

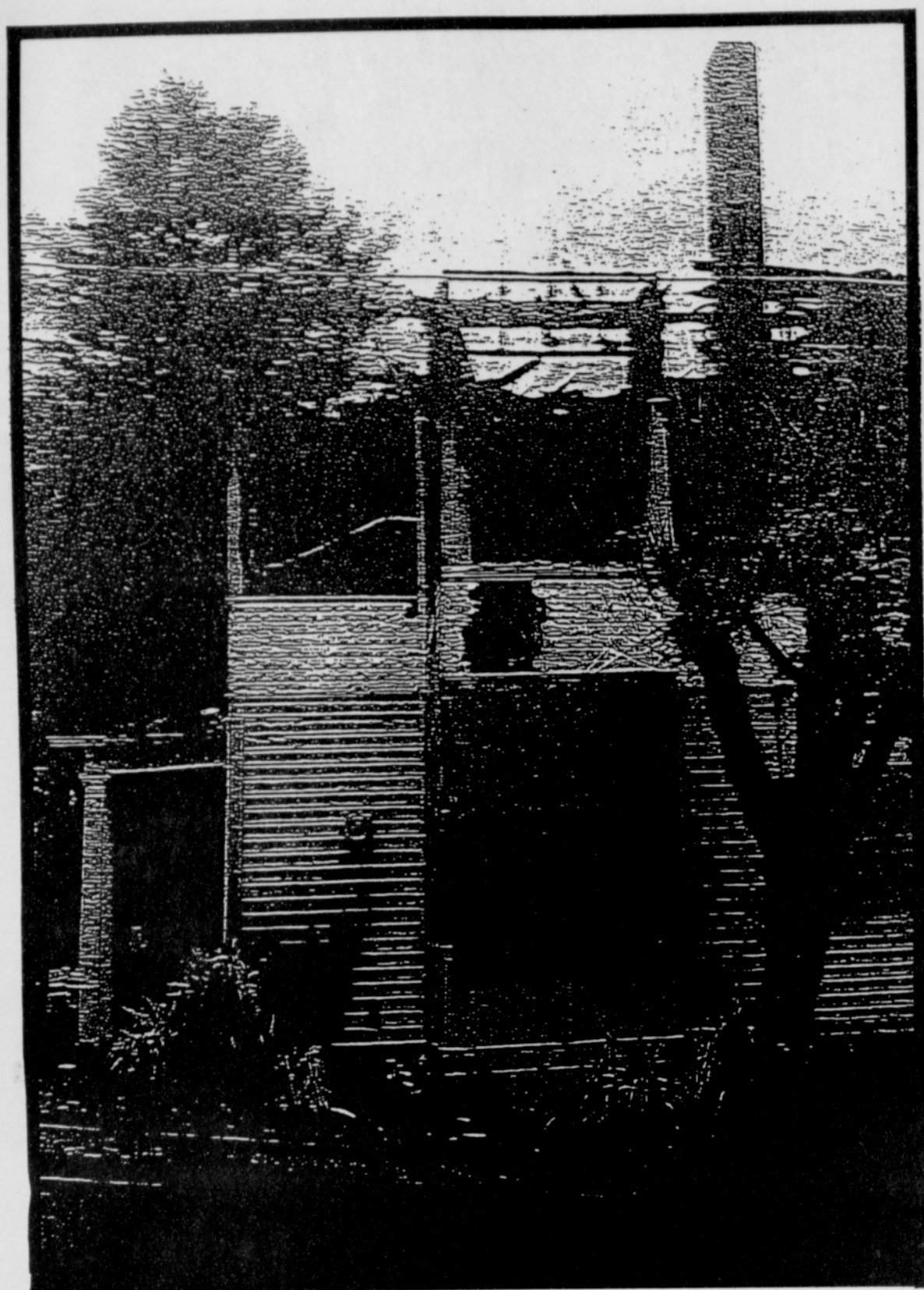


PHOTO BY ANDREW CIER

BOND ST. FAREWELL

A man
bleak in a dying night
ignites
and burns in a chair
in the manner of old Buddhist monks
Unlike gas poured upon flesh to enflame
self-immolation
his fuel is rapidly evaporating alcohol
boiling out through veins and tissue
A cigarette set him afire
small cylinder of menace
which would have got him anyway
in slow oxydation
this early spring morning blossoming
in spontaneous combustion
His crematorium is an old house
in which dwell two elderly ladies
who flee his pyre in fear and tears
a brother who shares the attic
and flings his mortal life out a window
escaping
unaware
of sibling incineration
and in the basement another man
who quit cigarettes a decade before
a monk suddenly awakened
and driven from his cell
by shouts to get out of hell
A halo of fire crowns his shock
as he steps outside his door
into the morning before dawn

--MPMc 4/25/93

I possess few material things. My wealth is in pulp, usually stacked on shelves along walls, in piles on desks, tables and floors. I burrowed like a gopher into a small basement apartment in an old Bond Street rooming house in Astoria for four years, walled in with books. The house was built in 1900 a few streets up from the riverfront on the west, or ocean side of Astoria. I heard rumors that it had been a brothel during Bond Street's wicked years at the end of the last century when the city teemed with seamen, farmers, loggers, fishermen, cannery workers and entrepreneurs who grasped at prosperity and the incidental profits of shanghaiing. Legend claims that a saloon was every thirteen steps from another and a bordello was usually inbetween. Cupi Ziek, himself a legendary figure, used to say that the zest went out of Astoria when the red lights of the whore houses were replaced on traffic signals.

