LOITERING

NEW & COLLECTED ESSAYS

CHARLES
D'AMBROSIO

TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon & Brooklyn, New York

Copyright © 2014 Charles D'Ambrosio

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, contact Tin House Books, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Published by Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon
and Brooklyn, New York

Distributed to the trade by Publishers Group West, 1700 Fourth St., Berkeley, CA 94710, www.pgw.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

D'Ambrosio, Charles.
[Essays. Selections]
Loitering : new & collected essays / Charles D'Ambrosio.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-935639-87-9 (paperback)
I. Title.
PS3554.A469A6 2014
814.54—dc22
2014014455

First U.S. Edition 2014
Third Printing 2016
Printed in the USA
Interior design by Jakob Vala

www.tinhouse.com

For all the conversations over the years this book goes out to Drew Bouton, Jon Fontana, and Tom Grimes; and I also send it along with love to some dear people who talked me up, talked me down, and talked me through, Marilyn Davis, Jae Choi, and my sisters; and of course the soul of the book belongs to Mike and Danny, my brothers, who will never read a word of it, though their silence tunes every sentence I write.

CONTENTS

By Way of a Preface.......................... 13

PART 1: WEST OF THE WEST

Seattle, 1974 27
Loitering 41
Whaling Out West 63
Catching Out 91
This Is Living 97
Documents 121

PART 2: STRATEGIES AGAINST EXTINCTION

American Newness 135
Winning 147
Hell House 163
One More Paradise 179
Orphans 197

PART 3: READING LIFE

Salinger and Sobs 227
Misreading 263
Casting Stones 273
Doo-Wop Down the Road 299
Any Resemblance to Anyone Living 309
Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg 320

By Way of a Preface

There's an old bus stop in Seattle that's maybe the loneliest place in the world for me, and it was there, reading in the vague light, that I first discovered the essay. Even now when I drive by, I still check that stop, looking for one of my brothers or sisters, although the stop itself has been moved to a better location and the family I might give a lift to is gone. By the standards of the day it was an excellent place to wait for the bus, really the stoop of an apartment, with a marble stairway that was cold but covered, offering shelter from the wind and the rain and a lighted entry that was just bright enough to read by. You had to sit on the top step and slouch over and futz with the book to get the angle, but once you had it, the words resolved on the page. As a bonus there was a bookstore across the street that stayed open late. It was one of those small places that made up for a lack of inventory with sensibility, a bookstore you could trust, and the first that I knew of to hand out free bookmarks, which I thought at the time was infinitely clever. I had just figured out, rather naïvely, that I could buy my own books, and then almost instantly I became a prig about their condition, so much so that I wouldn't lend them to anyone, at least not without a solemn lecture about their proper handling: no breaking the spines, no dog-earing the pages, no greasy thumbprints. At home, I had my own somewhat wobbly arrangement of brick-and-board shelves, two and then three tiers of ugly pressboard, painted brown and laddered up against the wall, my first piece of furniture. In private, I thought of those shelves with enormous pride, as something I was building, book by book, and brick by brick, and I often looked at them, vaguely satisfied, like a worker inspecting the progress of a job. I wanted the shelves to rise up and reach the ceiling, and for that to happen, all I had to do, I realized, was read.

