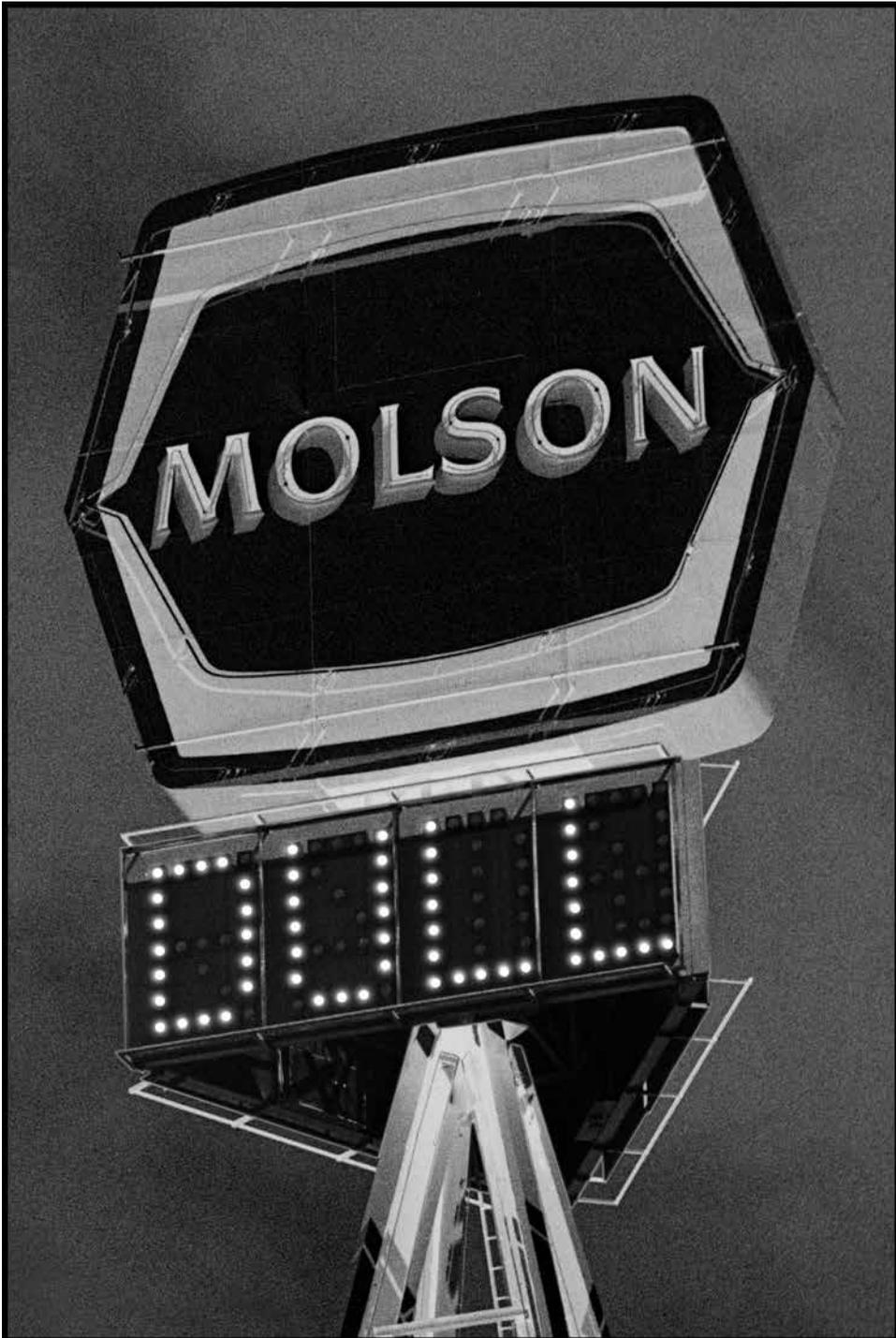


Terminal City Picaresque

Henri Robideau
2003



Terminal City Picaresque

My flight from California comes in at night. I don't see the city from the air. I'm not awestruck by its beauty. My brother picks me up at the airport and we tool into town on his motor bike. He picks a winding route along the Fraser River, on back streets through Richmond U-pick blueberry fields to Number 5 Road where we cross the mighty Fraser in darkness, rattling over the rickety board deck of the Fraser River Bridge, just dangerous inches above the churning black waters. The Fraser is filled with log booms, its banks crowded with belching sawmills. We pass mysterious pyramidal silhouettes of beehive burners and exotic crews of turbaned lumber sorters moiling their midnight green chain. It's a cool for August 1969 evening as we putt through drizzled streets lined with old wood frame clapboard houses. We arrive at his place on West 7th Avenue just off Pine Street. He lives next door to Big Pink, the Alexandra House, a one time orphanage that looks like an oversize, post Victorian institutional version of the surrounding houses but painted pink and now used as a community centre. My brother tells me that if it were a clear night that we'd see the mountains but tonight it's overcast and all I see is the rotating information tower on the Molson's brewery. The sign has three sides with data spelled out in light bulbs; one with the temperature, one with the time and one with a four letter word to describe the weather – it reads DULL.

