

# Tether

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El Beat

The January morning in 1960 when Allen Ginsberg flew in to the Los Cerrillos aerodrome was, they say, a warm one. For luggage he had a large tote bag and a cardboard box. When he stepped off the plane he was beaming. He looked more like a scruffy Chilean than a New York intellectual. Ginsberg was unshaven and smelled bad, they say. They say that, for the duration of the flights from New York to Rio de Janeiro, and then on from Rio to Santiago de Chile, the flight attendants had done all they could not to serve him.

The first words to come out of Ginsberg's mouth, on leaving the airport, were: 'I'm here to have fun'. A phrase that one of the journalists present – one of the few – wrote up in one of the morning papers (whether because his English was poor, or out of malice, no one knows) as 'I'm here to fuck one'. And this was what went to print, alongside a photo of the disheveled American poet.

They then say that Ginsberg was taken to the Hotel Panamericano. And when he asked to be shown the sights that he was taken to visit to the city zoo. There, in the all but empty zoo, the only other visitors being one or two families and a few young couples out for a stroll, the poet engaged the animals in conversation. He struck up a friendship with the anteaters, he shrieked at the parrots and the monkeys, and carried on doing so until he got a response. Those present say that Ginsberg spoke in English, reciting some of his own verses, and some of the poetry of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams. The only animal to respond was the anteater, which let out a number of low groans as Ginsberg intoned the disjointed lines of *Howl*, his most well known poem.

Ginsberg was there in Chile on the invitation of the University of Concepción, which was holding its inaugural Writers of the Americas Conference. The next morning, following the visit to the zoo and a long sleep for the poet, that was where he headed. South.

It was then, they say, as he left the hotel to go to Concepción, that two young men approached shyly. Would he grant them an interview? Delighted, said Ginsberg. They spoke for two hours.

The young men, who wrote for a university journal, spoke some English, but it was Ginsberg's Caribbean-Spanish that enabled something resembling a conversation. The poet said he'd learned the language during his time in the merchant navy, sailing the waters off Central America. Their discussion centered around the state of literature in the United States, science fiction, homosexuality, Vietnam, Fidel Castro, and Chilean poets.

At the end of the interview, Ginsberg told the pair he wanted to try Chile's psychotropic drugs. I hope from some of your country's natives, he said. He also asked them about *ayahuasca*. But the students, hoping to tell him something he didn't know, took pains to recommend the *chamico* plant instead; Vicente Pérez Rosales had included it in his catalogue, referring to it as the substance used by the Mapuche tribe. Ginsberg seemed to like the sound of this, raising his eyebrows, smiling broadly and making a note in his tatty notebook, which was falling apart, and which seemed to have had numerous cups of coffee spilt on it. Thank you, thank you, he said, I'm in your debt. Then, shouldering his tote bag, he said goodbye and turned back towards the hotel, where his van to Concepción had been waiting the whole time.

P had Nicanor Parra's *Poemas y antipoemas – Poems and Antipoems* – on his bedside table. He'd annotated his copy heavily. He dipped into it at least once a day. It was a tatty and falling apart: lots of the pages were loose, and all were thumbed and grubby.

P was a young student at the time. *Poems and Antipoems* was one of the few books he owned, and Nicanor Parra one of the few poets he could understand and admire. Other poets didn't interest him; they made everything complicated, and sometimes very academic. Other writers and artists of the day left him just as cold.

P remembered very well his single encounter with Parra, in a bar-restaurant in Concepción.

It went like this:

Nicanor Parra arrived, was seated, ate a casserole, wrote out a couple of physics problems on a napkin, quickly solved them, asked for the bill and left. P, who at the time was just starting his Philosophy course at Concepción University, was awestruck; it took him a number of minutes to react. Going over to the table Parra had vacated, he picked up the napkin and put it in his pocket, which he proceeded to pat repeatedly. Like someone who finds money in the street and continually pats their trousers to reassure themselves it's still there. Then he went back to his own table, where he had a number of books and notebooks open, but found he couldn't concentrate. He soon left and went back to his student accommodation.