My sense of the essay as a genre isn't something I can separate from my experience of those early encounters. I bought my first collection from that little bookstore, on their recommendation, and fell in love with the writer M. F. K. Fisher, whose works on gastronomy couldn't have been more foreign to me, growing up, as I did, in a big family, where we boiled everything in vats, drank powdered milk, and my father, fielding a complaint about food, would clench the fist of his free hand and stab his fork at the offending item on his plate and say, "Eat it. Your stomach doesn't care." Well into adulthood I was too shy to pepper food at a restaurant, afraid that I would somehow be insulting the cook. Anyway, it was at family meals that we learned indifference to our bodies, but it was in prose, particularly the kind I found in the personal essay, that a relationship to that body began to be restored, at least for me. One of my earliest ideas about writing was that the rhythms of prose came from the body, and although I still believe that, I still don't know what I mean. I would discover, eventually, that some of Fisher's love of food was a celebratory rebellion against a similar tyranny at home, a rejection of the dulling rules and sumptuary restrictions of the dinner table set by her grandmother. Prose moves so mysteriously that I believe I heard this unstated fact in the rhythm of her sentences long before her biography confirmed it. It came to me sotto voce, whispered on a lower frequency, a secret shared between intimates. And so, while the superficial subject of Fisher's essays may have drawn me in, offering a fantasy world in which foie gras and Dom Pérignon mattered, soon enough it was language itself, and more specifically, the right she assumed to be exact about her life, that won me completely. More than the wonders of Provence or advice on how to serve peacock tongues on toast, it was her prose that taught me how to pay attention, and it was the essay, as a form, that was the container, the thing that caught and held the words like holy water, offering the gift of awareness, the simple courtesy of acknowledgment, even to a life as ordinary as mine.

Other essayists followed, and I read them in great passionate jags—all of Joan Didion and George Orwell, all of Susan Sontag and Samuel Johnson, all of Edward Abbey and Hunter Thompson and James Baldwin, living for weeks at a time within the sentences of a single writer, excluding other authors, other kinds of reading. I read poems and novels promiscuously but essays were my fast friends. Something in the nature of the personal essay must have instructed me and informed this pattern. And I must have needed that sort of close attachment, that guidance, the voice holding steady in the face of doubt, the flawed man revealing his flaws, the outspoken woman simply *saying*, the brother and the sister—for essays were never a father to me, nor a mother. Essays were the work of equals, confiding, uncertain, solitary, free, and even the best of them had an unfinished feel, a tentative note, that made them approachable. A good essay seemed to question itself in a way that a novel or short story did not—or perhaps it was simply that the personal essay left its questions on the page, there for everyone to see; it was a forum for self-doubt, for an attempt whose outcome wasn't assured. That one mind would speak so candidly to another mind held a special appeal to me at a time when I didn't even know I had such a thing. Late at night, sitting on a cold stoop, waiting for the bus, the free and easy conversations I fell into via the essay seemed to suit my station in life perfectly.

For a glimpse inside the essence of the essay as I felt it then, as I understand it now, I'd like to misuse this passage from Patricia Hampl.

> On the first page of the *Confessions* [Augustine] poses a problem that has a familiar modern ring: ". . . it would seem clear that no one can call upon Thee without knowing Thee." There is, in other words, the problem of God's notorious absence. Augustine takes the next step West; he seeks his faith *with* his doubt: ". . . may it be that a man must implore Thee before he can know Thee?" The assumption here is that faith is not to be confused with certainty; the only thing people can really count on is longing and the occult

> directives of desire. So, Augustine wonders, does that mean prayer must come *before* faith? Illogical as it is, perhaps not-knowing is the first condition of prayer, rather than its negation. Can that be?

Seeking faith with doubt, that's definition enough for me. Or strike faith, if you must, and leave it at seeking with doubt. And longing. And not-knowing. And the occult directives of desire.

And taking the next step West.

I wrote the earliest of these essays for *The Stranger* in Seattle because no one else would give me five thousand words and then agree not to change a single comma—exactly the kind of hard bargain you can strike when you're willing to work for next to nothing. While the pay wasn't fancy, the freedom was absolute, and at that time in my life the liberty to think and write as I pleased mattered far more than money. I will always feel deeply indebted to *The Stranger*, and nothing satisfies me more than to acknowledge those foolhardy souls in this preface.