The next morning the DULL sign has changed to RAIN. I'm still not awestruck by Vancouver's beauty. In fact, the local hippyland neighbourhood seems a little, well, grotty. Lots of Volkswagen vans. Lots of dogs. As I look out from the second story window I see about ten ferro-cement sail boats in various stages of construction parked in people's back yards. Down the street a bulldozer is knocking over an old house. I'm an early riser and go out for a photo walk. Just past Big Pink I find the BC Electric tracks which I walk along, winding across 4th Avenue near a ten story high Army Navy sign standing beside the Granville Street bridge. The tracks lead down to False Creek where an impenetrable thicket of blackberries separates the train shed from fishing boats tied up at water's edge. The tracks curve around close to the RAIN sign and then along side the Burrard Street bridge where native guys are cooking something on a Coleman stove and a little further along a bunch of hippy kids are sleeping on the

ground in sleeping bags, wet, next to a smoking garbage fire. I reach the Kitsilano trestle and want to continue on across but it's swung open for boats to pass. False Creek is full of log booms, sawdust barges, fish guts and oil slicks. The city looks flat and gray. Ugly. It rains and I don't take my camera out. California has me spoiled.

After a ham-n-eggs brunch at the Aristocratic with my brother we go to a Committee to Aid American War Resisters meeting near 4th and MacDonald. Of course this is an American crowd and it's interesting to hear about the issues they face here in Canada, one common complaint is boredom. Canada is boring. The craziest guy there actually likes the army and approves of the Namwar but is pissed off that he got drafted as he wanted to be a general, not a private. An old high school buddy of mine is at the meeting and afterward we cruise 4th Avenue to score a few joints. We wind up at Hare Krishna's Famous Last Chance Saloon which is the center of the

