



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 16 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## Vancouver 2017

The trip drops out of the sky, an offer to house-sit two cats for 18 days in Vancouver, my home town. It's unexpected and comes before I've had a chance to digest the last trip, but it fits into a plan I've been considering to end the pilgrimages next year, a plan that includes living parts of the year in Southern California and Vancouver.

The trip doesn't feel much like a pilgrimage but I'm still in pilgrim mode and I've broken open a travel notebook, so we'll see. December can be dismal as well, the rainiest month in a rainy city with an average temperature of three degrees Celsius, so I'm not sure how many photos I will get.

The missions that emerge are to walk every day and attempt to imprint the whole city, not just the Old Neighborhood; to imagine I live there for the first time in 55 years, and once and for all decide if it's my real home. Is it just the magic dust of nostalgia that draws me to the city I left when I was nine years old?

I have a close friend there, who picks me up at the airport on December 1, 2017, and delivers me to my lodgings after lunch where I meet the homeowners and the cats, Astrid and Fava, for the first time. It's a purple house in East Vancouver, a ten-minute walk west to Commercial Drive, or north to Hastings, both major roads. The owners leave at two and I have time to do some errands on Hastings before walking to my friend's house for dinner with her and her family. On the way, I find *A Severe Mercy*, by Sheldon Vanauken, at Pulpfiction Books on Commercial Drive, a spiritual memoir that includes letters from Christian apologist C.S. Lewis. It rains throughout.

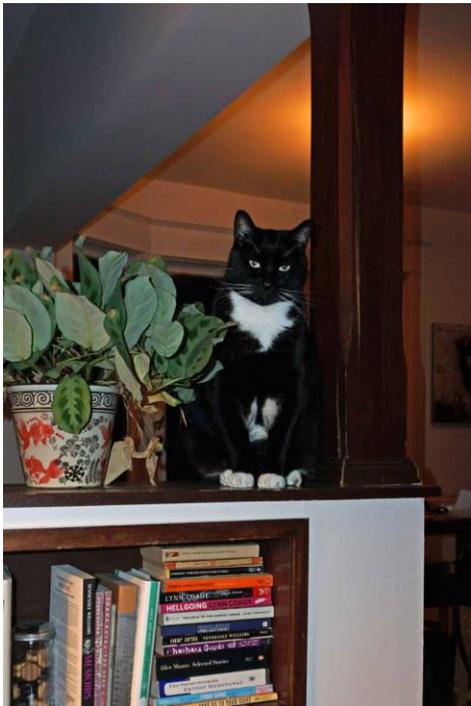
The city looks different from this neighborhood as I walk home in the evening. North Vancouver and the mountains appear very close and the occasional glimpse of glittering downtown lights from this higher elevation is unexpected. There are no curtains on the first floor of the house, and even though it's raised high enough above the sidewalk that not much is visible to passersby, I still find it unnerving. I sleep well in a small bed in a nook beside the master bedroom on the second floor.

Day 2 will be another rainy day, but sun is on the way. The plan is to walk to the Vancouver Public Library downtown and begin to research an old mystery. My father was a strange, secretive man, an Italian immigrant and active communist in a time when this was a problem. When I was nine years old, the family moved back to Montreal (from where they were taken before I was born) a few months after he took his life in 1962, and I've always wondered what he might have been up to. A suicide without a note is an endless mystery.

He used to make me read newspapers and one day showed me a front-page picture of an Orthodox Jew getting off a ship in Vancouver Harbour, which made a memorable impression because I had never seen anyone dressed this way. The next day the man was in our house. Knowing who he was might tell me something about what was going on at the time; why, for example, my father would disappear for a few days every now and then and sometimes take me with him to Seattle for no apparent reason. We would see a movie or go to the zoo, and we always stayed in the same downtown hotel. In the evening he would leave me in the lobby to watch TV and disappear for an hour or two which, even as a child, I remember finding strange.

