

George Stanley / from VANCOUVER, BOOK ONE

5

These things – to describe – not to describe – are important. That's what I think – I – some voice – not to describe – that I hear thinking – I overhear. I don't mean to be obscure. The city weighs tens of thousands of tons – or more – wherever you look at it – from – motionless. (4th floor of Birch Bldg., Cap College campus.) Something in your near distance moves – a leaf – looking over the city then, a cloud – moves very slowly – there seems to be no weather, no movement of the clouds – yet ten minutes later it's all changed, invisible winds are pulling these topographies of condensation out of, into, shapes, though they look still. But the city is still. It has this – a – not patient, not impatient – a dead stillness – motionless – nothing could move it except the earth – to avenge itself – not on people, but on the city itself – the mere fact of it – being – thousands of tons of steel & concrete. It's just an image in the eye – it doesn't exist –

(I've been in offices, in other cities, working, with paper & pencil & calculating machines, telephones, typewriters, filing cabinets - & worn the white shirt & thus been in the city & the city didn't exist –

no, it's this languor of age that makes it seem to exist – what's important? Did I start by saying something was important – that these things that go without description are important. Description – riding by –

& so there's a mind – I can't say – & summer's over, the whole latitude is moving. If it's there as an image – if it's there as inhabiting the poem – that's important, because it's so for some I, almost random, but menaced by something that won't die – but that – is in itself – death –

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The city – a block. A little steam rising from one of the flat-topped high buildings – monolith style – modern. But nothing else moving. There across the inlet. (I looked to see if the trees on this side were moving, to give a contrast.) I imagine winter – the city in the mind – the trees, the branches, waving, blowing all around, & the rain blowing, but the city still there, dark, in the mind. So non-existent, that way. There when you don't see it, as you wake in it. In a bed, in a room, in the city. In one of these blocky structures projecting upwards – rectangle & triangle shapes, in rows, among the overshadowing trees, & in them everyone breathing – separately – ready for the day as separate beings – souls – in this structure – structure of structures – (with its specific history based on land economy transportation – sucking people in

In 1910
Vancouver then
will have 100,000 men –

& do I think of them as souls? Did I say souls?

building it,

ever more motionless.

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Eaton's "rescued" by Sears –
the elderly ladies
with coats & artificial flowers & "permanents" –
seated on the buses at right angles to the direction of travel –
grey heads, mostly in silence, facing across the aisle –
batting thoughts back –

(now CuiScene – a “bistro” – no windows –
no crackers with the soup – a 50¢ bun -

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& knowing
 all this is important – all
 to the souls –
 (indiscernible
 to each one – they don't know they're here –
 & they're happy not knowing

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In this time – dark –
 the hungry people are sitting in the doorways –
 there is no consciousness necessary to this scene –
 “how to pick & point & leave them able to change their lives,”
 Jean wrote.

This is nothing they’re dying for – the golden lights strung like
 ropes across Kitsilano – one thing & another –

& Kenneth Koch said, one line crazy
 & one line serious –
 “That’s OK.”
 “It certainly is.”
 “I’m just going home myself.”
 (missed something)
 “I’ve got one more trip & I’m going home too.”
 “Might see ya next time.”

One line true & one line –
 cop lights red & blue – flickering fast
 “Are we leaving any time soon?”

One line fast – one crazy & one serious –
 would keep them sane & true
 & so they could write (New Jersey schoolkids) –

& you don’t put the book away
 because there’s no line pending.
 Vancouver is breaking through
 your understandable reticence.

Once it's made sure you
were drained of the need
of the will
for everything to be
marshalled

the city
is not unknowable
it's real

(This is the 10 – westbound – October - dark

One among the old people
in the cafeteria on the 6th floor
of the Bay – Seymour Room

Necropolis –

a coffee & danish
not thinking of anything
but the raisins

Sears will manage Eaton's as a traditional department store,
not high fashion, but will keep the Eaton's name because people
who shop downtown aren't interested in garage door openers.

An apartment house in the West End changes hands – 50%
increase in rents – “All of us could have had strokes.” Not sure if she
read that in *The Province* or heard it on News 1130.

