

**eastside**

**james hörner**

## **preface**

written during 2001-02, this collection was a reaction to the experience of working in and around vancouver's downtown eastside.

while some of the references are dated (pig-farm murders, woodward's development protests, the tv show *da vinci's inquest*) and some of the sentiments aren't exactly how i'd write them now, it stands as my memory of this time and place.

working amidst vancouver's most significant social problem, in the streets and laneways doing construction/repairs at all hours for a startup telecom company, was an indelible experience filled with daily contrasts. it all struck me as frustrating and absurd, with each magnifying the ridiculousness of the other. looking back on these pieces i see this sentiment coupled with exhaustion and confusion.

if i wrote this book today, if at all, i'd certainly do it differently. but i was shooting from the hip, trying to capture those moments, so here they are as they were to me.

the people i had the chance to meet were unique and interesting, some likely now dead, some continuing in their living limbo. and a few possibly, hopefully, escaping their addictions for now.

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**wheelchair woman**

wheelchair woman  
one leg sticking straight out  
a shoe covered battering ram

other foot pumping  
pumping the chair across cracked cement  
arms unable to keep up  
with wheels while  
crossing the active intersection

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## **linguistics**

twenty tongues of inquisition  
never finding their way in  
the sea of otherness  
each lost between  
words forged by borders  
bound by nations  
scratching each other  
with linguistic sandpaper

**paperbag princess**

hastings has its own paperbag princess  
caught off guard by slumber  
she rests her patchy head  
against the defiled walls of excess

her dreams of yesterday are  
not new to the unconscious minds  
in these parts

her determination to leave is as  
stale as abandoned clothing and  
damp mattresses left guarding garbage  
strewn in alley porticos - the detritus  
of habitual existence

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**casting photos**

cast-off casting photos  
mugs down in an alley  
showcase failed faces

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**a jagged rock**

he walks by me  
with a jagged rock  
in each hand

flips one up and  
catches it as  
we pass each other  
as though to indicate  
he could smash my  
fucking skull in

**hastings**

hastings, i worry for you.  
eater of souls  
recipient of wandering feet  
and troubled minds.

you've let carnegie down,  
again, her broken children  
scamper about aimlessly.  
they search for cigarettes  
or last night's crack,  
punctuating the damp fall  
air with grunts and giggles  
to themselves. arcane  
messages whispered among  
the walking dead.

hastings, what happened to you?  
shattered shells of innocents  
cannot make meaning, find  
sense, in your attempts at chaos.  
stop it with your arrogance  
and thick skin. we all know  
you are nothing but frightened  
and cold beneath your  
tattered blanket. you  
won't, can't, reach out to us -  
this is the way you will die.

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**tourist**

i'm nothing but a tourist  
in this alley  
staring blankfaced at the  
needle in your arm,  
the scabs on your face  
from where the junk in  
the junk comes out.

i sit there working, while  
you ask questions,  
wanting our work tent for  
your home.

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## **touch parking**

white haired  
parallel parking  
setting the car in place  
by touch

locking the door  
walking away  
without so much as  
assessing the damage

**space**

27 and i'm in a space  
of contradictions.  
told to be young  
and hip but waking  
with aches and pains,  
hungover without drinking

restless evenings of wine glasses  
and endless arguments over.  
where have they gone,  
accomplices of our youth?

i have not yet seen the world,  
left contemplating quitting  
it all, leaving security,  
telling employer and debtors  
to forget it - i'm not  
coming back.

shall we move forwards?  
not running away but  
pressing ahead into  
our possible fiction.

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**fog**

i like the world  
when it is covered  
in fog. it is easier  
this way.

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disenfranchised  
disassociated  
disconnected  
disoriented  
disheartened  
distant  
disgusted  
distended  
disturbed  
dissuaded  
diseased  
discarded  
disparate  
dismembered  
disfigured  
disaffected  
disillusioned  
disparate

**french-canadian junkie**

18 months straight as a cokehead  
and alcoholic, 5 days straight as neither.  
40 years old.

today he purchases a pair of shoes.

i've talked to him before, on lesser days,  
when he was smudged by heroin or  
touched by stimulants. today he is alive,  
impressed with the sunshine, excited by  
what appears to be his exit point.

never asking for money, social assistance  
keeping him slightly below water.

slicked back hair and a worn out shirt.  
started out back east selling pot, moving  
to cocaine, becoming his own supplier.

it is a cautionary tale, destroyed by  
the smirk and excitement of narrative.  
he likes this story too much to end it.