The rain is relentless, and it takes three hours to walk to the library, with stops at two bookstores on Pender and a search for a new umbrella along the way. The Bookhound is a bit snooty but I find a book easily: *The Sun My Heart*, by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. McLeods is much larger but claustrophobic, with books piled up on the floors of the aisles. The infamous Downtown East Side (the DTES as it's referred to here) on Hastings looked worse than ever when I walked through it. Sidewalks full of broken people, many evidently mentally ill. What is it about Vancouver?

I start the project in the library, beginning the task of scanning microfilm of two daily newspapers, The Sun and The Province, then take the Skytrain back to Broadway Station where I walk the rest of the way home in the rain.



The sun has finally come out in the morning of Day 3. I'm settling into the purple house with no curtains and still sleeping well in the upstairs nook. It's Sunday so I decide to walk to a Christian church in the Old Neighborhood. The service at The Tenth Church, which calls itself a "community of spiritual transformation and social justice", is long with lots of hymns. The young pastor and his assistant are as slick as the professional-quality music. He wears an open-collar white shirt and jeans and both he and his assistant are a bit Tony-Robbins, self-confident with expensive haircuts (or maybe just great hair). There's no magic in the service and the only thing I take away from the sermon is that it's not possible to feel stress and gratitude at the same time, which is interesting enough. One cancels out the other apparently.

The best part of the service was the Eucharist. When I walked to the front to take part, a young woman pulled a chunk out of the center of an unsliced loaf of bread and handed it to me to dip into a chalice of wine. Very nice, much nicer than the tiny sliver of whatever it is they offer in Catholic churches, which doesn't taste like bread at all.

I tour the Old Neighborhood and don't find much magic dust. I've returned three times over the years so this is not unexpected. Way back in 1962, the three-day Christmas-time voyage on a train to Little Italy in Montreal, a completely different world of French, Italian, snow, relatives and Catholic school, was a genuine emigration experience. I was homesick for years afterward and would constantly dream I was here, walking the streets of the Old Neighborhood. The disappointment upon waking was crushing and the neighborhood took on magical, other-dimensional, qualities in my imagination.

The first two floors of the Legion Hall around the corner from where I lived are devoted to Bingo players and the third floor, where the skating rink used to be, is a parkour center, full of running, jumping and flipping young men. The cafes nearby are overflowing with hipster Sunday-brunchers, so I end up at the Tim Hortons on the corner of Broadway and Main.

Fava, the alpha boss-cat, is waiting for me in the big front window when I return to the house at five o'clock. He eats first, and I once even saw him claim both dishes, leaving Astrid sitting discretely aside, looking slightly askance from the food bowls, very still, waiting for permission. After he's done eating, boss-cat stands at the kitchen door until I let him out. Astrid steps out, feels the cold and comes right back in. When Fava wants to come back in, he will impatiently tap on the kitchen window with his paw to summon me to open the door. I'm learning their ways.



Later, Fava will jump onto the dining room table where I'm busy on my laptop and place his head forcefully in my hand, demanding a massage. But only his head; he nips me, hard enough to leave an impression, when I touch his back. I Google alpha-cat and everyone advises the same thing: don't give in – establish your independence. So, I devise a system of blocking access with large pumpkin-like vegetables on each side of my laptop to protect myself while sitting at the table. Astrid will also demand attention, but less forcefully.

In the evening I set out for a concert at the Anza Club on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the Old Neighborhood, actually feeling a bit nervous leaving the house in the dark to go to the realm of dreams. The Anza Club is in what is now called Mount Pleasant Hall, but used to be called Mount Pleasant Gospel Hall, a Fundamentalist Baptist church. We used to live directly across the street in the late fifties and one of my first memories is of finding an illustrated prayer book on the sidewalk. I was enchanted by the vibrantly colored Biblical illustrations and somehow, at the age of five, talked my staunchly atheist father into letting me attend the church

The club and the show are perfect. And I remember the stage, especially the side-door where I can still recall feeling stage-fright in my shepherd's cloak with one line to say in the Christmas play. The vintage jazz band is pretty good and I'm very happy to be here. What were the odds I would find an enjoyable show in this special place? With a geezer crowd too, just to make me feel even more comfortable.

