Tom Coyne, the grandfather of essayist and fiction writer Hilary Masters, made his way from Ireland to Pittsburgh at age 15 in 1875.

Two years later, "having breathed the power of the place, and felt the heat and rhythm of its industry," he left, turned off, perhaps, by the violent labor riots against the Pennsylvania Railroad, or turned on by the prospect of a stint in the U.S. Cavalry.

"He never said," Masters writes, "so I am free to wonder." And to construct a narrative to "iron out the discontinuity" of Coyne's life by giving "tumbled events a cause and effect -- even a reason they may not have possessed."

In this eclectic collection of essays, the writer and Carnegie Mellon University English professor draws on his own itinerant life, his relationship with his mother and famous father, Edgar Lee Masters, the author of "The Spoon River Anthology," and the work of Daniel Defoe and Michel de Montaigne to reflect on the relationship between experience, remembrance, imagination and "truth" in literature.

Often witty and wise, "In Rooms of Memory" also seems world weary. Tracing "a small segment of our place and time into words," Masters writes, is a little thing, which grows in importance only "in the solitude of our keep." The work "may be all," as Henry James said it was, but Masters feels compelled to add that "it is also nothing."

Montaigne, Shakespeare and Cervantes could be "so brilliantly glib," he maintains, because they had "brand new material to write about."

They took as their inspiration the discovery of a New World, populated with "people so much like us, going about their odd religions, raising
zinnias, and putting the Julian calendar into stone steps.

These days, he suggests, there's nothing much left to say. The horrors of the 20th century so shockingly revealed the risks of intelligence that "we reach for the banal, and not just with a cell phone but in our politics, our literature."

Prose follows the curvature of the Earth: "Words do not fly up so much as they go round and round and round -- faster but the same words."

And so, alas, Masters sometimes succumbs to the post-modern preoccupation: writing about writing.

In "Chimera" and "Loitering on the Loire," he rummages through his notebooks, lingering on "a line here, a scrap of dialogue there," and a description of a man inside a car, holding a woman close enough to make her uncomfortable.

Is it fiction, he asks, or the residue of a long-forgotten episode? Only to conclude, not very satisfactorily to this reader, that he'll leave these characters alone "to sort out their own narrative, to tell it from any direction. Or not at all."

Happily, though, Masters remains a masterful essayist and storyteller, capable of capturing a world and a world view by looking at himself.

In "Disorderly Conduct," for example, he remembers his arrest by a rookie cop when he was spotted peering into the window of a nursing home a few minutes after he left a party welcoming him to his visiting professorship at Clark University.

During the trial that followed, Masters recognized that he was, indeed, guilty of "disorderly conduct." He had abandoned his children, spiritually and emotionally, and cheated on his wife.

"There are extenuating circumstances. ... [But] in the meantime, their wounds have been deep."

On the classic scale of justice, he asks, "How far down must one side sink to raise the forgiveness or approval of another?"

The subject -- flight from the scene of crimes, a rush to freedom and the validation that can accompany it -- is worthy of the Old Masters. As important, in its own way, as the discovery of the New World, it's a room of memory worth entering.

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