**big day**

combing hair and beards  
scrutinizing reflections in  
the main street provincial  
courthouse window.

it's their big day, oblivious  
to the police scurrying about  
or the down and outer sleeping  
on the bench beside them.

prim and proper, try to look  
your best, the voice in the back  
of their head tells them. pacing  
the sticky sidewalk, irritated with  
the sound of necessary footsteps.

on my way to work i left a  
grease skull smudge  
on the bus window, hastily  
awaking and exiting at  
main and hastings.

trying to hide behind our best  
appearances, concealing the  
tics and imperfections, but we  
never seem to get it quite right.

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**clouds**

clouds crashing against sky ethereal surf  
drifting by help keep eyes upwards  
creating shapes to take the mind elsewhere  
hoping i'll forget to ever look down again

**celebrity**

there's lincoln clarkes again,  
ducking into back alley recesses  
photographing his heroines.  
thought he was simply some  
john till i saw him on the tv.

down the street, another day,  
is one of a million films,  
capturing illusions, pretending  
here is elsewhere. residents  
reacting with amusement or  
irritation at this invasion. some  
stand or sit nearby, hoping  
they will be seen - suppressed  
desire surging forth, inklings  
of a previous life. dreams of  
stardom silent, not dead.

**destinations**

check the rearview mirror and gently slide the needle into your neck.

slip it under your tongue, grimacing.

remove your shoe, ignore the sores, and inject.

avoid restrooms with special blue lighting.

remember: don't fuck up your flesh if you think you will need it.

if all else fails, carefully press directly into the chest.

this may help get you where you are trying to go.

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**wednesday morning**

welfare wednesday lineup  
round the corner

anxious faces

need

walking through  
the throng

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**the suitcase**

broken green suitcase  
small enough to hold  
a tiny life. two condoms,  
pair of pants, lipstick,  
eyeliner, spilled out for  
everyone, smashed  
against the sidewalk,  
lost without an owner

**canada's poorest postal code**

downtown eastside is canada's  
poorest postal code, the news  
paper tells me.

an artificial slum, a construct  
of cast-offs and rejects. "not in  
my backyard," heard at the  
thought of social housing.

no one wants their plot of air to  
devalue, and we all know that  
undesirables destroy investments.

*move on motherfuckers. move on  
until you've walked to the edge.  
move on until you've hit the margins.  
and then keep walking. now that  
you're falling let me give you a push  
so that you never get back up.*

**a blind eye**

i glance up at the cop before quickly looking away, though i'm guilty of nothing besides having a job in the middle of this atrocity exhibition.

each day they shove themselves full of needles, sitting on benches, in stoops, on parking barricades. anywhere they can stay steady enough to push the plunger.

there's the law courts. there's the police station. there's the worst goddamn intersection i've ever seen. these institutions pretend they don't see each other, a game of social solipsism.

the courts know there is little point stuffing the overcrowded prisons fuller, the police know the problem doesn't go away with arrests, and the ants know there is nothing left to hope for but to be stepped on eventually.

everyone turns their eyes blind while holding the stick of dynamite. let's ignore it a little longer, maybe it will only take our arm off.

## burned

face shriveled by burns, he smiles faintly  
disgusted with humanity and its little dignities.  
coins fall into his cap, tourists working to defeat  
their pity, suppressing that which can dampen a holiday.

what most of them wonder is how the face became  
so rippled with scars, a face coursing with smooth veins of flesh.

no one wants to assume that it could have been his fault, the  
result of jumping drunk on a picnic table or lighting a match over  
a full barrel of gasoline in order to best gauge its levels.

the tourists are pleased with his atrocity exhibition, glad  
to empty their pockets of guilt and sadness, free to step  
into the shop and gather souvenirs for those not there.  
his will be one of the stories they tell when they get home,  
over a bottle of red wine and among friends. or else it is  
something they share to break the ice at an uncomfortable  
social gathering, regaling their tales of the dispossessed.