I take the bus home in the dark, still feeling like an intruder in the purple house without curtains.

Day 4 begins cloudy; I'll probably have to wait until tomorrow for sun. The plan is to walk to the library again, ringing the doorbell at Communist Party headquarters on Clarke Drive on the way to ask if they have copies of the local communist newspaper from the early sixties. Maybe the photo was on the front page of *The Pacific Tribune*, not one of the two major dailies. A friendly old guy lets me in and, yes, they do have bound copies that I can look through. He introduces me to his sidekick, Hassan, and offers me coffee before he leaves with stacks of newspapers on a dolly to deliver to the Post Office. I find nothing.

Then, I need to pass through the DTES again, teeming with an assortment of broken people as always. My friend says they come from all over Canada because you don't risk dying when you sleep outside here. But I think it's due to a certain level of tolerance and services offered as well, maybe a reflection of a special compassion that exists in Lotusland.



A parking lot where our house used to be, facing the Anza Club



The stage

I take a break at the Tim Hortons on Pender, just west of the DTES, where I find a seat in a booth next to the window. Two street guys are sitting at the booth behind me, talking about living rough, and I hear one of them, the older, more experienced mentor, say, "Once you get wet, you're fucked. What did you go to jail for?" I can't make out the mumbled response. "Oh yeah," says the mentor, laughing.

I find a book at Albion Books, the third used bookstore in what I will come to refer to as the Magic Triangle around the Smile Diner on Pender. *How to Think About God*, by the philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, offers an intellectual argument for the existence of God.

Then it's back to the tedious task of scouring microfilm on old, neglected machines before I find some good walking shoes in a department store on the way home to make the rest of the trip easier on the feet. The cats are very excited to see their servant return. Tomorrow, sun!

There's fog and silvery frost on the lawns in the morning of Day 5, another familiar scene long forgotten that makes me want to steal a bit more sleep after breakfast on the sofa downstairs in front of the big window with Fava's big head rumbling on my chest, just under my chin.

I leave the house at 10:30 and take the bus to Stanley Park to walk along the famous seawall and maybe over the Lions Gate Bridge. The trees in the park are magnificent. It's still cool and frosty but the sky is virtually cloudless and I can feel it gradually warming up as I walk, stopping for coffee at the Totem Poles to let more of the last remnants of morning fog dissipate. There's hardly anyone here. The wind picks up as I move around towards the bridge so I decide to skip the bridge and stay on the path.

I take the detour into the woods to visit Beaver Lake, just as I did five years ago to mark the day, fifty years earlier, that my father took his life only fifty yards from the shore. There's a mist hanging over and around the edges of the lake that makes rays of falling sunlight visible on the path in front of me, and the scent of wet wood is wonderfully reminiscent, just as the scent of sea and wood warming and smoking in the sun will be on the other side of the park, between Third and Second Beach.

Back on the seawall path, the light gets very good. I don't know if I've ever taken photos with the sun so low in the sky, directly in front me, just above eye-level. I take a break on a sun-soaked bench and read a bit of Thich Nhat Hanh. *Meditate on the sun as your second heart, the heart of your 'outer self'*, he says.



Beaver Lake, Stanley Park

I linger at English Bay for a while, getting a nice shot from inside the old beach house I vividly remember from another time. Then it's a long walk back to the library where futility reigns again. I can only look at microfilm for about an hour and a half before my eyes give up trying to follow the faint, scratched images whizzing by, stopping for anything that looks like a boat. There are gaps in the old film strips so this could be all for naught.

I'm feeling a bit sad at the end of the day. Stanley Park is not just a place of ancient memories; it will always be associated with taking a last "walk in the woods". The shoes I bought yesterday are perfect, except that they have the sort of rounded, slippery laces that refuse to stay tied. Unless I want to spend a good part of the rest of the trip on one knee, I'm thinking I will need to buy proper laces until I Google the problem and discover an incredibly simple solution. Apparently, if you form the first knot upside down (right lace under the left instead of left under right) the laces will stay tied. I'll test it tomorrow.