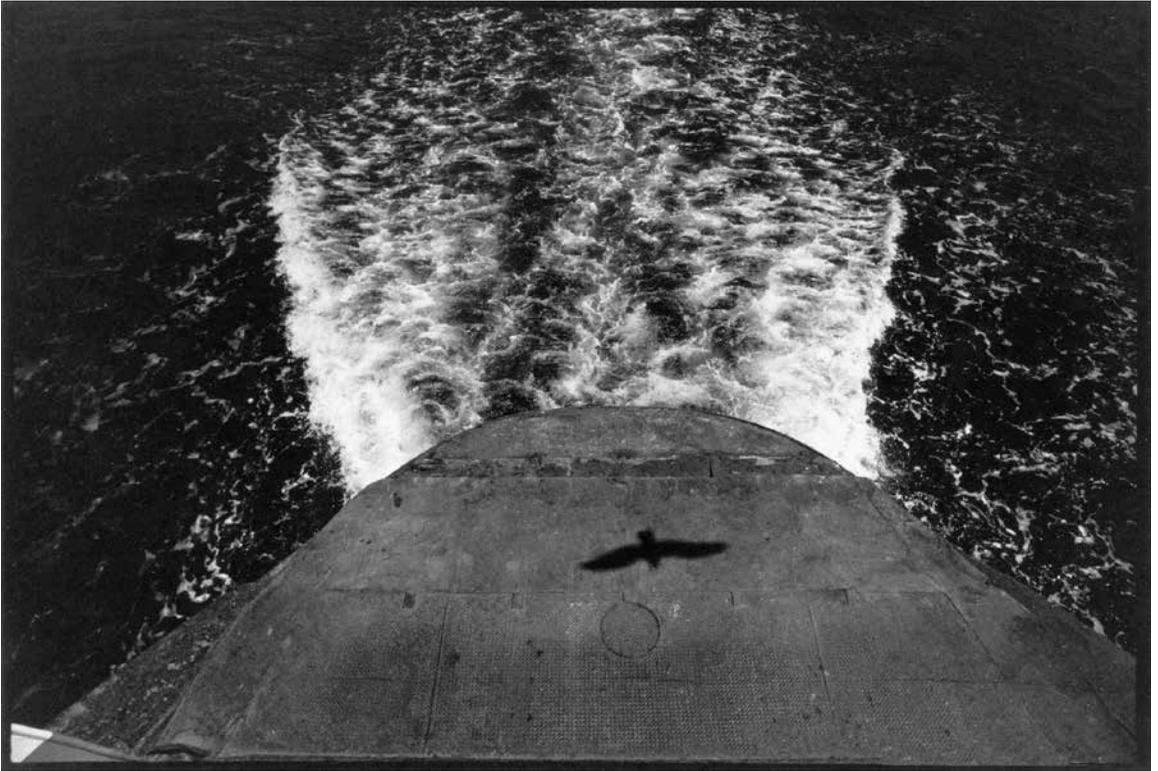


Denis on the Langdale Queen, Howe Sound

local acid and weed trade, only once we're inside, the obvious narcs with blinky neon neckties, fake granny glasses, pukka beads and flat top haircuts outnumber the dealers two to one. Maybe three to one. My friend and I score outside on the Ave instead and make plans to go backpacking in Black Tusk meadows the following day. On the way back to my brother's the RAIN sign has changed back to DULL.

The next morning I look out and the DULL sign has changed to FAIR but it's still overcast. My old high school war resister buddy and his wife pick me up early and as we drive out over the Burrard Street bridge into the West End, misty steam curls rise from the roofs, the clouds part, the sun blasts

through, the mountains appear and Hallelujah!, I'm awestruck. We drive across the Lions Gate bridge and the whole damned North Shore looks like the money shot from *The Sound of Music*. I'm still awe struck after zigzagging Marine Drive through the black forest of West Van to Horseshoe Bay where the road turns to into a gravel cliff hugger from there to Squamish with a minor car break-down in a sludge pit at Britannia Beach. We finally reach Garibaldi, which is named after an Italian socialist- this wouldn't be allowed in the States. We hike up to the Tusk, trudge around on a glacier wearing steel spike shoe clamps, drink water right off the ground and eat some pasty crap which is dehydrated backpacker goulash. I take



Langdale Queen fantail, Howe Sound

pictures of the alpine beauty but like any good street photographer I know that beauty is just a lie meant to seduce us so mosquitoes and bears can eat us and in fact when you look at the pictures later on they're never as good as actually being there, even if you use a polarizing filter to blue-up the sky.

The next day we rattle back into Vancouver late. The day after that Mom and Dad arrive to visit my brother too. Mom comments that last time she was in Canada during the Quebec visits of her youth they didn't have flush toilets. How times have changed. We hang out at my brother's girl friend's little wood house on Beach Avenue across the street from the Englesea Lodge and watch the sunset over paradise on English Bay. The next day we take the

ferry from Horseshoe Bay to the Sunshine Coast and back again. I photograph my brother with a paper bag under his arm out on the poop-deck of the Langdale Queen – he looks like an immigrant arriving at the Statue of Liberty. I photograph a seagull off the fan tail – another freedom kind of image similar to Robert Frank's looking off the fan tail coming from Switzerland to America picture.

