

An aerial photograph of Vancouver, British Columbia, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings. The image is heavily stylized with a dark, textured overlay in shades of green and black, giving it a painterly or digital-art appearance. The text is centered over the middle of the image.

Alex Leslie

VANCOUVER
FOR
BEGINNERS
poems

VANCOUVER FOR BEGINNERS

ALEX LESLIE

BOOK*HUG PRESS 2019

FIRST EDITION

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The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Funded by the
Government
of Canada

Financé par le
gouvernement
du Canada

Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Book*hug Press acknowledges the land on which it operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Vancouver for beginners / Alex Leslie.

Names: Leslie, Alex (Mystery story writer), author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190158069 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190158093

ISBN 9781771665346 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771665353 (HTML)

ISBN 9781771665360 (PDF) | ISBN 9781771665377 (Kindle)

Classification: LCC PS8623.E845 V36 2019 | DDC C811/.6—dc23

PRINTED IN CANADA

RAINFOREST PARADISE

Now that there is no weather there are only trends. Roots knit an urban basket. This was all forest way back when. Old-growth towers, glass swan spines. Public parks in buckets line the curbs for pickup. Recycling mecca, whose residents eat compost with full cream and push the poor from rooftop gardens into moss that flows from the lips of dumpsters, ocean dreaming in the background, mountains offering shadows to lean into, a sheltered city pillaged for bed frames. The forest's understory inhales, creeks shout from the manholes, on public transit a wavesounds meditation CD has been playing on loop for 180 years. Born into this misty static, residents swing axes at each other's ankles and fall like saplings into Taiwan-bound barges and post-industrial wet dreams, into hammocks knit from track-marked cedar branches. Hydroponic lovers nest in shore phone booths, a bulldozer uncurls its sleepy head and splits the street open with an egg tooth. At night raccoons patrol the valleys and alleyways with the cops, obligatory ravens wing-to-wing down the wires, and a man pushes a shopping cart full of huckleberry plants, salal, and prehistoric ferns toward the bottle depot. On his off-nights he is a flamethrower.

MOUTH OF THE FRASER RIVER

Because our thirst is never satisfied, a pipeline runs through us. The ex-river widened for your use. Riverbed, sidewalk, gutterpath. Land deveined of creeks with one swift tug. Old flow, a long tear down the surface visible only from the bridge. The ex-river runs a path dug by moonlight. Marine Drive, spook of delta. At the mouth of the ex-river, where it empties and spreads, a gate installed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. The ex-river slips through iron grates, slithers among pipes under bedrooms and kitchens. Do not try to take care of the river. Take care of what is around the river and the river will take of itself, instructs the pamphlet released by the city. A manhole gargles, coughs uphill from the water table. A dog lumbers the blackberry path, pants sugary heat. A city engineer crawls, green aluminum fins pinned to his ankles, rubs his belly on the pavement, a compass in his teeth. A salmon with small dark stones for eyes hurtles forward to her home above the reservoir, to the second Vancouver trapped in the clouds. Inside the ex-river, glass fishing floats whirl, each one an eye closing. Autumn is eternal. The ex-river skin slick with crimson handprints. Vancouver opens its mouth and words come out. When you drink from the river, you forget.

FOREST FIRE SEASON

Today the city lies on its back, its stomach bled out.

Buildings hang upside down. Windows plate the harbour.

Trees send roots upward thirsting for chemical reservoir.

Bridges dangle from the inlet's dark wrists.

This morning the city tilts its head in a heat dream blown in
from the other side.

Crazy-eye sun bores a hole through orange fog.

The city lies on its back on a new bed this morning.

Dreams itself in the bay lit up with pickled afterbirth.

Every sunset colour in the new alien dust-clouds descends.

The city lies on its back on the old, thinking cool of the channel.

What's underneath is forced upward and flips.

Houses inverted under the nuclear lid.

A lung suspended in a yellow cloud chamber.

Yellow so listless you could stare into it forever and not go blind.

BARTER

In the news today: Vancouver is tearing down the art gallery that used to be the land registry. The barge that unloads the hybrid cars leaves full of cedar, fat roots like fingers in the oil slick due north. The trawler's hold unloads flash-frozen salmon, departs full of clouds and tickets. The beach sealed with a wall had its lip peeled back, and a new shore named Water Street installed. The courthouse converted into a killing bazaar where bear furs are exchanged for oil paintings of possessed trees rebelling within a glass house, seizing apparitions the shades of a coastal storm. This fentanyl can be traded for eclipse. People do not come here to buy and sell but for miraculous business. Once a week crowds gather on the street and make their offerings: a van full of mixed wire; a Bible with half the words blacked out, *extra charge for the editing*. Forest of pipes traded for a river. First city bartered for a struck match. An inlet for a swimming pool named prosperity, dosing fentanyl into the veins of a chemical dawn. And somewhere back there, the past was traded for a different past. Vancouver releases its plan for the new art gallery: it will be built near the old viaduct, a fresh bamboo temple where wood was traded for blood.

INLET ECHOCARDIOGRAM

Inside acoustics. Ocean on shuffle
drained nightly, a new tide
spelled on the city's burnt edge.

Horizon control
soundbox, throats buffer
names, crossfade to
the flesh. Score
wiped again and swimming out
into blind tidal wiring. Wrists
bound and kelp.