Back home in the purple house, I find a smaller room with curtains on the first floor but still spend most of my time at the table in the dining room/living room, wondering if an axe murderer is standing in a darkened window watching me, waiting. Fava comes back from his after-dinner stroll with a wound on his tail.

Day 6 will be another sunny day. Fava's wound is almost imperceptible this morning and he sleeps on my chest again when I try to nap on the sofa. I'm not sure what to do with the day, so I decide to just keep walking. It's a thrill to simply be here, strolling in Dreamland.

I feel and notice the general wetness of this place when I leave the house. Some sidewalks stay wet all day even when it hasn't rained. The body feels different too: I must have peed five times in Stanley Park yesterday. Unlike the desert that pulls water out of the body, making us extend outward, the wetness here feels like an introverting force, pushing inward. In both environments, you can feel the non-human energy of Nature in your personal space, often literally. Very different from where I live. Maybe this is why I visit parks so often: to feel some of this energy.



The beach house, English Bay



Moss loves the wetness

I keep walking west, taking photos of the unique houses here, many of them covered in shadows of tree branches cast by the low-lying sun. In one shot, an orange cat sits in an open second-floor window of a yellow house with red doors. It's a long walk to the Museum of Vancouver which is small and quaint. The featured exhibition is a photographic history of political protest in the city and I think I see a projected photo of my father holding a picket sign before it's replaced by another image. I learn that hobos have been coming to Vancouver from the very beginning of the city, which is only 129 years old. I take a break at a classic diner table in the manufactured nostalgia of the 50's room, exhausted. I seem to be the only one here today.

It takes a long time to get home on the rush-hour bus with a besotted young man sprawled out next to me on the long bench at the back. His behavior is piggish - the way he seems to revive from his stupor every now and then to blurt out questions like *What time is it?* as he lifts his shirt all the way up to his armpit to scratch the side of his pale white abdomen. Is this really necessary or does he just want to expose himself – make a disgusting display? I'm surprised I feel no compassion (a problem I would have to resolve if I lived here) but when he finally stands to disembark and leaves a loonie behind on his seat, I get up and hand it to him, glad to see him gone.

After buying some things on Hastings, I walk home in the dark in fog so thick people are reduced to menacing shapes (ax-murderers?) emerging from the gloom. I remember this fog, the scent of the sea that it carries, and the haunting, soothing sound of foghorns in the harbour.

The shoelaces stayed tied the whole day! How is it that nobody ever told me this? How is it that everyone seems to have been taught the wrong way? How many other problems can be solved by just flipping them over? Another example of how we can see things completely backwards, how the wrong way can seem more natural than the right way.

Day 7 begins the same as yesterday ended, with more walking in clouds of heavy fog and a chill that clings and penetrates and yet isn't too uncomfortable (maybe because it's so familiar). I'm feeling a bit cheated because sun was forecast but instead it will be cold and foggy all day. The weather's not so predictable here.



I take the bus to the Vancouver Police Museum. When I get off in the DTES, I'm accosted by a disheveled, thirty-something woman who hustles me into buying her a gallon of milk and an enormous box of cereal (that will end up costing \$16) and still pleads for another \$15 for a women's hostel. The girl behind the counter at the corner store smiled like she was familiar with the scam. Why would a corner store sell what was probably three boxes of cereal packaged together? Later that day I will see one of the sidewalk vendors in the DTES selling a box of the same cereal and think maybe it's a form of currency in this netherworld.

The museum is small, housed in an old police station, and tries hard to be sensational, with stories and relics of infamous local crimes. There's what used to be the city morgue (full of screaming school children on a morbid field trip) and a room with a couple of autopsy tables (where I think, and will later confirm from his death certificate, my own father's body could very well have ended up in 1962, maybe even on one of these tables). The ravaged organs on display in glass jars are the most shocking exhibit. It's upsetting to see bronchial pneumonia lungs that look like they are coated with black fungus.