Before I know it, it's all over and I return to my Berkeley street photographer life where for the past couple of years I've fancied myself to be a Robert Frank truth visualizer, talk'n bout my generation, bringing the word to the people, snapping anti war demos, hippy weddings in the fog on Mount Tamalpias, Carousel Ballroom



Henri, portrait assignment, Laney College, Oakland

and Sunday Provo Park rock jams. I've returned to an unusually quiet Berkeley as it's not head smashing season with the students away for the summer and the cops having turned their attention to shooting Panther brothers at home asleep in their beds in Oakland. But come fall the violence is back in town constant brutal state violence, inescapable except for thoughts of summer's gentle Vancouver sojourn. The visit to Vancouver has left an impression on me- it seemed so peaceful and devoid of culture compared to my life in Berkeley. In this respect Vancouver has big potential. In Vancouver I could be king of the street photographers. I could sell street pictures to the National Film Board. I could study the raw

underbelly of the narc scene at the Last Chance. I could photograph the tragic lives of American war resisters. I'd be in Life Magazine in no time.

I begin making plans to return to the land of my ancestors. I do research on the Canadian Immigration point system and find out street photographers need not apply. However, architectural photographers are on the demand list. This is fine. I'm adaptable. Besides I've started going to Laney College in Oakland, where I'm taking commercial photography and cinematography. Laney is a trade school where almost everyone there attends for free on the G.I. Bill and despite the occasional knifing or shoot-out in the cafeteria most students are doing their

best to better their lives. The photo department is sandwiched between cosmetology and professional dry cleaning. People come in and while they're getting their hair done, their suite gets pressed and afterward we photograph them all snazzed up. I learn how to shoot buildings with an 11x14 Calumet view camera which is good for my Canadian architectural immigration plan.

As the new decade begins Kissinger is redecorating Southeast Asia with wall to wall carpet bombing. The remains of boys coming into Travis in aluminum tubes and body bags sometimes filled with Tai-sticks reaches alarming proportions. California's Twenty Mule Team Governor Ronald Reagan protects the silent majority from the enemy student commies by turning Berkeley into a war zone with dusk to dawn curfews, National Guard invasion patrols, helicopter tear gassings, cop clubbings and the Santa Rita concentration camp. I accelerate my Canadian architectural photographer plan by trading my Nikon in for a Sinar view camera, dropping out of school and selling off all my stuff so that I'll have a grubstake when I hit the frozen north.

The morning I make my official immigrant crossing there has been an explosion on the aptly named Apollo 13 moon rocket. As I kiss the USA and my fellow Americans goodbye they are all tense and praying to Jesus for those poor bastards floating around on an eternal lunar mission in a rudderless tin can. I enter Canada at the Douglas crossing. The Stanley Cup playoffs are on- astronaut news, even potentially dead-astronaut news, falls off the jabber list amongst the customs agents who are all praying to Phil Esposito. I pass the Canadian Immigration point test partly based on the fact that the border guy has never seen a Sinar view camera. He figures I must be a pro. I have a promise of work letter from a real Vancouver architect who

thinks it's, "Bloody ironic that a Brit is sponsoring a French Canadian to get into Canada." For my final ten points I'm asked to report for a physical at the Immigration Canada building located in the CPR freight yards at the foot of Burrard Street – a depressing, filthy train besmoked outpost of the British Empire, where they reassure me that a body cavity search is just a standard welcome to Canada health procedure.

Well my plan has got me here OK but now I begin to learn about my misconceptions and non conceptions. I do a couple of small architectural photography gigs but I don't have the right anal temperament or a wide angle lens, no tripod, no light meter, no darkroom, nor a car or a place to live that isn't about to be torn down – 12th and Oak, 10th and Ash, 15th and Prince Edward, 6th and Birch – each time I'm moving out the front door a bulldozer is coming in the back. This is no way to start a business, and besides, what I really want to be is king of the street photographers, so I start saving up to buy a replacement for my now gone Nikon.