I worked on each of these pieces a stupidly long time, with a determination that was fueled, in part, by vanity. I wanted the writing to live an independent life and not rely on passing opinion or the ephemeral realities of alt-weeklies and magazines to make its way in the world. Rather insufferably I thought of myself as an essayist and bristled when friends and family, in conversation, referred to my published work as "articles." The subjects of these pieces mattered, of course, but it was important to me that the sentences alone do the convincing. What this meant in actual practice was that I often had no idea what I was doing, no plan or sense of purpose, until I started putting words on paper. I relied on my ear to a ridiculous extent, trusting that if I got the sound right—the music, the mood, the feel of things—then sense might eventually make an appearance. Sometimes sense showed up, and other times, in that tussle of trial and error at the heart of all writing, error won the day. My instinctive and entirely private ambition was to capture the conflicted mind in motion, or, to borrow a phrase from Cioran, to represent failure on the move, so leaving a certain wrongness on the page was OK by me. The inevitable errors and imperfections made the trouble I encountered tactile, bringing the texture of experience into the story in a way that being cautiously right never could. In fact, as much as I wrote and rewrote many of these pieces, often, in a contrary mood, the goal of those revisions was to get the thing to read like a rough draft, cutting sonorities of thought and style that seemed dishonest, fighting against the insane clarity of public discourse or, in the more personal pieces, scraping away until I renewed my sympathies for raw subjects that time and habit had turned sclerotic.

Many of the ideas were mine, but just as often the impetus for these essays came to me in the form of assignments, which was always a rush, like being dropped behind enemy lines with nothing but a brick and a can of beans and the essayist's motto: *Que sais-je?* Very often I knew nothing. That's when the subject got its revenge, obligating me in ethical ways to justify my arbitrary presence in other people's lives and to honor complex worlds, both foreign and familiar, that I'd never truly considered. Feeling helpless and lost and dumber by the draft, I did my best to leave an accurate record of what resisted me, of all that I didn't understand, my little store of half-knowledge. Although I remember spending a long peaceful afternoon in the elegant hush of the Ryerson Library, reading books about brick, I rarely researched, preferring instead to work without a net—which may simply be another way of saying that I longed to fall. To fall, that is, and to hear what the descent had to say. "Bewilderment is the true comprehension," Luther wrote. "Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge." Truant in disposition, maybe I had no choice in the matter, but I took Luther's exhortation to heart, embracing it in the spirit of a possibility.

As a result, I've depended on my ignorance quite a bit, and maybe, just maybe, that gives the work a lopsided or eccentric shape and, at times, a certain velocity, a kind of venturi effect, as in an old carbureted engine, forcing the material through such a limited aperture of understanding—and I wouldn't want to gunk up the works with irritable facts and information gathered from Google.

Friends would diagnose me with a really bad, likely terminal case of aporia, but I suspect that my condition isn't so uncommon, that a little tribe of others feels, each in their own way, just as mystified and baffled as to direction as I do. At the risk of sounding parsonic, it seems to me we've ceded so much space to the expert and the confident authority that expressions of real doubt or honest ignorance are now regarded, in the demotic mind, as a kind of recreancy, a failure of loyalty, the sign of a faith betrayed. Our public space has become a matter of allegiances, always a prelude to ugly business, and as I worked on these pieces—stalled out, staring at the mess of contradictory notes tacked to my corkboard—I would wonder, in my uncertainty, where all the other people are who don't know, who don't understand. Are we—the hesitant, the conflicted—all alone? Can that be? In a leveling climate of summations, crowded with public figures who speak exclusively from positions of final authority, issuing an endless stream of conclusions, I get a wary sense in my gut of a world that's making its appeal to my indolence and emptiness, asking only for surrender. But when at last all of life is polled and made plural, when it's all been added up and averaged and answered and agreed upon, what happens if you don't feel so plural? In the face of so much decidedness I conceal my doubts in shame, or something of that character, feeling isolated and singular, useless and a little vulnerable, with all my innermost, urgent thoughts condemned to soliloquy. Cutting away what I consider the engine of the essay—doubt and the unknown, let's say—leaves us with articles and theses, facts and information, our side and their side, dreary optimism and even drearier pessimism, but nowhere to turn in a moment of true need. In that sense, I don't see any other option but to head west with Augustine; it seems not only possible but desirable that not-knowing would be the first condition of prayer. What I've collected here, of course, are just a bunch of scrappy incondite essays, not prayers, but behind each piece, animating every attempt, is the echo of a precarious faith, that we are more intimately bound to one another by our kindred doubts than our brave conclusions.