I leave the museum and continue to walk west through the DTES with hundreds of people milling about on the streets and in the alleyways, a village of six to eight thousand lost souls, a pathetic display of human failure. One man, a bit further west on Pender, in his forties (but who can tell?), is on his hands and knees, earnestly rooting out accumulated gunk with a little stick from the small space between the curb and the sidewalk, as if it's his mission in life and he really needs to do it well.

The fog will linger all day, casting a pall not made any less melancholy by ubiquitous Christmas carols and decorations. After more futility at the library, I walk, to catch the Skytrain home, through a high-end department store where all the customers look like very rich Asians. Is this the future of this part of the world?

Day 8 begins with heavy fog again, which I decide to embrace: I'll buy a day-pass and ride the buses all day. Waiting for the number 20 bus on Commercial Drive on my way to the cemetery, I look up and see a flock of seagulls, faded black silhouettes against a heavy grey sky, and it's beautiful, and I think if I can sense joy even in the damp, grey abyss above my head, nothing else matters in any given moment without pain or discomfort. Still, I feel unstable today, the ground shifty and slippery.



I get some nice shots in cemetery fog. It takes a while (and a phone call to the office on the other side of the cemetery) to find my father who has a nice spot in the old section of the Mountain View Cemetery. It's a brief visit consisting of a prayer and a few thoughts. I try to remember how much I missed him in the thirty days he went missing fifty-five years ago, but it's too far back. I remember I seemed to be the only one who missed him – everyone else in the family, born in Montreal and abruptly brought to this strange land where they were forbidden to speak French or Italian (one of my father's many strict rules), appeared to get happier the longer he was gone.

By the time I get to the Old Neighborhood for coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich, the fog has lifted and it's just grey. I linger in the café to warm my damp bones before walking down Main Street to take the Skytrain to the library, finding a copy of Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* at Massy Books along the way, a reprint of a tract first published in the forties with ads for occult, secret-revealing books and religious products such as incense spray cans on the inside covers and in the back.

I fail in my mission once again at the library but find a tiny article about the discovery of my father's body. *Police have identified the body found near Beaver Lake in Stanley Park as that of Vancouver tailor GL, 51. Police said it had been in the bush about a month. GL... was last seen July 28 when he left on his motorcycle to go fishing.*

I was the last person to see him. I remember the moment vividly because I was eating potato chips (another thing strictly forbidden) when he pulled up on his motorcycle at the corner of Main and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Remarkably, he said nothing about the chips, and seemed unusually calm and distracted when he said he was going fishing.

In the evening I see a movie with my friend and we end up walking back along Broadway in the fog. I get a nice shot of City Hall with my phone. It's nice to walk through the Old Neighborhood with someone else, a beloved friend: it makes it seem more real. I tell her about the amazing shoelace discovery and she says she will test it.

It's foggy again in the morning of Day 9 but looks like it might dissipate today. Halfway through the trip, I can feel the city pressing itself into my consciousness: the wetness, erratic buses, crazy people, trees, sea, mountains and foghorns. I especially like the happy, helpful bus drivers, not like our grumpy Montreal drivers.



By 9:30 the sky is blue, then grey again an hour later. I skim through the rest of the ultra-syrupy *A Severe Mercy*, not liking it very much. I will eventually take only two things from the book: that most people who reject Christianity know almost nothing about it, and the paradox that lies at the heart of faith. We need faith to believe yet must believe to have faith.

