# The Last Days *of* Roger Federer

If it is so difficult to begin, imagine
what it will be to end—

—Louise Glück

## 01.

'The End' is the last track on the Doors' *first* album, released in January 1967, having been recorded the previous August, when the band had been together for just over a year. It grew out of multiple live performances at the Whisky a Go-Go in Hollywood, though no recordings of these evolving versions of the song have survived. From the get-go at the Go-Go, then, Jim Morrison was busy obsessing about the end—and not just in 'The End.' 'When the Music's Over' ends with repeated assurances that music is your only friend 'until the End.' It's a safe bet, contemplating or proclaiming the end like this; eventually you will be proved right.

'The End' was the last song the quartet performed live, at the Warehouse in New Orleans, on 12 December 1970. In March the following year the twenty-seven-year-old Morrison moved to Paris, where he was found dead, in the bathtub of his apartment, on July 3.

## 02.

In a version of 'Tangled Up in Blue' the unnamed lover tells Bob Dylan (or whoever the narrator of the song is supposed to be): 'This ain't the end, / We'll meet again someday on the avenue . . .'

She's right, it's nowhere near the end when she says this. It's the second verse of the long opening track of *Blood on the Tracks*. Dylan continued to tinker with the song in numerous ways after a test pressing of the album had been made, prepared for release, and, at the last minute, rejected in favour of a more rhythmically insistent version of

'Tangled Up in Blue,' rerecorded with different musicians, in Minneapolis. (The changes were made so late in the day that the record went on sale with the old sleeve, crediting only the original musicians.) He's since performed it live, sometimes with major overhauls to words and music, on more than sixteen hundred occasions.

## 03.

On the wall of the barbershop where I have my hair cut on Main Street in Venice Beach—where the Doors started out—is a mural of Jim Morrison with his bare shoulders and luxuriant black hair that always looked like it never needed cutting. Recently another similar mural appeared, right on my street. All over Venice, in fact, there are traces of the Lizard King, tributes to the rock-god Dionysus. On the boardwalk at least one busker is always playing 'Break on Through' or one of the Doors' other big hits.

## 04.

I was dilly-dallying, unsure how to start this book about how things end, on Thursday 10 January 2019, when, at the press conference ahead of his first-round match at the Australian Open, Andy Murray announced what amounted to his retirement. More than moving, it was devastating to watch. The first, fairly innocuous question proved too much for him. Unable to answer, he left the stage for several minutes to compose himself. It was the end, he said when he came back out. He hoped to bow out at Wimbledon in July but was not sure he would make it even that far. When another journalist asked if this meant the Australian Open might be his last tournament, Murray said that was quite likely. Which meant that his match on Monday—my Sunday in Los Angeles—against Roberto Bautista Agut might be his last. Murray sat there describing how the pain, not just of playing

top-level tennis but of pulling on his socks and putting on his shoes at home, was too much. As often happens in these press conferences his common-sense answers made the questions a little superfluous. Had he seen a sports psychologist? Yes, but that didn't help because the pain was still there. If it had made the pain go away then he'd be feeling great. The whole thing made for harrowing and, of course, absolutely absorbing viewing. It was the end, Murray said, partly because there was no end in sight—to the training, the rehab, the pain; no sign when he might begin to get back to his best. A line from 'The End' floated through my head as I watched this gladiatorial athlete 'lost in a Roman wilderness of pain.'

One of the questions that had got me interested in this subject—things coming to an end, artists' last works, time running out—was the long-running one of Roger Federer's eventual retirement. The imminent departure of the first of the 'big four' male players brought an unexpected if indirect urgency into play. With a rival six years his junior on the way out Roger's time seemed also to be shrinking around him.

Writers often have an end in sight for completing a book. For some this can take the form of a proposal that leads to a contract in which a deadline for delivery of the manuscript is agreed upon in advance; I'm not one of them but Murray's going out of the Australian Open, as expected, in a blaze of beaten glory to Bautista Agut after five typically gruelling sets (the first two of which he had lost) concentrated the mind. It seemed important that a book underwritten by my own experience of the changes wrought by ageing should be completed before Roger's retirement, in the long twilight of his career.* Even with no idea of where, when, or how things might end up it was time to start work—on a book that ended up being written while life as we know it came to an end.