A small press published some of these pieces in a tiny volume called *Orphans*. This isn't the place to recount the saga of that ill-starred edition, but I'm happy to report that all thirty-five hundred copies of that feisty little foundling managed to find their vagrant way into the hands of readers, a solace to me like the thought of home. It was a small, small edition, easy to slip into a purse or pocket, and bears the distinction, I believe, of being sat on more than your average book. I've seen some really beat copies floating around, which serves me right. Thanks to Tin House, the substance of that book now lives on in this collection, reunited with some of its estranged siblings and joined by new work, including this gassy preface. Often the original titles were editorial decisions, hardly more than labels, and this time out, in *Loitering*, I've taken the liberty of rechristening the pieces, giving them the names they'll answer to for the rest of their lives. I've also attempted to structure the material, gathering certain unruly obsessions into familial groups, a task whose futility is somewhat akin to controlling a mudslide. The title of the book fits my sense of things nicely. Writing an essay is a form of loitering—a lingering, a skulking, a meandering—and I like the sinister undertone—*loitering with intent*—but in the end it brings me back full circle to that boy at the bus stop, reading in the dim light, and to all my brothers and sisters, whether by blood or by bond, who find themselves, now and then, without apparent purpose. ❖

PART 1:

WEST OF THE WEST

Austin**:** There's nothin' down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now—I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard. Fields that don't even exist.

Lee**:** There's no point cryin' about that now.

—SAM SHEPARD, *True West*

Seattle, 1974

The initial salvos in my hankering to expatriate took the predictable route of firing snobby potshots at the local icons of culture, at Ivar with his hokey ukulele and Stan Boreson and Dick Balch with his ten-pound sledge, bashing cars and laughing like a maniac all through the late night, etc. (Actually, I thought Dick Balch was cool and so did a good many of my friends. He had the crude sinister good looks of a porn star and once merited an admiring squib in *Time*. In his cheap improvised commercials—interrupting roller derby and the antics of Joanie Weston, “the Blonde Amazon”—he’d beat brand-new cars with a hammer, so to me he always seemed superior to circumstance—our old cars just got beat to hell by life, whereas Dick Balch went out on the attack. It was a period when a lot of us hero-worshipped people who destroyed things, and even now I wonder where Dick Balch has gone and half hope he'll come back and smash more stuff.) Anyone born in geographical exile, anyone from the provinces, anyone for whom the movements of culture feel rumored, anyone like this grows up anxiously aware that all the innovative and vital events in the world happen Back East, like way back, like probably France, but before expatriation can be accomplished in fact it is rehearsed and performed in the head. You make yourself clever and scoffing, ironic, deracinated, cold and quick to despise. You import your enthusiasms from the past, other languages, traditions. You make the voyage first in the aisles of bookstores and libraries, in your feckless dreams. The books you love best feature people who ditched their homes in the hinterlands for scenes of richer glory. Pretty soon the word *Paris* takes on a numinous quality, and you know you won't be silent forever. Someday you'll leave.

