

STAN PERSKY / A Man and A City

The lure of trying to figure out the enigma of the place where you live recurrently draws writers. If you're a writer in Vancouver, that's especially true; we dwell in a spectacular urban site that often seems like a cross between a multi-ethnic Floating World of glittering condo towers and a shabby netherworld of boarded-up storefronts, discarded heroin needles, and the basket-carts of the homeless rattling through back lanes. Just to complicate matters, the pricey condos often leak, and occasionally, the denizens of the netherworld resist their own destruction.

The stack of books about Vancouver in the first decade of the 21st century includes Doug Coupland's *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* (2003), Lance Berelowitz's *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination* (2005), Michael Kluckner's *Vancouver Remembered* (2006), and Gabor Mate's *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (2008), as well as a slew of Vancouver-based novels from writers like Timothy Taylor, William Deverell and Lawrence Gough. However, few poets have produced a full-scale meditation about this west coast Canadian metropolis. Until now, the most notable long poems about Vancouver have been mid-20th century poet Earle Birney's dramatic satires, *Trial of a City and other poems* (1952) and *The Damnation of Vancouver* (1977).

Vancouver poet George Stanley's *Vancouver: A Poem* is, I think, the most interesting book-length poem written about the city to date, and its phenomenological perspective catches the spirit of the times as deftly as a text message. Yet, Stanley isn't a novice writer. The 75-year-old self-described "senior" is the author of a dozen or so chapbooks and volumes—including, just in the last decade or so, *Seniors* (2006), *A Tall, Serious Girl* (2003), *At Andy's* (2000), and *Gentle Northern Summer* (1995)—and he's the 2006 winner of the Poetry Society of America's prestigious Shelley Award.

Since I know the author, a declaration of interest is in order here before taking a look at how a poet sees Vancouver. Actually, to say I "know" the author is a bit of an understatement. In fact, I've known Stanley for 50 years. We practically grew up together in the literary bars and coffeehouses of his hometown, San Francisco; moved to B.C. at roughly the same time some four decades ago; and for about a half-century have been engaged in a running conversation-argument-literary/philosophic-

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discussion; and we've even made cameo appearances in each other's writing.

The most famous modern book-length poem about a city is William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (1946–58), an epic-sized collage written in a mixed mode of poetic lines and prose that provides an account of the history, people, and spirit of the city of Paterson, New Jersey as well as a discussion of the role of the poet in society. In short, as Williams says, it's about "a man and a city."

Paterson is the book that George Stanley is reading at the beginning of *Vancouver*, as he rides the bus, "back & forth. Across the city. The 210." The poem's opening line is a stark declaration: "There is more here than memory." It's a terse modernist abbreviation of the classic opening invocation to the muses—the familiar "O, muse / hear my song"—that we find in the ancient Homeric and Virgilian epics.

Stanley's *Vancouver* is a book about the mind of a poet—a poet in Vancouver, as it happens—and about Vancouver, a city that appears in passing glances, in the middle of a traffic-clogged intersection, sometimes from a distance, and even in dreams. The distant view is frequently from a classroom window at Capilano University, on the far side of Burrard Inlet, where Stanley taught literature for many years. But most often, it's a view from within the city's busses, pubs, restaurants and department stores, and in such ordinary places as the lobby of the Kitsilano apartment building where he lives, a building where "the seniors in their apartments" are "waiting for a moment" in the late afternoon.

At other times the city sits there in stolid silence, its buildings weighty as the mountains north of Vancouver in which "we see two rocks, & call them Lions," Stanley says, and later notes, "like lions sculpted by some Assyrian or Henry Moore." Then looking away from the mountains, back toward Vancouver, he adds, "City of death, city of friends."

Stanley immediately challenges William Carlos Williams' catchphrase, "A man & a city," replying, "I am not a man & this is not my city." What he means, I guess, is there's no such thing as "a man" in the abstract, and he certainly isn't the socially-constructed "man" ideologically approved of in his society. At one point he muses, "not to be a man / to be a thought," emphasizing that he's an embodied mind thinking about a city. Still, if you're not a "man" in relation to a city, you can nonetheless be a citizen of the city, as Stanley in fact is—frequently a participant at civic political meetings or a member of the Bus Riders Union.

As for “this is not my city,” it can be read literally that Vancouver isn’t the city where Stanley was born (that was San Francisco). Or more simply, it’s a place he is “not at home in.” Or even, it’s not the same place of rougher edges that he lived and worked in, in mid-life, during the early 1970s.

Reading Stanley, I too remember a grungier version of Vancouver when a barrel-making factory, city councilman Ed Sweeney’s *cooperage*, occupied the oil-soaked shoreline of False Creek, before the chic housing development and its winding lanes replaced it. In the phrase “not my city,” there is a denial of proprietary ownership. It’s not his city in the sense of, Who can claim a city as one’s own?

