

FRONT PORCH

Seattle, 1974 Charles D'Ambrosio

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 ukelele and Stan Boreson and Dick Balsch with his ten-pound sledge bashing cars and laughing like a maniac all through the late night, etc. (Actually I thought DB 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 Joannie 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 Balsch 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 DB's 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 Speidel Jr., Bob Cram illustrator, copyright 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 folk singer 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 rear-guard 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 James Sedgewick Bldg. (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're waiting, you don't have a schedule, the rain's pounding around your head like nuthouse jibberjabber, 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 like 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 upper case 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, only had one leg. Later there was Elliot Bay Books, 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 a 100 mg of whatever tricyclate was cutting edge back in the Seventies. But who knew about such things? Instead I'd hide out in basement of Elliot 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 your self 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 UW 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 her coma coincided with my own incognizant youth. The Seattle of that time had a distinctly comalike aspect and at night seemed to contain in its great sleepy volume precisely one of everything, one dog abarking, one car acranking, one door aslamming 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 KAQ. 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 on to 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 nephew 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 boxboys 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 Raingear.* 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. FF sold flowers out of a homemade shack, a lean-to patched together out of realtor's 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 gladiolas, sunflowers, pink carnations, and then Floyd the hippie holdover tuning his scanner into 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.