* Yes, 'Roger,' not 'Federer'; even though I've never met him it's Roger, always and only Roger.

## 05.

In 1972, during a Duke of Edinburgh's Award Expedition (Bronze), we were camping somewhere in Gloucestershire, about eight of us from grammar school, when the news came over the radio. George Best had quit football. He would have been twenty-six; I was fourteen. We had not started drinking then—just being out in the countryside rather than at home with our parents was enough to make our camping trip thrilling, but it was the news about Best that made it memorable. He actually returned after quitting, and it was not until 1 January 1974 that he played his last match for Manchester United before the long and wandering years of boozy decline. This was not the first time I had heard of someone's career coming to an end but it was the first time I knew of anyone stopping doing something they loved, the thing that gave their life meaning. It was also the first time I heard of a retirement that was not, of someone quitting and then resuming the thing they had retired from. In Best's case it established a pattern for giving up booze and then giving up on trying to quit drinking.

## 06.

Retirement in the world I grew up in—the world of poorly paid, often unpleasant and unrewarding work—was something my relatives began to look forward to from a surprisingly early age. It was a form of promotion, practically an ambition. In the world I've become part of, retirement is almost unheard of or at least seldom admitted to. If you have retired—are no longer able to write or are finding it impossible to publish what you have written—you keep it to yourself; you keep the manuscript to yourself because nobody wants it. And in any case, if part of the job is sitting in a chair at home with your feet up, reading, then the difference between work and retirement is impercepti-

ble, even if you start reading—though it's something I advise against, whatever the weather—with a blanket over your knees.

## 07.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme was a big deal at my school. Probably it was one of many little attempts at importing something of the character-forming ethos of the public school to a grammar school where rugby, not football, was the official sport. I gave up ahead of the more rigorous demands and gruelling expeditions of Silver and Gold just as, at junior school, I'd given up on the personal survival swimming badges after Bronze, which I'd wriggled through by doing almost all of the required lengths in the chokingly chlorinated water of Pittville baths on my back. (*On* my back, not doing back-*stroke* as such. It barely even counted as swimming but by kicking my legs wildly and sort of waggling my hands by my sides I was able to cover distances far in excess of any that might have been achieved by conventionally recognised methods of propulsion.) My mum duly stitched the Bronze survival patch onto my trunks and that was the end of it. Neither of my parents could swim; both regarded the ability to do so as one of many things that were beyond their reach, and were content with this third-level endorsement of their child's aquatic survival skills as sufficient evidence of generational advance.

As a perpetually grumbling anti-royalist my dad had never been able to muster up much enthusiasm for the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, which, he suspected, must in some undisclosed way be lining the pockets of the dim-witted duke (whose physical resemblance to my dad was quite uncanny), and so was not at all displeased when I quit. Bronze, in my family, was always enough.

Many years later I contributed an essay to a series of radio broadcasts on a word associated with the Olympics. I can't remember what my word was but Gillian Slovo cleverly chose 'fourth,' focusing on

competitors who narrowly miss out on a medal and are, as a result, completely forgotten and go away without recognition—become indistinguishable, in fact, from the anonymous mass who come trailing in their wake. So spare a special thought for members of this group of near-miss losers who, after the Olympic flame has been extinguished, having returned home to resume the acclaim-denied grind of training or the uncertainties of retirement, are subsequently and unceremoniously upgraded to bronze because of a drugs disqualification among the trio who basked in podium glory.*

## 08.

'I've always been a quitter,' announces the narrator of *Budding Prospects*, the second novel by T. C. Boyle, who's turned out to be the opposite of a quitter, who's gone on to set such a pace that his publishers have their work cut out trying to keep up with his productivity, but who no longer teaches at the University of Southern California, where I occupy the office and chair (not Chair) that used to be his. The first paragraph of the novel is a list of all the things the narrator has given up on: 'I quit the Boy Scouts, the glee club, the marching band. Gave up my paper route, turned my back on the church, stuffed the basketball team. I dropped out of college, sidestepped the army with a 4-F on the grounds of mental instability, went back to school, made a go of it, entered a Ph.D. program in nineteenth-century British literature, sat in the front row, took notes assiduously, bought a pair of horn-rims, and quit on the eve of my comprehensive exams.' This epic résumé of curtailed achievement culminates with

* The absolute difference between third and fourth—between bronze and nothing—in the Olympics does not apply to the World Cup. Although there is a third-place play-off for the beaten semi-finalists both teams are so consumed by shared disappointment that neither really wants to play—and no one really wants to watch them play. The competition is effectively over; there is no consolation in coming third rather than fourth.

the declaration that 'the only thing I didn't give up on was the summer camp.' The next paragraph is just six words: 'Let me tell you about it.'