To Williams’ notion of “a man and a city,” Stanley counterposes his own credal idea of “the darkness of the mind & the darkness of death, / & in between the bright day, bright city.” Stanley’s book investigates those edges of darkness as well as the brightness in between.

I don’t want to minimize the fact that Stanley’s *Vancouver* is a complicated, even difficult, modern poem, which is to say that it’s a work in which a person is actually thinking. Further, the process of writing it is part of the poem, including the very problems of writing. The hesitations, blanks, the anxious sense that the whole thing (even the city) might be an illusion, are all there. What we have, as Stanley says at one point, is “a single ape / in complex light,” and the refrain, “City of death, city of friends.”

Recurrently, Stanley tells himself to “write carelessly, but slowly,” or “write carelessly & / stop focusing.” What he means by the curious admonition to “write carelessly,” I think, is a recognition that relinquishing a certain amount of authorial control over the “material” is a way of allowing the city to come through on its own.

Behind the invocation about how to write this poem, one finds throughout Stanley’s work an almost metaphysical tension between caring and not caring. The notion extends from the most mundane matters, as in caring or not about the outcome of the game on TV in a bar, or the homeless beggar to whom one gives or doesn’t give “spare change,” all the way to big cares about cities, existence, the universe itself. It’s something like Samuel Beckett’s famous declaration, “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” In Stanley’s version, it’s “I don’t care. I care.” It’s a reminder to us, as readers, to think about what we do and don’t care about.

Naturally, Stanley’s poem is not intended as a comprehensive portrait, history

or analysis of Vancouver. Nonetheless, his local epic is clearly organized in a dozen numbered sections, plus the inserted chapbook called “Seniors,” which is about being old in this relatively young city. After a bit, you get used to the twists and turns of Stanley’s bird-quick mind and his idea of Vancouver. You gradually pick up on his wry humour. For instance, in a 3-line poem titled “Seniors,” he says,

Seniors know everything.

Correction: Each senior knows everything.

The others don’t want to hear about it.

If a book about Vancouver like Doug Coupland’s entertaining *City of Glass* is a view of Vancouver that often seems as though the city is seen through a telescope perched on the cedar deck of a house across the inlet from Vancouver, Stanley’s city is distinctly experienced from *inside*. We’re inside its busses, bars, among its beggars, inside the apartments of seniors where “the horizon of meaning / is just inside / the living room window,” and of course inside the mind of the poet.

The Vancouver that Stanley thinks and dreams and writes about is both the changing city and the city retrieved in time. He shares with Birney’s work of a half-century ago a materialist and economic sense of the urban. Perhaps the more apt affinity is with Donald Gutstein’s *Vancouver Ltd* (1975), a book that insisted that much of Vancouver politics is a battle over real estate. “Sausi’s is closing,” Stanley notes about a bar on west Broadway, “to be replaced by a Banana Leaf,” the name of a small chain of Indonesian restaurants. “Reterritorialization,” he calls it. “We’ll have to find some new place to drink.” Later, he remembers, “In the dream I lamented the passing of bistros / like the Modern, which was Sausi’s three reterritorializations back.”

Behind the reterritorializations, and the constant destruction and reconstructions of capitalism, the city is haunted by its older self. Stanley invokes a time when the large “W” emblem revolved atop the old Woodward’s department store on Hastings, just after World War II, as a “reminder of a certain way of life,” a time when people were regarded “as people,” “not merely plural.” And, we might add, not merely as consumers. It can be seen as a sort of golden age, or the illusion of one. But, as Stanley sharply reminds us, “There’s more here than memory.”

Given the role of poetry in Canadian culture these days, a book-length poem about Vancouver may not get the attention it deserves. The subculture of poetry and poets now takes place almost entirely outside of the view of the general public, more

or less as a specialised discourse restricted to its practitioners. The one thing worth saying about the disappearance of poetry from public view is that we're likely losing a way of understanding something about life that we don't get from other linguistic modes, such as story, discourse or the language of science. Not paying attention to this poetic work would be a mistake.

For all its interesting complexities, Stanley's *Vancouver* offers the straightforward notion that all of us (in Vancouver) have a version or vision of "Vancouver" in our minds, and it suggests the question, "What kind of Vancouver is in *your* mind?" That is, there's a sense in which each of us could articulate, if we wanted or were able to, the city that we experience over time. What would your *Vancouver* look like?

In the meantime, there's George Stanley's capacious mind, trying out ideas about everything from Vancouver to the void in a remarkable poem of urban exploration.