**the pretty people**

there are the pretty people  
smelling pretty  
looking pretty

black skirts  
black suits  
IBM blue shirts  
(aren't those out this year?)

walking talking working  
i'm trudging dodging cursing  
footfalls and footsteps  
overwhelmed in this sea  
of mediocrity and perfectionism

summer vacation tans  
hints of perfume and cologne trailing  
looking very lovely but i bet  
they taste sour like the rest of us

the ones that weren't laid off  
live with the fear, trying harder,  
still struggling to make sense  
of markets and themselves

many fail. some die, or try,  
and others i pass, passed out,  
under a sleeping bag, on my  
way to slaggery

**no. 5 orange**

there i am in the no. 5  
walking under the orange  
entrance, immersing myself  
in another culture.

eyes all fixated, relaxed, watching  
kicks and crawling, crotchshots  
and titillation. the menu offers  
drinks, massages, and lapdances.

"when you get a private dance here  
they let you touch their cookie," i'm  
informed.

the beat begins anew, the last  
dancer having climbed the ladder,  
exiting stage, the next dancer skips  
into rhythm.

the clothes, as such, come off.  
smooth and confident, making  
more cash than any of us voyeurs.

she's like a good hockey game,  
everyone hollering and  
clapping on the stage. we're passive  
but insistent, satisfied though  
never satiated.

a man in the gallery keeps whispering,  
"lisaaaaa. lisaaaaa," and she wishes  
he would fuck off. he puts the five

between his teeth, with a hurtful gaze,  
that she retrieves with a snarl.

some dancers are confident, performers  
who understand their role, while  
others wish they were home with  
their kids. like it or not they are  
stars tonight at the no. 5.

when we go home, both audience and  
performers, performers and audience,  
we attempt reentry into the mundane.  
most men won't talk about their evening  
out with the boys and the dancers go back  
to their boyfriends, family, or habit.

## **working girls**

desperate stares cut through me.  
blotches of colour, hair tussled.  
revealing the goods, optimized  
for fucking. some walk as though  
they're sore, probably not good for sales.

they're in business but don't care.  
they're working girls.  
pussy and blowjobs,  
needles and pills and anything  
else that anaesthetizes.

trying to lure with puckered  
lips and cocked hips,  
getting into cars like their mommas  
told them not to. they don't really  
have a choice, these days, with  
selection and prices the way they are.

the suvs stop for a quick one before  
heading home, hoping they don't get  
picked on by the john patrol. blowing  
their loads before hugging the kids  
and kissing the wife hello.

wcb doesn't help these girls, raped,  
punched, called cunts and whores,  
kicked, stabbed, fucked with foreign  
objects. broken teeth and purple eyes.  
working girls with nothing good  
to show for it.

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**i drink my coffee with a crowbar**

i drink my coffee with a crowbar  
sitting beside me.

it's cold and i'm anxious, the old  
warehouse moaning, the smell  
of garbage and junkie piss drifting  
in from the alley.

there's an edge some days,  
though no one pushes it around  
us. the closest has been a  
workboot in the back of a  
young woman feigning  
ignorance while lifting a  
backpack out of our truck.

everything is fair game,  
and i still haven't learned  
the constantly shifting  
rules.

## **jack the ripper**

how many did you do, jack the ripper  
of the downtown eastside? luring girls  
back to your sanctuary - a quiet place  
and some livestock.

there are a thousand names you've  
been called while we all watch the  
evening news, listening to the  
investigation and imagining the  
years of suffering your soil has seen.

anonymous predator, constant anxiety  
to the sex workers. what the fuck makes  
a man like you? are you lacking empathy?  
did your mother and father beat you? there's  
something wrong inside of him but we  
can't figure it out and stop it.

none of this helps the survivors and the  
newcomers. although he's been stopped  
they know there are others like him.

**jonestown kool-aid party**

sometimes i wish we could have a  
jonestown kool-aid party, he says,  
betraying no sense of sarcasm. it  
would clean the slate, let us start this  
mess fresh.

he, too, is tired of this place, worn down  
from rainy days, junkies, and beggars.

you're conservative with a capital c, i say.  
he knows, but doesn't see solutions.  
give them drugs? give them homes?  
give them jobs? give them education?  
give give give give give. why should we?  
after all, there is no 'we' in capitalism.

**a red dress**

there's a red dress  
hanging in oppenheimer park,  
it's owner having abandoned  
it on a metal hanger,  
left dangling from a tree.

sit, lay, collapse on the grass,  
a junkie jitterbug dancing where  
the wild things are. it's not quite  
yet noon in the place where time  
has no meaning.