The house was at the corner of 3rd and Bond Streets in what might be called the Bond Street Historical Slum District. My small cell was in the basement, on the ocean side of the house, but it was far from being dark and dank. Large windows ran its length and around the northside overlooking the river. I felt often that I stood at the bridge of a ship looking out over a small sea of wild grass, bushes and plum trees that grew in an empty lot outside the windows. A fringe of old spruce trees curtained the street above the lot, which sloped down toward the river. Near the house, a dried up pond made of cemented rock was buried among weeds. A pair of shoes near its edge had been left undisturbed for years, as if waiting for someone who jumped into the pond and disappeared.

My view of the river was limited to one window. The others on the north side faced directly the white painted boards and lower windows of another old house. The view from that single window was further obscured by the edge of the house next door and the roofs of houses on another block. Yet the tight frame concentrated my sight and made what I saw more personal than abstract, whether large ships or small fishing boats in and outbound from the ocean.

I lived in the small apartment as if in a shoe. Books were stacked against walls, along window sills, kitchen shelves. Paraphernalia of pre-desktop newspaper publishing occupied almost half the available space. Bed, reading chair, bookshelves, filing boxes, stove and toilet filled most of the rest. I felt that I had reproduced a Vietnam bunker, books instead of sandbags my inner wall against an unpredictable and dangerous outside world.

I was comfortable in my shoe. After an early morning fire destroyed the house on April 25, 1989, an 80 year old woman who lived in an apartment above my basement cell said that we were struck with disaster because "We were too happy here." I certainly was. Four years saw a lot of moving in and out of assorted tenants in the house, which was divided into three other apartments. Feisty, nasty, old Champ, 70s year old boozier and pain in the ass (with whom I got along), a young community college student, a bitter couple whose disputes fabricated me as the wife's lover, the old woman (who read Nietzsche and Niebuhr), a friend who lived in the most interesting apartment in the house, the room at the top. My friend's decision to move on after a few months made room for two brothers, one of whom came home drunk late one night soon after. He lit a cigarette and fell asleep. The cigarette cremated him and set the house afire.

Four firemen almost died attempting to reach his body. The stairs collapsed as they climbed. Fire dropped on them from upstairs. Other firemen poured water on them and they escaped.

After the fire steamed and died the charred corpse was removed and the mortally stricken house unplugged from its life support systems. Electricians and plumbers cut lines and sealed pipes similar to nurses unhooking IV lines to deceased patients. Water dripped like rain from the upper floors into my shoe, soaking half of my library. The air was thick with smoke

and the smell of burned wood. Someone boarded up the windows, shuttering my shoe's eyes.

An old man who grew up in the house provided its epitaph. He stood beside me while I stared at the ruin. He said that his father and he had hollowed my basement cell out of dirt in the 1930s. He remembered dumping wheelbarrow loads of dirt and rocks into the river. It seemed ironic that the old man showed up to provide a history of my shoe's origin the day it was destroyed.

That was the year an arsonist seemed determined to conflagrate greater Astoria. Haunting memories of a fire that destroyed the city's core in late 1922 made every siren a shrieking Cassandra. "Who is trying to kill us? Why all the fire?" asked a frantic letter writer to The Daily Astorian, expressing the sentiments of the city at large. "We are like guards in our own home...Afraid to sleep, weary at work, afraid to go anywhere, hoping we have a home to come back to."

The arsonist's reign of terror did not include my burnt house or a torch job on a woman's house that same morning by an agrieved boyfriend, though people continue to think so. In all, the arsonist was responsible for about 20 fires. He frightened Astoria so much that for months the city froze at the sound of a siren. His father was a fireman, and he seemed to choose arson as revenge against his father's abuse.

Five years now. Since the fire I have lived up the hill from the river, which seems to spread out toward the Washington mountains like a wide placid lake, a different perspective from Bond Street. My house is in an old grove of spruce trees, a part of the city forest that a few leading citizens wish to clearcut for money. The old woman who read Nietzsche and Niebuhr has been forced to move several times since the fire. She remains unsettled, wishful about the old house, that it hadn't burned and she and I were still there, neighbors and friends.

--MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER



Uriah's St. Diablo Jellies