All this came flooding back when, a few years later, Nicanor Parra again visited Concepción. Posters began springing up on campus: *Inaugural Writers of the Americas Conference*. On the bill were Nicanor Parra, Gonzalo Rojas, Jorge Teillier, Volodia Teitelboim, Ernesto Sábato, and 'el poeta beat' Allen Ginsberg.

P later learned that the original idea was to include the whole Beat Generation. That is, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso, not just Allen Ginsberg. They'd wanted to bring all these mad gringos to Chile, where few people had read them, and where they weren't at all well known besides. But, in the end, in the words of one of the organizers, the ones who showed up showed up.

P was in raptures. He couldn't believe it. This time, this time he'd get to speak to Parra – no question about it. He'd walk up to him and say something witty. Though, not too witty, because you don't have to be *too* witty, not with Parra. *Señor Parra*.

And that wasn't all. P planned on spending some time with the Beat, too.

P owned a copy of *Howl*, a poor translation he'd been sold at the Santa Lucia flea market by a particularly mad gringo who was a little older than him. An eccentric gringo who claimed the world was so polarized it was going to explode, a heroin addict who had come to Chile planning, he said, on taking a boat to Easter Island, where he was going to get clean: on Easter Island he'd have no way of finding any drugs, nor would the drugs have any way of finding him. He knew the Beats, or claimed to know them, and he himself had carried out, and self-published, the translations into Spanish of the poetry and collections he was selling.

This was how P got hold of his copy of *Howl*, and he had read it, and liked it, though a number of the references passed him by.

When the conference got underway, P was quickly bored. It all felt very political. The hall was full of literature students who all seemed happiest discussing the new laws, politicians, the left and the right. Very few were talking about books, literature, writers or poets. That is, until Parra and Ginsberg came onstage. Here Ginsberg spoke in English, Parra translating almost as soon as the words had left his mouth. This was how the reading worked: Ginsberg read a verse, Parra followed with the translation; Ginsberg started up again, Parra translated.

Ten minutes in, P began to think that Parra must be playing games, because he would take at most thirty seconds to recount what Ginsberg had taken two minutes to read. He seemed to be missing things out, or maybe it was one of his strange experiments – P couldn't tell. Maybe Parra was even *making up verses* based only loosely on what the gringo said.

It was during the reading, during one of Ginsberg's turns, as Ginsberg read part of *Howl*. That was when P interrupted them, started asking questions. He couldn't stand it. Where are the rest, Señor Ginsberg, I'd like to know? Where are your friends? What's it like being a Beat? People didn't know what was going on, or who this person was. Ginsberg, plainly annoyed by the interruption, said something about Kerouac having not wanted to come, about him being in Mexico in pursuit of Tristessa, the love of his life. Burroughs was in a clinic, trying to get over heroin, and Corso was leading some anti-Vietnam protests. That is, he said, the rest, my friends, my colleagues and contemporaries, are busy with their own affairs. This last comment he then repeated, pointedly modifying it in the English: "That's to say, *mindin' their own business.*"

Silence descended on the hall.

P felt everyone looking at him as though he was some kind of aberration, but P was used to being looked at like that, so he didn't mind. In fact, P was in raptures: Ginsberg had spoken to him. *To him!* And not only that, Parra had also looked at him. A look of reproach, or of weariness, yes, but a

After the conference, Parra was the only person who didn't find Ginsberg, or his plans to journey further south, unnerving; the North American poet had communicated his idea to Parra previously. In fact, Ginsberg had invited Parra along for the ride, but Parra, though he agreed to accompany Ginsberg, had declined the principle feature of the excursion. He was grateful for the invitation, he said, but didn't take drugs himself.

'But go ahead, *mi amigo*,' he said. 'If that's what you want to do.'

They say that, on the advice of some southern poets, Nicanor Parra and Allen Ginsberg headed into the jungle, emerging together a number of hours later. 'Here's the mad gringo,' Parra said to the group of musicians and writers who were there waiting for them. Ginsberg was out of it. He seemed sedated. People spoke to him, but he gave very little sign of being able to hear. They put him in a van, and then in a train bound for Santiago, where, gradually, he recovered his previous level of lucidity. Lots of people asked what had happened. Señor Ginsberg, what did you take? Did you manage to find the *chamico*? But the poet, in fits of laughter, simply said: I'm working on it, I write poetry based on my experiences. When it's done, then I'll show you.