Put like that it all sounds so easy.

## 09.

I gave up playing football gradually, the intervals between games increasing because of injuries until the games became intervals between injuries. The ongoing passage of time was still broken up in multiple ways but less frequently—and then not at all—by what became an obsolete and eventually forgotten marker called football. I can't remember when I played for the last time but at least twice a year I still *dream* that I am playing. My wife says that during these dreams my legs start kicking in the bed. She never wakes me up—as she does if I'm moaning in the grips of a nightmare—because she knows how happy I am. Those are my best dreams of the year. I *say* that, but, increasingly, these dreams do not involve scoring goals or even making long, powerful passes. Instead the ball seems to get stuck between my feet or somehow lodged in the leggy grass so that I'm stranded in a kind of stagnant dribble. Maybe my legs twitch in the bed because I am trying to free myself from whatever entanglements have taken root in the unconscious.

On nights after I've played tennis I often have trouble sleeping. Partly this is because I always collapse into a long nap or a brief coma after getting home so that by bedtime, although I'm exhausted and achey (lower back, both knees, left shoulder and elbow), I'm not sleepy. Plus it's fun lying there, replaying crucial sequences and points—up to a point. But then I become powerless to select or stop which bits are replayed and am stranded in a tormenting swirl of yellow balls that gradually becomes a Slazenger-sponsored meteor shower in the tramlines of space.

## 10.

*'Seen a shooting star tonight . . .'*

Even though Martin Scorsese's film about Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder tour had begun streaming on Netflix a day or two earlier, the Prince Charles Cinema in London, on 13 July 2019, was packed—with an audience of the widest possible age range, from teenagers to Dylan's contemporaries and beyond. Who else could pull in a comparable demographic, for something that wasn't even the streaming of a live show? There was periodic applause, starting at the climax of 'Isis,' which comes not at the end of the song but in the middle, after the shouted 'Yes' that completes the amazing quatrain of dialogue:

*She said, 'Where ya been?' I said, 'No place special.'*
*She said, 'You look different.' I said, 'Well, I guess.'*
*She said, 'You been gone.' I said, 'That's only natural.'*
*She said, 'You gonna stay?' I said, 'If you want me to, yes.'*

Everyone in the Prince Charles's notoriously lumpy seats was gripped throughout the 140 minutes of the film's duration. In the communal intoxication of the occasion I had the distinct sense that all around me people were asking themselves the same question that I was: how can someone be *so* great? I had no answer but the question played its part in ushering in another of the Dylan revivals that have punctuated my adult life. I'll go for six months without listening to him until something prompts me to play 'I'll Keep It with Mine,' 'Boots of Spanish Leather,' or whatever, and there I am again, instantly and completely enthralled.

With so much music from one's youth, curiosity about a given track—'Hmm, I wonder what "Keep Yourself Alive" or "Spanish Bombs" sounds like today . . .'—evaporates midway through the song, often earlier. With Dylan you're on the edge of your lumpy seat, even

when you know the song off by heart (as long as you stay clear of the anthemic tedium of 'Blowin' in the Wind,' which I would happily never hear again—which is how I felt from practically the first time I heard it, which was probably sometime before I had even listened to it). It's not that his music never ages; it keeps step with our own ageing in a way that Freddie Mercury or even Joe Strummer never do. This is not because they died young; it's because we've grown old and out of the music they made. *London Calling* is a great album; seeing the Clash in Lewisham in February 1980 was one of the best gig-going experiences I've ever had, but these days, even when driving, I scarcely have the patience to get to the end of one of their songs.* There's nothing left to hear. But I'll be listening to Dylan, to new and old versions of songs I've been listening to for more than forty years, with undiminished wonder, till the end of my days, hopefully after Dylan himself is no longer around, when the incredible fact that he exists, that we could probably go to see him play somewhere tonight, no longer holds true.