Meanwhile, the only city I really knew was a dump worse than anything Julius Pierpont Patches (local TV clown) ever dreamed of, sunk in depression and completely off the cultural map, no matter what outlandish claims local boosters made for the region. And they made many. In a highly cherished book of mine (*You*

Can't Eat Mount Rainier! by William C. Speidel Jr., illustrated by Bob Cram, © 1955) I read, "What with the city's leading professional men, artists, writers, world travelers and visiting VIPs always dropping into the place, [Ivar's] has become the spot where clams and culture meet." Huh? Artists? Writers? To explain, Ivar's is a local seafood restaurant, and Ivar himself was a failed folksinger in the tradition of the Weavers. Back then there was an abundance of clams and a paucity of culture, but even more than this disparity, I'd somehow arranged it in my head that clams, salmon, steelhead, and geoducks were actually antithetical to and the sworn enemies of culture. No one wrote about them, is what I probably meant. Perhaps clams and culture met, once, in 1955, but then of course 1955 stubbornly persisted in Seattle until, like, 1980, and in between time you felt stuck mostly with mollusks. The culture side of the equation was most prominently represented by a handful of aging rearguard cornballs. Like Ivar himself.

If you were a certain type, and I was, you first had to dismantle the local scene's paltry offerings and then build up in its place a personal pantheon remote from the very notion that clams and culture really ever do meet, anywhere, at a time when, all arrogant and hostile and a budding prig, you believed culture was the proprietary right of a few Parisians. That an old warbly-voiced yokel like Ivar might pass for culture, or that *Here Come the Brides* might signify to the world your sense of place, seemed a horror, an embarrassment. I went incognito; I developed alibis. For starters I took to wearing a black Basque beret and became otherwise ludicrously Francophile in my tastes. Mostly, however, I couldn't find solid purchase for my *snobisme*. Not that I didn't try. I'd have liked to be some old hincty Henry James but couldn't really sustain it. Still, you badly wanted things delocalized, just a little. Even if you had to do it first just in your head, with issueless irony. You looked about. With a skeptical eye you sized up the offerings. You wondered, for instance, why it was that suddenly in Seattle there was an aesthetic love of statues. You wondered, what is it with all these replicas of people around the region? A brass Ivar and his brass seagulls, some apparently homeless people (brass) in the courtyard of the Sedgwick James Building (as if a real, non-brass loiterer could actually rest awhile on those benches unmolested), and then, last, least, a hideous band of five or six citizens (cement) waiting for the bus in Fremont. Like a bunch of gargoyles walked off their ancient job guttering rain, they've been waiting for the bus twenty or thirty years now. If you've lived here long enough (like a week), you know the rain of today is the rain of tomorrow and the rain of a million years ago, and if you stand in that eternal rain long enough and often enough, you start to feel replicating the experience rubs it in your face. I've stood in the rain and waited for buses or whatever and it wasn't a joke, not that I understood, at least. You're standing there, you're buzzed, you're bored, you don't have a schedule, the rain's pounding around your head like nuthouse jibber-jabber, and from this incessant and everlasting misery someone else works up an instance of passing cleverness, then casts it in concrete for all time?

Those stone citizens, silent and forever waiting, are my nightmare.

I badly wanted to escape my unwritten city for a time and place already developed by words, for Paris or London or Berlin and a particular epoch as it existed in books. I wanted Culture, the uppercase sort. Books fit my minimum-wage budget and afforded the cheapest access. Fifty cents bought admission to the best. I purchased most of my early novels and poems from a woman who, I recall, had only one leg. Later there was Elliott Bay Book Company, which offered both a bookstore and a brick-walled garret in the basement. You could loiter without having to skulk. You could bring your empty cup to the register and ask for refills.