As for the rest of the time the North American poet spent in Chile: Ginsberg visited the central market and ate a stew, but not a meat one because he was vegetarian; Ginsberg slept at Parra's home, had discussions with Parra's wife Violeta, and played with Ángel, the son; Ginsberg visited the house at Estación Mapocho, the poet Pablo de Rokha's residence; Ginsberg spent evenings at Il Bosco, the well-known bar, and became acquainted with the capital's bohemian crowd; Ginsberg and that smile of his – ear-to-ear, his whole face a smile – climbed Santa Lucia. And there, up on the mountainside, he turned his mind to what had passed in the jungle of Temuco. And spent an afternoon writing down his ideas, poems and phrases.

P's second time with Ginsberg (or in the vicinity of Ginsberg, at least) was a few weeks later. Ginsberg was staying at the Parra household in the Santiago neighbourhood of La Reina. P, having transferred from Concepción University to the National University, was now living closer by.

Every Friday, P walked the few kilometres to Parra's mansion. He looked in from the high fence at the perimeter. Sometimes he saw Ginsberg taking the sun on the deckchairs, his paunch open to the air, a messy-looking spliff dangling from the corner of his mouth. He saw him laughing to himself and reciting poems in English and Hebrew. Occasionally P would hear a guitar playing nearby, and then catch a glimpse of Violeta Parra, who would play for the gringo when he wasn't painting, talking to himself, or, as he did from time to time, making challenging groans in her direction.

After a week of surveying the Parra plot, P began to feel that everyone there was crazy. But he could see, too, that they were good Chileans; they were crazy for the good of Chile. They made the country, in one way or another, more interesting.

The last time he saw Ginsberg was at the farewell party at the Parra household. Parra's musician brothers played through the night, children wheeled around, hens and chickens got caught in people's feet. Ginsberg walked about in a poncho, drunk on wine. He introduced himself to everyone there, and interspersed Violeta's *cueca* playing with the occasionally wail – more akin to animal noises than anything.

Seeing that it wouldn't be difficult to get into the party, P walked through the wooden gate and into the mansion. He wandered the length and breadth of the edifice that, until then, he'd only seen from outside, from by the fence. He poured himself a little wine and took a seat in a corner, waiting for Parra to appear. But Parra didn't appear. Unlike Ginsberg – who, after a good amount of marijuana and various concoctions, was the king of the party – a bout of creativity had hit the Chilean poet, who had locked himself in his study, where he spent the night writing down problems and poems in his notebooks.

Around dawn, as the birds began to sing and the drunk people were becoming aggressive, P decided to leave the Parra mansion. On his way home he saw the sun rising over Santiago, an orange line bisecting it horizontally, and clouds on the horizon. He climbed a little higher on his bicycle and came along the principal avenue there, which years later would be called Avenida Larraín, but at that time was nothing but rubbly earth and horse dung.

He dropped down and came along to Plaza Italia where he went into a soda place for breakfast. He ordered the tea, homemade bread and eggs.

The day Allen Ginsberg left Chile, the temperature dropped significantly. It was autumn by now and the leaves had begun to turn a yellow-brown. They say Ginsberg scooped up several fallen leaves and put them in his notebook to press.

At the airport, he and Parra shared an embrace. 'Goodbye, mad poet,' said Parra. 'Cuidaté!' Ginsberg beamed back at him. Then, gathering his tote bag, he turned and headed for security.

A number of hours later, they say, after an uneventful flight, Ginsberg arrived in Peru, where his Latin American peregrinations were to continue. Again the flight attendants, put off by the smell of him and his peculiar appearance, had avoided him. As for his time in Peru, his treks through the Amazon and his experiences with *ayahuasca*, these hardly need much description: they were immortalised in the missives he sent to his friend, William Burroughs, later published as *The Yage Letters*. Soon, some say, towards the end of the 1970's, a self-published edition of this book was being sold by an eccentric gringo, in the Santa Lucia flea market, under the title *Tether*.