In the dark, echoes sensormurmur
homing signals from glowing
chests of commuter
whales
bellies of Toyotas
and
greenwood.

Repeat from the beginning.

English Bay refills with static, scrubs
the skin of a freighter pregnant
with enough oil to render
this scrapyard edge of the
Pacific uninhabitable
for the next two hundred years.

Downbeat.

The microphones

were placed
in Vancouver's
inhabitants' chests
at birth.

The inlet
works a
cabled arm
into the city's
centre,
tectonic spin
on the pelvic floor
sinks chambers
into the temporary
foundation. The shallows
burrow under the bridges
that staple
the city's
stomach.

Inhabitants
go under again
for a season
bass line shoehorned
from a foghorn's
blue mind,

morning massaged from stone.
Old fishermen
line the shore with buckets,
clearing computer chips and omens.

Looptrack
of tide
on synth
eardrum
fibrillates.

Ear
pressed
to the
blasting
ground.

Ocean is
analog.

LOVERS

Go down to the old port on Valentine's Day to see streets burned in the Great Fire of 1886 resurrected by the city for tourists. Singed cedar arcs, the brothel a stage on peg legs, an actress screaming in the background, hurling her body every twelve minutes into the waves that brief the saltlick shore beyond the overpass. She arrives at daybreak, slams her cityblock shoulders into the surf. People on the opposing shore raise their fists in welcome. She has worked this shore for centuries, knows where to unbutton the waves.

A cruise ship drifts by and releases nets, snags her hair and discarded fingernails, dumps out a hook and a trunk of bent keys. She returns to shore, phosphorescence turning turning in her womb, opens her mouth, eyes shedding dark fish, generations of salmon flop into the buckets crowded in foam. The tourists arrive in families, spread beach towels on sunlit slagheaps, stretch limbs, watch her do laps, turn their faces from the streets scrubbed of graffiti and the past.

For this one day, from the gutters scorched with hotel bleach and blood-pinked brine, from the black roofs and shuddering wooden boardwalks polished by the commerce of men's boots. They watch her swim, body arched graceful as a whale toward the open ocean toward the silent tanker barricade toward the series of bridges that link us, a wavering spinal chain in silhouette one two three.

POSTCARD HOME FROM ENGLISH BAY

Nostalgia is a territory. Chain-smoking seagulls do yoga on the horizon at dawn. English Bay organized into lanes with flaming buoys for swimmers to do their drive-by banking. The bridge shut down for candidates who launch down the inlet on robotic wings, competing for votes. People tread water below to witness, swallow the new Pacific vaccine. The famous building with the tree growing out of its roof drinks rainwater, spits mercury into the teacups of developers. Acid rain rainbows the parade tie-dye, the marchers photograph their chemical shadows and post in Renaissance filter, reflections in oil paints. Pride bellyflops into a harbour of profit. The portrait artist hired by the mayor works until sunset, then lies down in the surf and dissolves, skin floating off clear as a jellyfish, black formal tails trailing ink. It is so beautiful here. This child will draw your caricature for free by throwing a glass of coins in your face and raising his fingers to catch the bent light that arcs off your cheekbones. Blink and you'll miss the moon inspecting its own bruises, reading Captain Vancouver's letters home by the lights of a thousand rigs, miniatures available in bottles for collectors and investors. Visit soon.

MARPOLE BUS LOOP

Whales sleep in the bus loop at night. Orcas loll on the asphalt, black skins thump oil-drum hymnals, they swim up from their old sleeping under the hollows to rest where men built the parking lot to hold the buses for this coast city. Paved over the cabled grass, shell, ground-up vertebrae, old berths in saltwater belly, the city's fleets of buses sleep here under the Laing Bridge's flare of light, a pod of eighteenth-century engines sunk into muck, rusted out with river pulp. Pacific commuter blood vessels homing to mammalian bed, hubcap eyes blinking between the branches of the Fraser, mouths push out smoke, dawn shorefogs stuffed with gull wings, motorcycle motors and rage, windshields muzzled with fog. The buses have been coming here for centuries, sleeping off the work of a river unzipping its skin, sloughing birdland, shedding flatgrass, dropping their skins on the shale city edges, fat flensed off curbs. The buses moan, lean into one another for warmth, rub barnacles on steel, the old wartime trolley cables telegraph sea songs. Gutted melody in the pipes. Another dead one found in English Bay this morning, oil spill off sunset, whale with a chemical half-life. The inlet rinses its morning mouth with bunker fuel and spits out streets. A bus breached off Lion's Gate. A thousand phones captured its slow soar. The tankers are calving, birth matter flowers ochre in the bay. A net hangs over the foot of Burrard for any stray life. No one wants to go into the ocean this summer. Out there, the buses drink black milk in the deep. The nightshift drivers park the whales belly-to-belly in the lot under the bridge. Whales roll in the shallows, flip steel dorsals, bask in the spume from the wheels on Marine Drive, chew up tickets and ferns and midden, their eyes fade to rings of knowing

delta grey. At sunrise, the whales head off on their daily transit routes, haul their bodies up Granville past the library, vegetable stands, apartment blocks. The power grid is the new coastline. Their wide-open headlights half-lit in the ocean-bottom streets, halogen eyes stare at tumbled logs roiling at the base of the city's industrial throat. The buses head off for the day and gather up people in flocks, all the way up the hill. All the whales are singing and rolling down there at the bottom of Marpole in the unmarked graveyard where they park the buses.