Skytrain to Waterfront – faces reflected impassive as in an old
T. S. Eliot poem – as if the set of the face belied the interior mind –
and it does – try it – I could teach this to the young.

Wait for something to happen – want nothing to happen.
Homeostasis. Sun flashes past the pillars. Terminus station: “Will all
passengers please leave the train.”

winter comes on in the mind
even before October's half over –
the broom sweeping leaves

In Gastown, the concentric brick circles & low ornamental
posts with chains – what is this all about? Something else than is
given in perception, so shut your eyes. Shut the mind's eyes. Fiercely.

No smoking, tourists. Go outside,
he says. Who? Oh, I forget, I'm dead,
I can't smoke. Which are tourists
& which are ghosts.

Look at the old warehouses, concentric circle brick arches over
the windows, pediments with an inset brick pattern & think

why are there so few
here
(compared to, say, St. Louis)

did they (we) have just-in-time delivery
from the trains to the steamships,
the steamships to the trains?

a single ape

in complex light

city of death, city of friends

10 again. Dark, seamed faces,
old clothes. (Some missing word)
as Swedes. This is prosperity.

Washrooms on the 9th floor
Elevator door mirrored
on the inside. Security man:
2nd door to your left.
Mirrors, red & gray tile.
Inside the Hong Kong bank.
It's cool in here, & it's night, & it's not sad.
In the men's room of the Hong Kong bank
(she uses the men's room).

When Debra McPherson pointed over the heads of the crowd at the anti-TransLink rally & said, "I've always liked looking at her. I remember the original," nobody knew what she was talking about. I knew. She remembered the stone figure of a nurse executed in high relief that had adorned the façade at the southeast corner of the old Georgia Medical-Dental building (blown up) & that had been replicated at about the same height on the new Cathedral Place building that had taken its place.

I saw it on TV. And two days later I read it in the *Sun*. The triptych of the explosion. A time-sequence. The dustcloud rising to reclaim the irresolute verticals. I wondered what happened to the steel frame. Oh, I know now.

The newspaper is held up at a distance, depending on her eyesight, between the reader and the city or flat on the breakfast table next to the coffee cup. When the newspaper is lowered, the city rises again & she forgets that it has changed.

The Devonshire Hotel. I remember when I first came to Vancouver I used to go to the Dev. They served a great corned-beef sandwich with hot mustard. I thought, "This is England!" Blown up – replaced by – the Hong Kong bank!

Now back downstairs in the (atrium?) she rejoins the crowd dressy at the opening of a display of photographs of writers. She sees her own photograph with a poem. It reminds her of Iris Murdoch's wry inquiring smile before her forgetting.

These formalities, of people
kissing, exchanging
compliments, & lightly patting
the other's hand, at the same time as
"No, thank *you*."

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At Darby's drinking whiskey (that catches the tone of it, no crap about brands or labels – nationalities). Watching the Redskins & Cardinals, from Phoenix, out one eye (the left), & the other, the Mets & Atlanta tied 1-1 in the 14th, in a rainstorm. The electronic scoreboard says "14th inning stretch." And I keep looking out the window onto Macdonald, the October dusk, now night, & thinking it's raining here. No, it's raining in New York, my mind snaps back at my brain. And now from up the bar voices of three middle-aged lads arguing on two drinks about Canada & the States. The youngest, biggest, richest-looking one says, "There's no sense of urgency here."

I laugh, soundlessly, smilelessly. No, there's no sense of urgency here, either.

I'm glad the NDP screwed up the convention centre deal. It means I won't have to walk another 200 m to the SeaBus.

It's not true the snow makes the flanks of the Lions more lion-like; here it is October & the rock is bare; they're like lions sculpted by some Assyrian or Henry Moore. If anything, the snow would obscure these lines.

City of death, city of friends.

NOTES

- 5 "In 1910...": Tourist greeters' song. Alan Morley, *Vancouver: From Milltown to Metropolis*, 3rd ed. Vancouver: Mitchell, 1974. 149.
- 6 Jean: Jean Rysstad, writer.
- 7 Debra McPherson: President, B.C. Nurses' Union.