Not that I'd bother going to see him tonight, tomorrow, or any other night, even if he were playing for free at a venue down the road—as he was, in Hyde Park, as it turns out, a month after I saw the Scorsese film at the Prince Charles.

## 11.

The film ends with a year-by-year list of all the gigs Dylan has played from the Rolling Thunder tour onwards, like names on a memorial: non-stop (almost) and never-ending (until Covid brought everything to an end). I've been to four of them, the first at Earls Court in 1978, the last in Austin, Texas, on 6 May 2015, in a smallish venue conveniently located only a fifteen-minute cycle ride from where I was

* I also saw Queen, at Cheltenham Town Hall on 14 March 1974, where I was able to get the cover of their second album signed by all four of them. This presumably valuable artefact has since been lost. (And I exempt the Doors, absolutely, from any strictures about growing out of once-loved music.)

living. The band was great, the sound was superb, and the seats were excellent (row twelve of the stalls). It was OK, I suppose, but I kept thinking of something a friend had said about the last time she'd seen him, also in Texas: 'He was *so* done.' Except he wasn't and isn't. Covid permitting, there's plenty more doing to be done.

So: why does he do it and why does anyone go to see him do it? The second is the easier question to answer: people go not to see Bob Dylan but to *have* seen him. I can understand that urge, though for me it has never been strong enough to render the quality of a musical experience irrelevant. There is little satisfaction to be derived from having seen any artist way past his or her best. I can say, truthfully, that I have seen Van Morrison (in Hay about twenty years ago) and Miles Davis, looking deeply amphibious, at the Royal Festival Hall in June 1987. Neither occasion was memorable but it is still possible, friends insist, to catch Morrison in top form (before he was reduced to complaining about his rights being trampled on by Covid fascism). I believe them in a way that I don't believe it when people claim that Dylan was recently fantastic on whichever stop it was on his ceaseless tour. I did believe another friend I bumped into the time before last that I saw Dylan, at Brixton Academy in 2003. He had been playing keyboards, mainly, it seemed, so that he could have something to lean on. I was familiar with the way Dylan changed his songs around, but his singing, combined with the murky sound at the Academy, made it difficult to tell which song from the back catalogue he was in the process of mauling at any given time.

'That was really dreadful,' I said as we milled around on Stockwell Road afterwards.

'You thought that was bad?' she said. 'You should have seen him last time.' So yes, some nights have been worse than others, but Michael Gray, in *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, sums up a not untypical experience under what is surely the best entry heading to be found in any reference book—'frying an egg onstage, the prospect of: In Japan in 1986 Dylan reportedly said this: "Somebody comes to see you for two hours or one and a half hours, whatever it is . . . I mean

they've come to see *you*. You could be doing anything up on that stage. You could be frying an egg or hammering a nail into a piece of wood." Instead of blitzing truculently through his 700th "Tangled Up in Blue" or his 1,500th "All Along the Watchtower," how infinitely more magical it would be if he *did* come on stage and proceed to fry an egg.'

We'll have more to say later about another unusual reference book, but for now and for whatever reasons, yes, people will flock to see Dylan. Why does *he* do it? You've got to serve somebody, he once sang. That claim might have been specific to his born-again period but certainly you've got to *do* something. This becomes problematic when you can do anything and the whole world wants nothing more than to serve and see you.

It's possible he enjoys it but if the stage is, as he claimed in 1997, 'the only place where I'm happy,' why then doesn't he show it? At the end of the Austin show, when other artists might have taken a bow, Dylan treated the audience to an extended *glare*. Not of aggression or hostility, just of indifference or obliviousness even. All writers like to get out of the house but is Dylan's home life so unhappy that he never wants to be in any of the properties in his impressive portfolio?* Maybe the money helps even if, at some level and in the most fabulous quantities, it doesn't help at all. Could it be that the way to get out of 'going through all these things twice' is to go through them two *thousand* times? The strange thing is that a life like Dylan's is so beyond comprehension as to seem almost meaningless: the result of some tangled extrapolation of the way his songs have brought so much meaning to the lives of people who have spent so much time trying to work out what they might mean.

