re-enacted the crime for the police, and Kammerer’s body was shortly discovered floating off 108th Street. Carr spent his time in police custody reading the poetry of Rimbaud and Yeats.

The Daily News called the crime an “honor slaying.” Kammerer, a former teacher, also from a well-to-do St. Louis family, had fallen desperately in love with the arresting handsome Carr when Carr was a student in one of his classes. Although Carr was not gay, in 1943 Kammerer followed him to New York. There, Kammerer drifted toward derelict status, doing odd jobs for the superintendent at 48 Morton Street in Greenwich Village in exchange for a room.

At the trial, Carr, who had a girlfriend at Barnard, claimed self-defense: The older and far larger man was trying to rape him. He pleaded guilty to manslaughter and served two years in an upstate New York reformatory, emerging in 1946 sobered, stouter, with an unbecoming mustache, as if determined to bury his beauty from sight.

Burroughs, a close friend of Kammerer’s, had
told Carr not to blame himself—Kammerer “demanded” the fate he met. Yet, while none of his circle thought Carr was homosexual, they noted that he hadn’t discouraged Kammerer’s attentions. Indeed, the brilliant Carr, a self-declared aficionado of Mephistopheles, took a perverse pride in Kammerer’s abject state, taunting him yet never forbidding him his company. “If he doesn’t love me,” Kammerer asked a friend, “then why is he always around me?”

Although Carr was not himself a writer—he had “the vision,” Kerouac realized, “but not the method”—Carr served as a muse to his friends, who at once wrote stories about Kammerer’s death. Kerouac and Burroughs collaborated on a hard-boiled, sensational narrative in the manner of Dashiell Hammett, sardonically titled And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks, which no New York publisher would touch.

Ginsberg submitted a chapter of his novel in progress to his writing professor at Columbia, only to find himself summoned to the office of the dean, who expressly forbade him to write on the subject. Columbia wanted no more bad publicity. James Baldwin’s second novel, Giovanni’s Room (1956), was partly inspired by the case, but the accounts of Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg remain unpublished, part of the city’s secrets. (Carr went on to become a reporter and an assistant managing editor for United Press International in New York; he is now retired. He is the father of the novelist Caleb Carr.)

New York afforded the Beats more than scandal. In 1948 Ginsberg moved into El Barrio, to a brownstone apartment at 321 East 121st Street (a block later razed to make way for John S. Roberts High School and the Robert F. Wagner Houses, a public apartment complex). Less than a year before, he had reluctantly authorized the lobotomy of his hopelessly psychotic mother, Naomi, at Pilgrim State Hospital on Long Island; Naomi would be the subject of his greatest poem, “Kaddish” (1961). Engaged in a painfully frustrating affair with Neal Cassady, Ginsberg had not yet finished his course work at Columbia; friends felt he was beginning to crack.

One July afternoon, as Ginsberg was lying on his bed by the open window, masturbating and reading Blake, he heard a prophetic, tender voice. He knew at once that it was Blake speaking, telling him to “cultivate the terror, get right into it.” A series of intolerable, bright visions began; “the top of my head came off,” he said later, “letting in the rest of the universe.” The buildings outside his window, the entire city, became a living thing.

At the Columbia Bookstore the next day, a fresh revelation hit him: “Everybody knew. Everybody knew completely everything.” Everyone was aware of the “great unconscious running between all of us,” but adopted masks to hide it. Convinced that he had seen God, he called his psychiatrist to tell him what had happened; the doctor hung up on him. Ginsberg had embarked on what would become a major career as a poet-provocateur, remixing the sacred and the profane, seeking the leverage to pry his society loose from its destructive self-deceptions.

Ginsberg stayed in Manhattan, where he died of cancer in April 1997 at the age of seventy in his East Village apartment, but his first and closest friends did not stay there with him. Burroughs, who achieved international fame in the early 1960s with the publication of his novel Naked Lunch, settled in 1981 in Lawrence, Kansas, after decades of living in Tangier, Mexico, London and New York; he died in August 1997 at eighty-three in Lawrence.

Kerouac began to travel around the country in 1947. When he was in the city, he spent more and more of his time in Queens with his mother, Gabrielle, first at 133-01 Cross Bay Boulevard in Ozone Park, then at 94-21 134th Street in Richmond Hill. Manhattan still thrilled his soul, he said, but it had begun to “mortify” his heart.
Neal Cassady, whom Kerouac immortalized as Dean Moriarty, the exuberant, fast-talking "jailkid" from Colorado in On the Road (1957), first looked him up in Ozone Park in the winter of 1947. When Kerouac opened the door, Cassady plunged into intimacy: "I've come to ask you to show me how to write," he said.

In 1951, standing on Cross Bay Boulevard before the window of a bakery (still there today), Kerouac discovered "sketching," a way of achieving "100 percent personal honesty" by writing down what was right before him, on the spot, as it happened. It was in Queens that Kerouac wrote or rewrote some of his best novels, including On the Road, Visions of Cody, The Subterraneans and Maggie Cassidy. Fittingly, on October 23, 1969, the Historic Landmarks Preservation Center of New York placed a plaque with his name on it on 133-01 Cross Bay Boulevard. Despite the enduring devotion of Ginsberg and Carr, Kerouac died of alcoholism in Florida in 1969, a bitter and defeated man. He was forty-seven.

Yet Kerouac always remembered the first days in New York as the happiest of his life. He left a wonderful "true story" vignette of them in The Town and the City (1950), his first novel. It is 1946. Kerouac has just come back to town, and Ginsberg is eager to give him a demonstration of the insanity of the postwar city, the result of the "atomic disease" now afflicting America. Radioactive fallout has turned the population into "zombies," Ginsberg says, "locked up in the sad psychoses of themselves." His experiment is to be performance art, madcap mayhem undertaken in the interests of metaphysical hunger and social prophecy.

Ginsberg and Kerouac get on the subway at Times Square. Once seated, Ginsberg holds a newspaper in front of his face and pretends to be reading it. He has torn a hole in the middle of the page, however, and a melancholy old gentleman seated opposite him with his small grandson is soon aware of the "glittering eyes of a madman burning triumphantly into his." Ginsberg has told Kerouac that his "victim" will show signs of "paranoid persecution," and in fact, under Ginsberg's unrelenting gaze, the old man becomes extremely uneasy. Others in the car look pointedly away or assume expressions of outraged indignation.

But, contrary to Ginsberg's prediction, several people, including a man coming home from work, a young student and the grandson, are transfixed with delight at his antics. The little boy jumps up, sticks his face in the hole and stares, pop-eyed, back at Ginsberg. Then he claps his hands and cries, "Do some more, Mister, do some more!"

Soon everyone in the car is laughing. Ginsberg's experiment has apparently backfired; he's been outwitted. But he's not upset. He needed collaborators, not victims, people ready to drop their preconceptions at divine folly's cure, and in New York he has found them.

As a girl, I ran away to be part of the world the Beats were inventing, and living in Manhattan today, I still feel them, co-conspirators with its creative chaos, riding the electric connections that turn the city into a hive of overlapping purposes and fantasies. Catching the hope-and-fear rhythms of their time and place, they paced the streets, "digging" everything one day, bustled and mute on a park bench the next—in Kerouac's words, "storing up for more belief."