My first job is working the night shift at the Beatty Street Armoury which has been turned into a youth hostel by the Secretary of State for kids from the east who've hitch hiked across Canada and ended up in Vancouver without any dough. The old commissioner at the armoury who's been in both WWI and WWII, tells me the secret of how everyone in Canada gets along, he says, "It's not the nationality, it's the personality." Mayor of Vancouver Tom Campbell doesn't like these kids or their personality because they spread gonorrhoea and end up stoned on acid on 4th Avenue so he whacks an eviction notice on the door of the armoury but we laugh in his face, ha-ha-ha, as this is federal turf and out of his jurisdiction. Friday nights are the worst at the hostel as plaid shirt



Canadian Immigration, dockside, Vancouver

suspended loggers in town for their weekend drunk, drift up from Hastings Street expecting to find a flop but get turned back for lack of youth.

While on the Beatty beat, the adjoining Gastown/Chinatown village becomes my stomping grounds. I eat super cheap real stray cat meals a couple of blocks away at the Green Door or the Orange Door in the lane behind Pender Street or go into the bowels of the Vancouver Cultural Center under the Giant “W”– the Woodward’s Food Floor – where all the characters that ever existed in the Terminal City come for their box of Red River purge. For rendezvous with friends there’s the smoke filled Anchor Bar off Alexander Street, always packed with long shore men, sailors,

loggers, miners, railroaders, rotten old toothless pirates, off duty narcs and mean ass drunken bastards guzzling Uncle Ben’s. Knocked out teeth strewn on the tiled floor and that beer/piss-never-gives-up odor lend a special charm to the place. For milder grooves there’s the brick walled Classical Joint on Carrall Street with folk or jazz music coffee conversations spiraling as far out as any Greenwich Village conception. For proletarian culture there’s China Arts on Hastings, the only Chinese Communist outpost in North America where you can buy those black and white jacquard cloth pictures of Marx, Lenin, Engles, Joe Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, Chou En-Lai and Chairman Mao himself. They have Chairman Mao’s ben wah balls,



Beatty Street Armoury, Vancouver

Chairman Mao clocks, Mao radios, Mao's little Red Book in every known language, Mao tea pots, Mao writing paper, Mao pens – really, even more accessories than Barbie. Farther amidst the walk-up flops along Hastings are the say goodbye to your eardrums Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, the sportsman's last stand Western Gym and that grizzly clown decor Coin City Arcade in the lobby of the Hotel Washington. Within convenient dragging distance are the detox unit, the cop shop, the city slammer.

I'm not happy being a graveyard shift social worker for Canada's wandering youth so it's time to get my camera back on the street. With my savings I buy a circa 1938 Leica IIIB for a hundred bucks at Leo's Camera Supply. Leo's is a typically

eccentric Vancouver crossroads where when you go into the store nobody waits on you, they just watch you. There are about five people working there – mostly Leo's relatives– and they peek out from a back room observation bunker, or talk on the phone to bush photographers in Pouce Coupe or act like they are writing up orders. It's here I meet another malingering Leo's customer, a Canadian beatnik named Fred Douglas. While we're waiting to be waited on, me and Freddy have photography conversations. It turns out that Freddy is the pivotal person in the Vancouver scene, the missing link between commerce and culture, between art and photography, between the past and the present. He is the photographer at the Vancouver Art



Beatty Street Armoury Youth Hostel, Vancouver

Gallery where he's built their darkroom sink out of old packing crates covered with fiberglass. Freddy corrects me on many of my American misconceptions, everything from California hard versus Vancouver soft contrast range to the theory of Canadian culture. He says it would be cool to live in the giant loaf of bread on top of McGavin's bakery on the corner of Broadway and Arbutus. He tells me about the Vancouver Public Library where the City Archives and Historical Photograph collection are located – if I want some perspective on the city I should check it out.

