

- FOCUS
- SPOTLIGHT
- RECRUITMENT
- ANNOUNCEMENTS
- EVENTS

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A howl of hope

This year is the 50th anniversary of the landmark poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, whose opening line is "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness." So it's timely to see how the verse (not including the stuff about sex and drugs, which is, admittedly, about 75% of it) might apply to the next generation of scientists.

In the first part of *Howl*, Ginsberg writes about a generation who "passed through universities with radiant cool eyes". So far, so good. One can interpret this as guarded optimism in the quest for knowledge, perhaps exemplified by today's student pipeline, which is producing an ample number of scientists.

A phrase halfway through the middle section, "ashcans and unobtainable dollars", is a bit foreboding, especially if you consider the flattening of the US National Institutes of Health research budget to be equivalent to unobtainable dollars that could put young researchers' careers into the ashcan.

The next section is even more ominous, as it rages against the machine of "Moloch", a god who requires human sacrifice. In science, this could include a study

section, an institutional review board or a regulatory agency, all of which have the power to halt a research project as they see fit.

But here, too, there's hope. Scientists have built up ways to appease, if not beat, their individual Molochs by banding together under student and postdoc organizations, professional societies, lobbying efforts and mentoring schemes.

Howl chronicles how an individual can be crushed by an institution. It could be read as a warning for scientists to band together, avoid alienation and triumph over obstacles. Perhaps scientists who avoid isolation could rewrite the cautiously triumphant ending as follows:

"Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent funding of the grant."



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