**woodwards**

in fatigues he patrols the sidewalk,  
giving my camera dirty looks,  
protecting the sleep of the tent tenants.

a man with a homemade bike cart,  
fancy and elaborate, informs me that  
he is collecting money, food, clothes  
to distribute to the homeless.

i tell him i don't have any money, but  
he says i can take a picture of his bike  
anyway, which i do.

smash capitalism, the chalk on the wall  
informs me. i can't do it today, unfortunately,  
as i'm on company time, but the point  
has been made.

give them their social housing. better yet,  
get it out of the eastside. move it west,  
move it north, move it south. move it into  
your backyard, my backyard, so we can be a society again.

fuck your capital and remember that you too  
are one paycheque away from main and hastings.

**i'm sorry to hear you're dead**

mike, i'm sorry to hear you're dead,  
you hid the holes in your arm so well.

it was days before we found out what  
happened to you, dying broke and  
overdosed in your hotel room.

the last days were strange, your anger  
and disgust at the world pouring out,  
an unfiltered assault you couldn't conceal.

we didn't know about the ex-wife and  
the daughter. we didn't know about the  
abandonment. all you told us was the  
previous problems with the bottle and  
whatnot.

now you're dead, mike, and the crew is  
left stunned. we sit around at lunch,  
not sure what should be said, until the  
silence is broken and we give our eulogy.

**november**

november is coming close with its rain  
and homelessness. i'm not sure if i can  
handle another day of walking past wet  
sleeping bags and abandoned  
shopping carts.

the downpour can't disguise the stench  
of piss and death everytime i go down  
your alleys. rotting cardboard covers your  
makeshift bedroom, but don't worry  
because there's a different one tomorrow.

there was a man i haven't seen in a long time,  
passing him each morning as he walked his  
kids to school, rainslickers and umbrellas.  
they were down but not out, a family finding  
their way through the fog of november.

i wonder what has happened to them - have  
they moved out of their low income housing,  
tearing the children from an education they  
will never unlearn? regardless, they're gone.

november is coming close with its rain  
and homelessness. i'm not sure if i can  
handle another day of walking past wet  
sleeping bags and abandoned  
shopping carts.

**veteran**

old timer, what war did you serve in?  
whichever it was, it won't save your ass  
if keep jaywalking on cordova.

it's late morning and i can already smell  
the beer on you, spending your stipend  
to numb the final days.

you've seen too much, shoved to the  
corners of the world. now you've got a  
low-income tour of duty, a pension that  
keeps you alive until we can find a better  
way of killing you off.

### **complimentary dogs**

high heeled boots, fishnet stockings, and  
bright red lipstick. her sunglasses conceal  
her thoughts, but her face tells me she's cocky.

she's walking her dog, it seems. i have come  
to the conclusion that the middle class women  
of gastown are given complimentary dogs  
upon signing leases they'll never escape.

chien lunatique, the sign on the door says,  
the owner brings forth un petite yap yap.  
scarcely concealing my snickering i walk  
by, laughter mistaken for peculiar friendliness.

the furry security system pisses in my path,  
shits in my footsteps. these glamorous  
gastownians are reticent to put on the plastic  
glove and retrieve a handful of their  
complimentary dogshit.

**gassy jack**

i've never read your plaque, though i don't suppose  
it'll tell me why you have such an atrocious name.  
were you a flatulent man, known for robust farts,  
or simply so full of hot air and rotten real estate?

the birds crap all over you today, and the tourists  
prefer pictures of the steam clock. i often eat at  
the restaurant in your name, ordering the  
vegetarian indian lunch special.

as i walk back to work i pass the familiar lady:  
"will you buy me a cup of coffee?" squawked  
as she rocks back and forth in her chair. she's  
probably 50 years old and somehow she's still  
alive.

i think you'd be surprised if you saw what became  
of your tourist trap, jack. while you may have seen  
an opium den in your day i don't think you'd be  
prepared for the land of the zombies, the home of  
homeless. that's what i'm thinking today while a  
tourist, laughing with his family, takes your portrait.

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**gastown paparazzi**

i'm in a thousand photos, a thousand albums, around  
the world. walking by the steam clock each day,  
evading the paparazzi.

tourists take photos, collecting memories, never  
straying too far off the red brick road.

occasionally they ask where chinatown is, and i  
do my best to direct them through the heart of  
vancouver.

