

On the Eve of Destruction

The weekend Watts went up in flames,
we drove from Fullerton to Newport Beach
and down the coast as far as Oceanside,
four restless teenage boys three thousand miles
from home, Bob Dylan's rolling stones
in search of waves and girls and anyone
who'd buy us beer or point us toward the fun.
California. What a high. The Beach Boys,
freeways twelve lanes wide, palm trees everywhere.
And all the girls were blonde and wore bikinis.
I'd swear to that, and even if it wasn't true,
who cared? A smalltown kid from Perkasio,
I spent that whole long summer with my eyes
wide open and the world unfolding
like an open road, the toll booths closed,
service stations giving gas away.
What did riots in a Negro ghetto
have to do with me? What could cause
such savage rage? I didn't know
and didn't think about it much.
The Eve of Destruction was just a song.
Surf was up at Pendleton. The war in Vietnam
was still a sideshow half a world away,
a world that hadn't heard of Ia Drang or Tet,
James Earl Ray, Sirhan Sirhan, Black Panthers,
Spiro Agnew, Sandy Scheuer, Watergate.
We rode the waves 'til two MPs
with rifles chased us off the beach:
military land. 'Fuck you!' we shouted
as we roared up Highway One, windows open,
surfboards sticking out in three directions,
thinking it was all just laughs, just kicks,
just a way to kill another weekend,
thinking we could pull this off forever.

— *W. D. Ehrhart*