* The mere notion of Dylan's home life exercises an inordinate fascination, partly because we have so few glimpses to go alongside the one of him alone at home in L.A. watching the seven o'clock news, on *Desire*. With nothing much happening except an earthquake in Black Diamond Bay, he turns off the TV and goes to grab another beer. Might a future archaeological technology be able to unearth, from this sliver of textual evidence, the brand of beer he was drinking, what else was in the fridge, whether he was wearing slippers . . . ?

## 12.

The relentless grind of touring has taken its toll on Dylan's voice, though witnesses report that on odd nights it's been magically restored. The rest of the time the voice David Bowie had famously described as sounding 'like sand and glue' has seemed, for a decade or more, to emanate from glands permanently afflicted by an incurable yet oddly sustaining strain of flu. The biographer Ian Bell rightly considers Dylan's voice his greatest instrument and powerfully evokes the 'eroded rock formation' of this 'magnificent ruin.' Combine that with the history-soaked imagery and deliberately archaic musical style of the later albums and an already legendary figure is elevated to a mythic realm in which he is lauded both as elder statesman of the 1960s and as sprightly survivor of the *1*860s. To suggest that he rasps like a lizard with a frog in its throat, that the music consists of rock 'n' roll plods and retirement boogies, serves only to prove that one's sense of cultural heritage extends no further back than Donny Osmond. The flip side is that a terminal phase can easily become interminable.

But that voice—I'm listening to it again now, as I type . . . How could it not be shot to hell given what he's put it through, the unbelievable demands he makes on it in the course of the Rolling Thunder concerts alone when he's belting out every song, night after night? Specifically I'm listening to the opening line of 'Going, Going, Gone' from a bootleg featuring material omitted from the live *Hard Rain* album, recorded during the second part of the Rolling Thunder tour (not covered by the Scorsese film). When Dylan sings, 'I've just reached a place,' we believe that he has, at that very moment, *just reached a place*. We are there with him, at that place and in that moment. Or how about the line from *Oh Mercy*, when he sings, 'Seen a shooting star tonight, / and I thought of you.' That is nothing if not believable, even though the song goes on tacitly to undermine this claim. If he'd omitted the verse about 'listen to the engines, listen to the bells,' etc., and allowed the song to pass as quickly and insignificantly as a shooting star

so that it was over almost as soon as it began—too fleetingly even to get to the required duration of a three-minute single—then the brevity of the whole would have been in sync with the transience of its opening claim. These days he rarely sounds like he's in either the place or the moment, wherever they may be. Even when he slows down a song he still sounds like he's in a hurry to get it over with. It doesn't matter that he can no longer reach certain notes—it's not like he ever thought he was Pavarotti—but it no longer sounds as if the truth of a given moment is able to achieve unprecedented fidelity of expression through him.

This is hard to accept precisely because people have always *believed* in Dylan—as the voice of the protest movement, of a generation, or whatever. More privately, we believe him when he comes out and confesses, in 'Sara,' that he'd been 'staying up for days in the Chelsea Hotel / Writing "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" for you,' even if, as Clinton Heylin pointed out, 'it is fairly well documented that he wrote it in Nashville.' We believe him when he says, at the end of 'Up to Me,' that 'no one else could play that tune, you know it was up to me.' That is indisputable. No court in the world could overturn that claim.

We've believed him even though as a witness he's repeatedly testified, under the songwriter's oath, that nothing he says can be relied on: 'No, no, no, it ain't me, babe.' (Outside the sanctuary of the songs, in interviews and so on, it's best to assume that little he says is true.) It's not just that there's a discrepancy between the songs and what may or may not have happened in real life (inadmissible as evidence in the court of artistic appeal); the songs themselves are unusually vulnerable to cross-examination. Where was he employed—and in what capacity—in 'Tangled Up in Blue'? According to one account he was 'loading cargo onto a truck' at 'an airplane plant' in L.A. and, to another, he was working on 'a fishing boat right outside of Delacroix.' Even a destination that seems fixed—Tangier in the opening lines of 'If You See Her, Say Hello'—on one occasion shifts without warning to 'north Saigon.' This is admirably precise—i.e., neither west nor south Saigon—but it's possibly so far north that he actually means