And you could read. Those books, more than any plane ticket, offered a way out. Admittedly it was a lonely prescription, an Rx that might better have been replaced by 100 mg of whatever tricyclic was cutting-edge back in the seventies. But who knew about such things? Instead I'd hide out in the basement of Elliott Bay or in the top floor of the Athenian and in my sporadic blue notebooks track a reading list—Joyce, Pound, Eliot, et al.—that was really little more than a syllabus for a course on exile. You could probably dismiss this as one of those charming agonies of late adolescence, but let me suggest that it's also a logical first step in developing an aesthetic, a reach toward historical beauty, the desire to join yourself to what's already been appreciated and admired. You want to find yourself in the flow of time, miraculously relieved of your irrelevance. For reasons both sensible and suspect, folks today are uneasy with the idea of a tradition, but the intellectual luxury of this stance wasn't available to me, and I saw the pursuit of historical beauty, the yearning for those higher essences other people had staked their lives on, as the hope for some kind of voice, a chance to join the chorus. I was mad for relevance, connection, some hint that I was not alone. I started scribbling in notebooks in part just so I'd have an excuse, a reason for sitting where I sat, an alibi for being by myself.

Seattle in the seventies was the nadir of just everything. A University of Washington prof. of mine, a yam-faced veteran of SDS, inelegantly labeled us "the phlegmatic generation." The word *apathy* got used an awful lot. I quite sincerely believe Karen Ann Quinlan was the decade's sex symbol. Seeking an alchemic dullness in quaaludes and alcohol, she actually found apotheosis in a coma; that's what made her so sexy (i.e., compelling) and symbolic to me. I'm not trying to be ironic or waggish here. Objects restore a measure of silence to the world, and she was, for those ten wordless years, an object. Her speechless plight seemed resonant, delphic. The reason I remember her as such an emblematic figure is that her coma coincided with my own incognizant youth. The Seattle of that time had a distinctly coma-like aspect and at night seemed to contain in its great sleepy volume precisely one of everything—one dog a-barking, one car a-cranking, one door a-slamming, etc.—and then an extravagant, unnecessary amount of nothing. Beaucoup nothing. The kind of expansive, hardly differentiated, foggy and final nothing you imagine a coma induces. I read the silence as a kind of Nordic parsimony. An act of middle-class thrift. A soporific seeded into the clouds. All the decent dull blockheads were asleep, and you could no more wake them to vivid life than you could

Karen Ann Quinlan. Being alone at night in Seattle began to seem horrifying; there was just so much nothing and so little of me.

You know how the story goes—I went away, I came back, blah blah. I now see the personal element in all this, the comic note, and I also realize the high European graft doesn't readily take to all American subjects. The predominant mental outlook of people I grew up with depended largely on a gargantuan isolation. When I finally went away I was always careful to tell people I was from Seattle, *Washington*, afraid they wouldn't know where the city was, which suggests the isolation of the place was permanently lodged in me. Finding myself at last in the warm heart of culture, in New York or Paris or even LA, I returned, like some kind of revanchist, to the cold silent topography I knew best, the landscape of my hurt soul. I first read Raymond Carver because in paging through his second collection at a bookstore I noticed a familiar place-name—Wenatchee—and latched onto the work solely based on that simple recognition. Ditto Ken Kesey. And then there was the discovery of Richard Hugo, a great epic namer, who beautifully described himself as "a wrong thing in a right world," and noted the oppressive quiet of the city the way I had, so that it seemed we were brothers, and offered to me a liberating emblem far better suited to my ambitions as a writer than a girl in a coma. These are probably just the humdrum dilemmas any writer encounters, and that I should express any keen pain at the difficulty of finding a subject and a voice is, I realize, kind of carping and obnoxious. It comes with the territory, after all.