My friend Annie works in the card catalogue department of the public library so I ask her if she knows anything about the photo collections. She

tells me about the city archivist, Major Matthews, who one day in the staff elevator asked her in a hushed tone if she would like to see Queen Victoria's knickers? She says that along with queen's undies Matthews has collected a railroad spike, a wool sock, a cigar, a red neck tie – each thing in its own little glass fronted box, surrounded by cotton batting and annotated with a hand printed label. He collects photographs upon which he inscribes Matthewsian historical anecdotes. Annie says that there is also the Northwest History photo collection which is run by Ron D'Altroy – I'm intrigued.

The morning of my first visit to the library I head up to the third floor and find the archives.



Green Door alley restaurant, Vancouver Chinatown

A tiny woman, white haired, ancient to my young eyes, asks if I have an appointment. I say no. She asks if I have credentials. I say no. She stares at me blankly. I ask if I can see some historical photographs. She says no. I'm thinking I should ask to see the queen knickers but instead I go looking for Ron D'Altroy. When I find him, D'Altroy is very different, friendly and talkative. He is squirreled away in the subterranean caged storage area of "A" deck, where he has collected Major Matthew's photographic cast-offs; the 1907 Chinatown riot, the 1914 Komagata Maru incident, the Post Office sit-in and police clubbing of men on relief during the Depression, the internment of the Japanese in the 1940's, everything and anything to do with

the history of British Columbia. He has saved the negatives of Philip Timms, Leonard Frank, Mattie Gunterman, Richard Trueman, and the Province Newspaper among others. D'Altroy is running one of the most active historical photo services in Canada and welcomes anyone to look at anything in the collection. Here I see the work of Vancouver street photographers who have gone before me and find an inspirational reference for my own discovery of the city. Ron D'Altroy is also a walking encyclopedia of Vancouver history, telling me how Sun Yet Sen, protected by his Jewish Canadian body guard Two Gun Cohen, plotted the Chinese revolution from a seedy hotel room on East Georgia, and how Rudyard Kipling occupied a

cramped wicket at the CPR station selling steamer tickets to India for ten years before ever going there himself and never writing even a single word about Vancouver – it was just too dull.



The 1938 Leica IIIb is truly an awkward camera. Mine has a collapsible lens that wants to collapse every time I take a picture. The viewfinder is separate from the focusing window – both of which are tiny peep holes so small that the eye can never find them– in 1938 the term “user friendly” had yet to be invented. Awkward as it may be, the IIIb doesn’t keep me from my street photography. I get around town on a ten dollar bicycle dubbed the SS Cartier Bresson. At the end of summer the kids go back to Ontario and the youth hostel business goes with them so I shoot a farewell test roll of Beatty Street Armoury photos before loosing my job. I develop the film in my bathroom sink at night. There is so much I want to be photographing on the streets of Vancouver, but I’m penniless and filmless. I do some dry walling, painting, minor construction work and buy some

bargain priced movie picture end stock which I bulk load into 10 used Ilford cassettes. Over the period of the next couple of months I take the little IIIb with me everywhere, photographing the White Lunch with its West Coast murals on the inside and funny rotating silhouettes on the sign outside. I

snap the thoroughly unhappy guy on the corner of Granville and Georgia who is there every day outside the Bay clutching his rosary and holding up a laminated picture of the crucifixion. I shoot the Giant “W” turning day and night, the funky water towers on Hastings Street roofs and the giant Nabob Tea Cup perpetually steaming real steam down by the CN station.