Hanoi. (In a heavy rewrite of 'Tangled Up in Blue' from 1984 on *Real Live* he announces that 'all of the beds are unmade'; in this version of 'If You See Her,' from a concert in Florida, in April 1976, *everything* is unmade. The most striking line is surely, 'If you're making love to her watch it from the rear,' advice that, in the era of internet porn, has come to seem somewhat superfluous.) The whereabouts of the truth articulated by Dylan changes, as does its quality, but we used to be left with a choice not as to *whether* we believe him but which version—which location (of performance and incident)—of multiple truths we preferred. It beggars belief that anyone could prefer a recent version of an old song or indeed a new song over an old one. When I listen to a new Dylan album my reaction is to quote back his response to the Albert Hall heckler in 1966: 'I don't believe you.'*

## 13.

Scorsese's film includes a sequence—originally featured in *Renaldo and Clara*, which, in the late 1970s, I saw *twice*, undeterred by a running time of 235 minutes, at least half of which did not merit filming, let alone watching—of Dylan and Allen Ginsberg visiting Jack Kerouac's grave in Lowell, Massachusetts. They look down at the words written on the grave, 'He Honored Life.' In the longer sequence in *Renaldo and Clara*, they get into a slight pissing contest about writers' graves. When Dylan asks if he's been to Chekhov's Ginsberg says no, but he has been to Mayakovsky's, in Moscow. Dylan has visited Victor Hugo's grave in Paris but Ginsberg has visited Apollinaire's, laid a copy of *Howl* on Baudelaire's (naturally), *and* is able to tell Dylan what is written on Keats's grave in Rome: 'Here lies one whose fame

* Since history has been altered—or corrected (the 'Albert Hall' gig was actually at the Manchester Free Trade Hall, ten days earlier)—it's a shame that a further change to this apocryphal but true event couldn't be made. I've always wished that Dylan's spirited defiance could have been a literal announcement of the title of the next song—which, unfortunately, had already been played—rather than a prelude to playing 'Like a Rolling Stone,' 'fuckin' loud.'

is writ in water.' (Ginsberg gets this wrong; it's 'name' not 'fame,' but it's contrary to the spirit of Romantics and Beats to be pedantic.) When Ginsberg points at Kerouac's grave and asks Dylan if that's what's going to happen to him Dylan says he wants to be buried in an unmarked grave.

There's a wonderful moment in *Walk Me Home* (1993), a film written by and starring John Berger, when Berger's character says that he wants to be buried in land that no one owns. In Scorsese's film, meanwhile, we cut from the scene of Dylan and Ginsberg at the grave to a studio interview with the now aged and grizzled Dylan who says of Kerouac's great novel, 'He was talking about the road of life.'

## 14.



In 1959, three years before he took his well-known pictures of the young Dylan in the East Village, and less than two years after the publication of *On the Road*, John Cohen took this photograph of Kerouac. Kerouac was thirty-six or thirty-seven. His conviction that *On the Road* was 'a great novel' had been consolidated rather than threatened by

its having been rejected by publishers for six years before Viking relented in September 1957. As early as 1952, in response to an editor who had called it a 'thoroughly incoherent mess,' he predicted what would happen: '*On the Road* will be published by someone else, with a few changes and omissions and additions, and it will gain its due recognition, in time, as the first or one of the first modern prose books in America.' What he failed to anticipate was the sodden collapse of writer and man that would come in the wake of this prophecy's being fulfilled.

The hard-won struggle to master 'spontaneous prose' both enabled Kerouac to write a great book and condemned him, for the rest of his creative life, to banging out pretty terrible ones. By 1961 he was conscious of the paradoxical and hidden costs of his style of composition. 'What happened was, as soon as I had made a formal discovery of spontaneous prose, it wasn't spontaneous any more!' 'In fact,' he went on, 'I think I've forgotten how to write by now.' As the liberating idea of 'wild spontaneous yowks' hardened into an inflexible method, Kerouac became a prisoner of the 'fuckyou freedom' he had helped unleash. Conscious of how spontaneity could become stale, he announced his intention of 'going back to the careful writing of Town & City,' his first book. Had he followed through with this, he might have accessed a deeper seam of creativity than the one depleted by habitual reliance on 'enormous overdoses of benzedrine to write my novels' and 'phenobarbital tablets to offset the benny depression 8 hours after ingestion (after 8 hours of writing).'