And yet it is still some form of familiar silence that I struggle against when I write, something essential about the isolation. As Graham Greene wrote: "At that age one may fall irrevocably in love with failure, and success of any kind loses half its savour before it is experienced." For me the city is still inarticulate and dark and a place I call home because I'm in thrall to failure and to silence—I have a fidelity to it, an allegiance, which presents a strange dislocation now that Seattle's become the Valhalla of so many people's seeking. The idea of it as a locus of economic and scenic and cultural hope baffles me. It a little bit shocks me to realize my nephews and nieces are growing up in a place considered desirable. That will be their idea, rightly. That wasn't my idea at all. Vaguely groping for a diluted tertiary memory, people used to say to me, I've heard it's nice *out there*, and I'd say, Seattle has a really high suicide rate. (I was kind of an awkward conversationalist.) But really I didn't know if it was nice; it never occurred to me to wonder. I'd shyly shrug and mumble out of the conversation, saying I didn't know, it was home. Seattle does have a suicide rate a couple notches above the national average, and so does my family, and I guess that earns me the colors of some kind of native. I walk around, I try to check it out, this new world of hope and the good life, but in some part of my head it's forever 1974 and raining and I'm a kid and a man with a shopping cart full of kiped meat clatters down the sidewalk chased with sad enthusiasm by apron-wearing box boys who are really full-grown men recently pink-slipped at Boeing and now scabbing part-time at Safeway.

Today I go in search of an older city, a silent city. Early in the morning the painted signs on the buildings downtown seem to rise away from the brick in a kind of layered pentimento. The light at that hour comes at a certain angle and is gentle and noticeably slower and words gradually emerge from the walls. YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD. THE BEST IN RAIN GEAR. There is a place I can stand on Westlake Avenue and read the fading signs and recognize many of the names of people I grew up with. I've got my own people buried in the ground. I cross the Aurora Bridge and think special thoughts and know my brother's black Wellingtons are buried in the shifting toxic silt at the bottom of Lake Union. That brother's alive, and I thank God for certain kinds of failure. New silences layer over the old. I hope this brief superficial essay hasn't simply circled around a peculiar woundedness. Folks double my age and older often run down a conversation tracking a vanishing world that will, with the passing of their memory, vanish entirely. This is something more than benign senescent forgetfulness. So be it. Nowadays I feel like an old-timer in terms of estrangement. I don't know what determines meaning in the city any better than these old people with their attenuating memories. Probably traffic laws, the way we still agree to agree on the denotation of stop signs. I went away and in my absence other things have sprung up. Good things. It's a new place, but there's an old silence bothering me.

And now when I write I feel the silence pressuring the words just like the silence I felt as a kid, walking around town with nowhere to go. It used to be I'd wander down the alley around the corner from the Yankee Peddler and see if Floyd the Flowerman was in his shack. Floyd sold flowers out of a homemade shack, a lean-to patched together out of realtors' sandwich boards and such and propped up against what's now a soap shop, and he was a big fan of police scanners, of the mysteries of other people's misfortunes as they cackled over the airwaves and received, at least briefly, a specific locus, a definite coordinate within the city.

This oddball interest in fixing the detailed location of pain and disaster fascinated me. I'd say it prefigured the job of a writer, if the conceit weren't so obviously tidy. I can't now tell if Floyd was crazy. Probably he was just sixties jetsam, tossed overboard by the era and living like a kind of alley-cat Brautigan, "made lonely and strange by that Pacific Northwest of so many years ago, that dark rainy land . . ." That wet black alley, and then the queer miracle of his white shack, those floodlit plaster buckets filled with red gladiolus, sunflowers, pink carnations, and then Floyd the hippie holdover tuning his scanner in to instances of tragedy, dialing up meaning and its shifting vectors.

One night when the bus just wouldn't come, Floyd and I walked in the rain down Stone Way to watch a house burn. He was very hepped up. The cold rain on our faces warmed to tear temperature in the heat of the burning house. I wish time would collapse so I could be watching flames and ash rise from that house and also see my brother falling through the air below the bridge. Obscurely I know this is a wish that Time, like a god, might visit us all in our moment of need. But Floyd's gone, and that brother's got a metal plate in his pelvis and walks a little funny, and myself, I wander around at night, taking long walks to clear my head before sitting down in front of my typewriter, walking for an hour or two as all the new and desirable good floats before me like things in a dream, out of reach, and I peer through the windows of new restaurants and new shops and see all the new people, but I don't go in, probably because I feel more in my element as the man who is out there standing in the rain or just passing by on his way home to write. ❖