**stopping, turning, screaming**

move you fucking people, you goddamn  
fucking chinks go back to your fucking  
country, get the hell out of my way you fuckers.

screaming, pressing her way through half a dozen  
old asian ladies, stopping, turning, screaming,  
standing, yelling, red, angry, disturbed.

stopping, turning, screaming, you fuckers you fuckers

confused and upset they talk amongst themselves.  
tone of her screaming sufficient, but the content lost  
in translation.

stopping, turning, screaming, she eventually moves on  
and the morning elderly continue their walk.

**there is no poetry this morning**

there is no poetry this morning,  
although the fog is dense and  
the commuters dull and worn.

blood red brick streets quiet.  
no one walking dogs.  
silent place of solitude.

there is poetry this morning,  
but it is hidden inside, tucked  
under blankets to escape the  
seeping cold of daybreak.

there is poetry being dreamt,  
everyday life and transcendence  
sought. a fix from this mess  
we're all in.

**sufficient**

sufficient, he says, contemplating her ass.  
he's wearing a smirk, smoking his cigarette  
while driving down w. hastings.

it's a nice break to be down in these parts,  
where the failures wear suits and the ladies  
sell themselves because they want to, not  
because they have to. after all, we're in the  
business sector. these people are professionals.

**art**

passing the galleries and studios each day,  
i'm stunned while walking by them that  
i've never been in any of them.

it's not that i don't like art, or respect artists.  
it's not that i don't care about creativity or  
feel inadequate by their prowess and dedication.

it's the attitude, the scene, an insider/outsider  
dynamic i don't wish to explore. it is this  
that keeps me from seeing something different,  
as the days slurry and the rain refuses to stop.  
and it's the guilt, passing the man reading his  
newspaper each morning on the steps, drinking  
from a paper bag. how can i enjoy pretty things  
when there is so much suffering around me. i  
want to drown in it, as though i could drink it up  
and piss it all away.

i pass the galleries and studios each day, a living  
museum on every street corner, down every alley.  
there's performance art irregularly and always  
something new and exciting on display.

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### wednesday night

1 am, working in the alley south of powell and columbia  
on a welfare wednesday. we're both a bit nervous, listening  
to the yelps and watching the insanity brewing outside. there's  
a steady stream of visitors tonight, as we sit and watch the  
shooting gallery. there's an excitement in the air, a skiff of chit chat  
before the main act. then there's nothing - a slumped body  
lulled to another plane, chasing the whispers from heaven.

**bread line**

someone's giving out stale bread, is it sally anne? a lineup  
running through to the mouth of the alley, mostly middle-aged  
men with caps and moustaches and old asian women.

there are several hot-dog buns on the ground beside me, dumped  
by the owner, careless. i nudge it with my boot to test its freshness  
and it responds with softness. this is a perfectly fine hot-dog bun,  
useful for many things besides holding pig anuses. i suspect it has  
been left for the birds, but there are none around. all of the bird  
aficionados find much better grounds to toss their crumbs to. this  
bun has been abandoned, although i'm sure someone will be along  
before too long to pick it up and give it a loving home.

**addicted**

reality is a messy business.  
few handle it, most cope.  
some need to be sedated,  
others accept the consensus.

i'm broken but don't won't  
the medicine, can't stand  
the thought of stepping outside  
and joining the other rat race.

it's bad enough convincing  
myself to hand over my unfree  
labour, give my ten hours to  
the cause, never mind addiction.

slaves to capital, addicted to the material world,  
slaves to junk, addicted to escaping the world,  
slaves to slavery, addicted to addiction.

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### **graffiti train**

graffiti train rolls on  
spreading the good word,  
telling the rest of canada  
about oaph, take5, and  
the other artists decorating  
our city.

i'd like to hop on that  
graffiti train, drift slowly  
away from the coast. i  
imagine a world of hobo  
signs and freedom. i'm not  
really so naive, but desperate  
to escape the present.

**this is not sipping poetry**

this is not sipping poetry,  
filled with crafty metaphor  
and well tuned verse.

it is gulping poetry, drunk  
on everyday life and pushed  
to passing out on the brutality  
of being.

can't stand still -  
shift, flutter, scatter.  
subjects subject to  
erratic behaviour.

drunk on reality,  
stoned on suffering,  
poetics of a terrible  
anthropology.