He also experimented with acid but, while his old pals Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady played their merry parts in fomenting a psychedelic revolution, Kerouac became increasingly hostile to the narco-ideological claims of the emergent hippie movement. That hippies were the progeny of the Beats, that his passionate immersion in Buddhism anticipated their own fascination with all matters Eastern, served only to strengthen his befuddled reactionary resolve. As Timothy Leary recalled, Kerouac 'remained unmovably the Catholic carouser, an old-style Bohemian without a hippie bone in his body.'

Angered that his ideas were 'being lifted by Jews,' Kerouac sank into a swamp of paranoia and buffoonish alcoholism.

'Free to do anything I want,' he wrote in 1962, 'I've deliberately imprisoned myself, like a hair shirt, I dunno why.' Pining for a cabin in the woods, Kerouac settled for the suburbs of Florida or Massachusetts, where he lived with his mother amid 'endless rows of perfect new houses but all of them without exception full of flat housewives looking out of the window when someone dares to try to walk to the stores which are too far away anyway under broiling sun in flat treeless waste, ugh.' Even at this distance from the limelight, word always got out that the king of the Beats was in the vicinity, and Kerouac would be lured off on week-long swill-outs, 'drinking and talking with hundreds and hundreds of my acquaintances day and night, in shifts.'

Looking at a snapshot of himself one day, he saw what 'all this lionized manure has done to me; it's killing me rapidly.' His situation was made doubly intolerable by the fact that the lionisation didn't stop him getting critically mauled. Seen in retrospect hostile reviews tend to vindicate the writer and incriminate the critic; in Kerouac's case, the passage of time has served to prove the accuracy of Dorothy Parker's reaction to 'the appalling monotony' of *The Subterraneans*.

The best-known criticism of all—Truman Capote's that *On the Road* was not writing, but typing—was echoed poignantly by Kerouac himself when, in 1967, he confessed, 'I cant type like I used to, I'm afraid I cant write like I used to neither.' This was during the 'most dreadful part of [his] life,' when his mother was paralysed after a stroke and Kerouac—who, in February 1959, felt he was 'rapidly going to pot and on the verge of becoming a blob'—had become 'a big glooby blob of sad blufush.' Broke and drinking 'more than ever,' he had been 'thrown out of all poolhalls except the Negro poolhall where I'm bound to have me head bashed in someday.' An earlier beating had, he suspected, given him brain damage—'maybe once I was kind drunk, but now am brain-clogged drunk with the kindness valve clogged by injury'—and there were more beatings to come before his death in 1969.

But to view Kerouac's life as a tragedy of squandered talent is to think in clichés. From the time that Kerouac completed *On the Road*, he was indemnified against ever making—or ever having made—a serious mistake in his life. The value of a life cannot be assessed chronologically. He had waged everything on becoming a great writer and he had won. Nothing can offset the achievement and *victory* of *On the Road*. Kerouac was in Manhattan with Joyce Glassman when Gilbert Millstein's review appeared in *The New York Times* on 5 September 1957, lauding it as 'an authentic work of art' whose publication was 'an historic occasion.' According to Ann Charters, Kerouac's biographer and editor of his letters, they 'bought a copy of the paper at a newsstand on Broadway just before midnight and read the review together at Donnelly's Irish Bar on Columbus Avenue before returning to her apartment to go back to sleep. Joyce remembered that "Jack lay down obscure for the last time in his life. The ringing phone woke him the next morning, and he was famous."'

Everything else—not just everything that had come before but everything in the sloshy aftermath that was still to come—is insignificant in the face of that moment, when the long wait for vindication came to an end. Even if his 'kindness valve' did become clogged, the vivid generosity of spirit embodied in his conception of Dean Moriarty courses through every line of his masterpiece.

## 15.

The one time I set eyes on Boris Becker, at Wimbledon in 2018, he was struggling to open the door of a Centre Court toilet. The poor guy could hardly walk. It looked like he had knee trouble and hip trouble to go alongside hair trouble, bankruptcy trouble, and what, for a German, was the highly unusual loss-of-diplomatic-immunity-as-attaché-to-the-Central-African-Republic trouble. A photograph from the Covid summer of 2020 showed he had now acquired (big) pink belly trouble to go with his tennis-elbow trouble. Not tennis elbow in