With all my running around I’m bound to bump into other street photographers and in fact that’s how I meet Tim Porter shooting in front of Izzy’s. Tim is

an edgy chain smoker who seems equally drawn toward to the opposing elements of formalism and loose loined strip club documentaries. His Vancouver impressions are about to appear in the BC Almanac(h), an anthology of fifteen West Coast photo folios published by the National Film Board. To be included are artists like Michael DeCourcy who is also showing work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Roy Kiyooka the supernova-headed painter now training his sights on camera images. I want to be like these guys. I go to their leader Jack Dale hoping somehow to get into the Almanac(h). I show him my Berkeley images and he shows me his social documentary series on the bikini and mini skirt. He says it’s too late for me to be in the project and too soon for me to be part of the scene until I produce some Vancouver imagery. When the BC Almanac(h)



SS Cartier Bresson on ice, 418 East 15th, Vancouver

comes out I'm inspired by its promiscuity of style and pulp concept of what photography can be.

In the autumn we move into a crummy little pad on East 15th across from Mount St. Joseph's hospital. Along with the house we inherit Rommel the Cool Aid dwarf who will only move out if we help him relocate the couch upon which he lives. We need to repair the walls which are full of fist holes punched out by a former resident with an anger management problem. This is a really dull neighborhood where nothing ever happens except on Sunday mornings at 8 AM when the Salvation Army Marching Band does trombone practice in the hospital parking lot or the biker next door catches himself on fire while cleaning motorcycle

parts in a pan of gasoline and smoking a cigarette at the same time. One day shortly after we move in a couple of poorly groomed balding gentlemen wearing natty trench coats drive up in a big Ford. They are Canadian bureaucrats who want to check our Landed Immigrant cards. My brother and I show them our cards. They say OK and leave. A couple of days later James Cross is kidnapped and then Pierre Laporte. Trudeau declares the War Measures Act, martial law and I think oh fuck, this is as bad as Berkeley.

Sure enough, I'm woken up at the crack of dawn by the sound of jack boots clomping up the stairs. As I head downstairs, a bunch of 250 pounders in leather jackets are running around



Looking southwest from 418 East 15th, Vancouver

the house with their guns out. One guy is dangling my brother by the neck and I'm terrified these assholes are going to do something stupid. I tell them they have no right to invade our premises and that this kind of thing wouldn't be allowed in the United States without a warrant. The guy dangling my brother says to me, "Shut up mouthy, I'm from Saskatchewan." A business suited guy comes through the door and has no visible gun but has a piece of paper in his hand. He hands it to me. There is one sentence on it. It reads, "The Suit has the right to search anyone, in any place, at any time, signed her royal majesty." They round up everybody in the house and The Suit tells us that our house has been under surveillance for months

as a drug house – they know we have drugs so go easy on ourselves and just tell them where the drugs are. I point out that their powers of observation are sorely lacking as we have just moved in and the previous occupants are long gone. I get another shut up mouthy from Constable Saskatchewan.

The Suit then breaks off "the Frenchies" from the other people and starts asking my brother and I questions about our family connections to Quebec. It's not too hard for me to put *duex et duex ensemble* to know what kind of raid this is – these guys don't really care about drugs and maybe think we've got Pierre Laporte in the basement. I tell them we don't even speak French but I hear them crashing around in the basement. They come



Winter, 418 East 15th, Vancouver

up and shake their heads no, no Laporte. The Suit wants to know what I'm doing in Canada. I'm frank. I say I'm here to be an architectural photographer. He says oh ya, prove it. I show him my Sinar view camera. He's impressed. He's never seen a camera like that before. They leave without busting anyone. Architectural photography has saved me once again.

Now I don't know what to do, my Canada seems just as screwed up as my United States. I spend a fair bit of time defacing pictures of the queen which proves to be good therapy and illustrates the usefulness of the royalty. When I finally develop the 35mm film I've been shooting for the past few months it turns out that one of

the shutter curtains of my IIIB has been stuck and everything is ruined. I feel humiliated and upset about how nowhere my life is going in Vancouver. As my first Canadian winter sets in I trade the Leica IIIB for a microscope and spend my ice bound days studying the secret lives of pond slimes.

THE END

This story is a fictional account of my first year or so in Vancouver, back in 1969 and 1970. It was written between October 1 and November 13, 2003. Any resemblance this story may bear toward historical truth is purely coincidental.

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