**shit**

that's too big to be dogshit  
we concur, examining the  
enormous heap of feces.

he takes a photo of me  
laughing, in rain gear,  
holding a cup of morning  
coffee, and pointing at it.

we put on face masks and  
begin work, concerned about  
the half inch thick pile of  
bird crap on our work area.

several spatters of seagull  
shit strike, strafing us. this  
will not be as bad as the  
direct attack we sustain  
some months later.

**inquest**

da vinci, your inquest is too local  
to watch without disturbance.

i recognize your alleys and placenames,  
just up the block from work. alexander,  
powell, sometimes we pass you as we  
drive around, irritated by the crew park  
and rows of trucks.

i've only seen you a couple of times,  
nicholas campbell, as you film your  
portrayal of this zone. you are a fine  
actor, without doubt, but you  
strike too close to everyday.

granted, i've never seen a criminal  
investigation of your kind, only a  
stakeout or two, but there's nothing  
worse than watching work on a  
sunday night.

**the chase**

walks past us, looking suspicious.  
we sit in brown van, wondering what  
the fuck is going on. he ducks and  
covers, talking into his jacket. it is  
then that we realize that he's on the  
trail. it is then that we notice the  
suspect racing up railway street,  
swerving and curving, dodging  
behind dumpsters and trucks.  
and then we notice the unmarked  
car up dunsmuir, floating, waiting.  
eventually they all drift out of  
eyeshot, but the chase sticks with  
us for the rest of the day.

**crew park**

how much do you figure they're making, he asks, as we wait for the movie crew park lady, coming to ask us to move.

not much, i figure, maybe 10 or 12 bucks an hour.

while i'm away he chats her up, and as we drive away he tells me that they work for free. 12 hour days for weeks straight just so they can put it on their resumes, sucking ass for the chance of getting noticed.

**film**

it's the 3rd crew park guy of the day, always in our way, and while i'm stopped we talk about his day.

mostly, he says, i stop old drunk men from peeing on cars and i watch junkies shoot up under that billboard. i saw the grossest thing yesterday - this lady shot up into her foot. we're shooting an indie movie about this area, so it's totally real. there was this one whore who showed up a day late, apologized, and i was thinking why don't you just go back to whoring because you're obviously a total fuck up.

as we drive away i can't help thinking what a naive little shit he is, and while we drive past one of my favourite alleys i see they are shooting there. it is piled deep with litter and decay, a mess i've never seen the likes of down here up to this point. the movies know how to glamourize even the eastside, creating an archetype of decay that could only exist on film.

eastside  
james hörner

**green bottle brew**

"that's not 7-up"  
security guard in the  
west georgia alley

sure as shit it's not.  
green bottle brew, cuts  
away the after work edge,  
cleans our tired heads of  
honking cars and pissant  
pedestrians.

**van kōō'ver**

walking south i see the  
art gallery and a banner  
saying "Thompson" across  
one of his landscapes.  
(he's no lawren harris but  
i'd like to see the exhibition  
anyway)

i don't see enough forest,  
scenery outside the inner  
city sideshow. while landscape  
may define us in some regard  
as canadians, the eastside defines  
vancouver to the rest of canada.

**pedestophile**

"hotties"

"they certainly are"

"nothing beats working here on a sunny day"

"the shorts, the skirts - makes up for the usual scabs and ribcages"

"people watching is the best"

"pedesting is sweet"

"so we're pedestophiles, eh?"

"better watch what idiot you say that around"

**injunction**

playing drums and guitars,  
celebrating, the protestors  
defiant towards the injunction  
under the giant 'w'.

forty-five days of squatting,  
illustrating the shelter shortage  
and the power of civil disobedience.

holding their ground, it remains to  
be seen what the boys in blue will do,  
i'm hoping it won't be all chokeholds,  
handcuffs, and pepper spray.

**emergency**

apparently there's an emergency.  
the ambulance roars down the street  
towards us, sirens blaring.

a truck in the path sits stunned,  
broken by indecisiveness. the  
driver begins backing up, then  
drives forward, then backs up  
some more. finally, after the effort  
of a 75 point parking job he moves.

the ambulance continues toward  
us, siren again alerting everyone  
to the possible presence of death.

## **rock and roll**

bryan adams was in the building today, apparently on the prowl for more studio space. the old minimalist showed him around, and i wonder what such benign and business like conversation sounds like. no requests for senseless autographs or photos.

there is a rock and roll history to this area, where the famous and the walking dead meet. is it the bricks and big beam buildings that attract them, or is it the allure of the artificial hardcore? nothing says badass like a junkie, but nothing says loser like someone who rides around social inequity in a limo. one must be careful where they choose their place of business.

### **the old minimalist**

the old minimalist makes furniture,  
hawking high-priced goods to the  
rich and famous.

his eyebrows arch extravagantly,  
not becoming of a man of simplicity.  
his nervousness betrays an artifice  
that doesn't fit with the ease of a  
white wall.

the old minimalist is wound tightly,  
constantly concerned about his  
appearance, speaking in quiet tones  
with hands in pockets and brand  
new sneakers.

assessing, judging, pretending  
to have control over a world he barely  
touches - social disconnection is an  
aesthetic he doesn't recognize, his  
pallet filled to bursting with brands  
and designs and connections. i, too,  
would like to simple life of art and  
beauty, simply out of sync with humanity.

**sorry**

and then there's the guilt.  
sorry i have a job.  
sorry i have a leased car.  
sorry i rent an apartment.  
sorry i'm paying back close  
to fifty thousand in student  
loans (post interest). sorry  
i have visa debt from moving  
around the province in an  
attempt to find a decent job,  
but not really succeeding  
at that until now. sorry that  
i will one day have kids, although  
that day probably won't come for  
a long time because i don't want  
to bring them into a world of being  
broke all the time. sorry i'm happy  
sometimes, in spite of the fact  
that i perform pointless labour  
many hours a day so that i can  
continue to have spare time to  
write and paint and all that. sorry  
that i have a solid relationship and  
people who love me, and who i  
love despite my situational  
misanthropy. sorry i don't give  
you change, but why the hell would  
i support your drug habit when i can't  
afford one of my own? sorry i don't  
give food more often, but you don't  
typically want the food i give because  
you can't resell it. sorry i care but

eastside  
james hörner

don't know what to do about it.

**domestic**

shoulders, forearms, fists,  
pushing against him. she's  
pissed about something,  
giving him the dead stare,  
body incapable of concealing  
the shakes.

he's playing stupid, hands  
in pockets, deflecting her  
blows with his curved frame.

certain days this domestic  
might be a source of humour,  
but today it is overcast and  
i imagine how hard it must  
be to sustain love, or even  
companionship, in this  
fractured downtown community.

**ordinary oddities**

peculiar how we've become so  
accustomed to this madness, isn't  
it? he notes. i didn't ever think my  
everyday life would be filled with  
druggies and homeless people.

i agree, and we recite a list of  
ordinary oddities now encompassing  
our lives, swapping stories about  
the everyday dramas we witness.

a tall, elderly, black man, dressed  
to the nines. hat and cane and swagger.  
whistling a hymn while walking down  
the alley.

we stop and stare as he passes by,  
a testament to how strangeness has  
no limit.

**bareback dumpster diver**

bareback dumpster diver  
moves at an unparalleled pace,  
in and out, in and out,  
searching for bottles and cans  
and anything else of value.

he doesn't fill his shopping cart  
with everything that crosses his  
path, as some do, instead keeping  
his transportation streamlined  
for maximized mobility.

the sun has scorched his body  
dark brown, the thin muscles  
under his skinny frame flexing  
with each high paced step  
towards another few cents.

while watching him, a blurred  
multitude of days passing around  
us, once in a while giving him a  
spare bottle, i wonder if he's  
ever been jabbed with an intravenous  
landmine.

**pseudo crazy**

some talk to themselves  
as though the act were a  
talisman, designed to keep  
the collapsing universe at bay.

everyone appears to ignore  
the talkers - chatting with  
god, or satan, or someone  
long forgotten or gone.

there are more than a few  
pseudo crazies out there,  
the ones that only start  
talking upon approach.

creating a verbal barrier  
between us, ensuring  
i won't harass them, their  
babble a promise they won't  
intersect my duties.

we co-exist comfortably,  
each performing our  
designated roles.

**purgatory**

escape the air and the glare  
of the transportation public,  
walking out into the throng  
of discontent.

it's drizzling out, not enough  
for umbrellas, just enough to  
dampen faces, encouraging  
scowls and foul glances.

this is a tuesday, eight in the  
morning. a working week limbo  
filled with cups of coffee and  
sarcasm. i stand at the mouth  
of gastown, the dark red bricks  
leading the path to work.

entering the place of temporary  
punishment and suffering,  
the space in between that no  
one comprehends. there is no  
compassion towards self-inflicted  
damage, regardless of the world  
that inspired the initial carnage.

there is no history here, only  
external accusations and an  
attempt to destroy memory.

### **hastings retirement savings plan**

"hey boys - looking for an air tank?  
a chainsaw? a maul? none of the  
shit is hot, i bought a whole lot of  
the stuff from a buddy of mine."

we know the spiel, understand the  
bullshit. the air tank gets spoken  
for, a ten dollar contribution to  
his hastings retirement savings plan.

**buns for the birds**

plastic bag buns for the  
birds, thrown out in the  
manner of birdseed.

his eyes are silent and steady,  
not revealing revelry at the  
panic his parking lot feast  
is encouraging.

he's got two canes,  
so he can double arm  
his way back home  
after watching the birds  
fight for scraps.

**pleading**

swinging a one foot by  
three foot piece of plywood,  
squealing, howling, crying,  
pleading pleading pleading  
for the drugs to run their  
course.

we pause to get out of the  
brown van, watching her  
consumed by discount  
madness.

walking by us, board held  
high, pleading with herself,  
about the past, her family,  
her life.

stumbling through the  
parking lot potholes,  
moving out of sight.

**long gone**

there was a dead chick  
at the end of the alley  
this morning, he recalls.  
i thought for a minute  
about giving her cpr,  
but decided she was too  
many strange colours  
for that. a few minutes  
later one of her buddies  
is giving her mouth to  
mouth. when the  
ambulance came it didn't  
bother turning its lights  
or sirens on. she was  
long gone.

**god doesn't know what**

we honk for him to move  
his mobile drug distribution  
centre. he turns slowly and  
gives us the supposedly menacing  
wait-one-fucking-minute finger,  
and accompanying glare.

he hands off a bag of heroin  
and a clean needle to the  
customers before driving on.  
the dealer appears to have a  
conscience, but its really just  
good business to keep your  
customers alive a while longer  
so they can keep putting god  
doesn't know what into their  
collapsing bodies.

**content**

the contents of his life are  
strewn about, although on  
further examination they  
have been placed in two  
organized piles. this display  
has the organization of a  
gallery exhibition.

matches won't light today  
for some reason, nothing  
more than a spark.

there's a dampness in the  
air, my bones are cold, but  
standing there in his  
overworked plaid shirt and  
his makeshift ponytail  
he doesn't notice.

his full attention has been  
given over to the early  
morning task of getting  
breakfast lit up and  
throwing breadcrumbs to  
the birds.

there are footsteps muttering  
all around me, prodding my  
early morning paranoia.

when i look up he has put  
on a sweater, jacket, and

has been joined by another man who briefly considers purchasing a pair of sunglasses.

"watches? you got any watches there?" another voice bleeds into the frame.

"steve! steve! i got a cigarette here" a voice yells from the other end of the alley and today will be alright for some after all.

**sincere insincerity**

hello, good morning, he says.  
surprised, but not because of  
surprise, i reply.

still vaguely smiling, i bite my  
cheek at stupidity. we say  
hello so others respond,  
creating the connection. thin  
cord, frayed, repaired enough  
with each bout of intercourse  
to suppress our near- homicidal  
misanthropy a bit longer.

standing at the street corner,  
without a hat or hand out,  
his hello seemed sincere.  
does he want money,  
now or later,  
is the knee jerk, and i'm guessing  
that he wants it now but is  
trying to raise the odds of  
a double dip.

i'm no good at this. sincere  
insincerity would come easier  
than a thousand meaningless  
jabs of communication, whether  
it is from the lawyer next door  
or the drunk at the mouth of  
water st.

**bird on the bricks**

bird on the bricks, almost  
walked across it squinting  
into the sharp beam of  
sunrise.

limp, unruffled. not yet  
crushed or packed away,  
transitioned by process.

no mark on the glass  
where the bird must have  
hit. no recognition of  
violence, only the newly  
dead offering itself up to  
the world of progress.