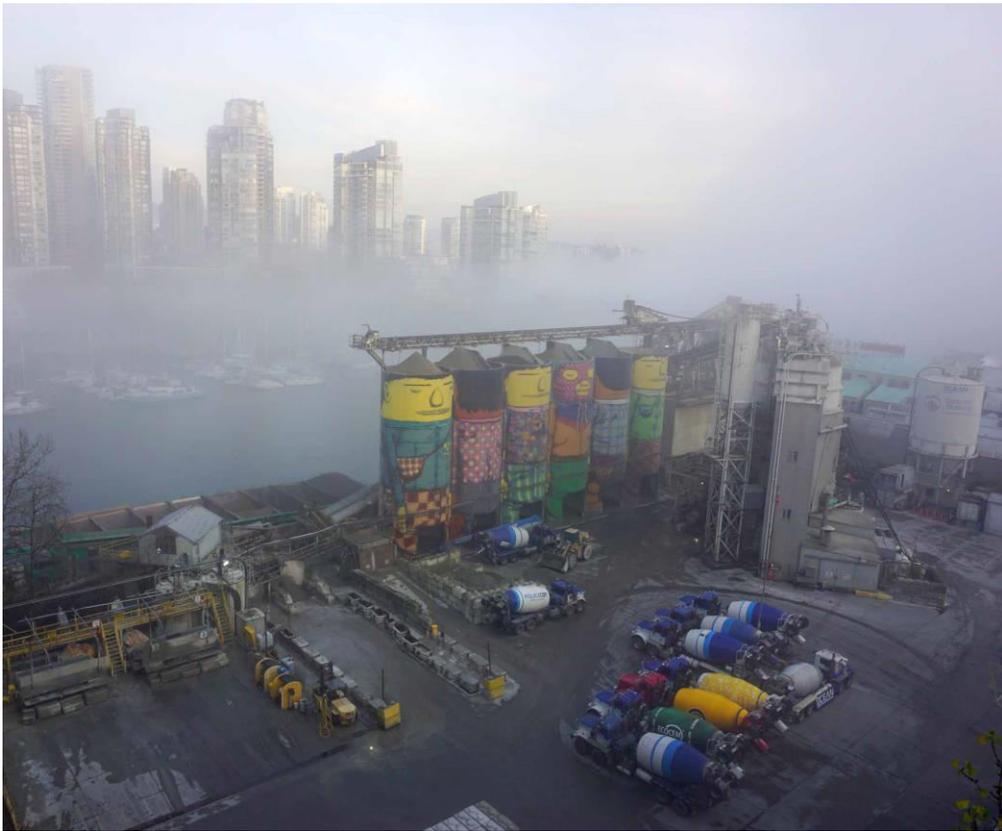
The sun comes out again at 12:30 but it stays chilly, verging on cold. I take the now-familiar route on foot west through ultra-gentrified Strathcona and Chinatown, skirting the DTES. I visit the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden then have mid-afternoon fish & chips at the Smile Diner where self-important movie flunkies (there are lots of movies being shot in this city) are talking too loud in the next booth, basking in the imaginary celebrity dust cast off by the people they work with. And of course, the guy talking the loudest is the guy with the walkie-talkie, marking him as the most important of these most important people.

The meal is fantastic. I love the Smile Diner and the Magic Triangle. This part of town will definitely be imprinted. I spend another 45 minutes in the library to no avail, then walk down Granville and over the bridge. But it's foggy on the popular island below with its upscale markets and restaurants, and I can't photograph what I can't see so I just keep walking up to and then east along bland West Broadway for the second day in a row.

Back in the Old Neighborhood, I stand across the street from the old house, waiting to see any sign of life in the windows. Nothing, but I'll keep trying – maybe someone will notice, ask me what I'm doing and invite me in. Not much of a plan but I would like to see the fish tiles on the bathroom floor again, if they still exist, the only detail I remember about the house.

In the evening I read more of Thich Nhat Hanh, the sage with the annoying name I can never remember. I should think of a way to memorize it, but then again maybe he likes the anonymity it must bestow, maybe he doesn't want the cheesy Buddhist celebrity of the always-smiling Dalai Lama. I don't think he would mind if I refer to him as Tic-Tac-Toe.

Sunday, Day 10, begins fogless but I know now not to assume it will stay that way. The sun sits even lower in the sky as the winter solstice approaches, only eleven days away. I walk to Commercial Drive to take the 20 Bus downtown for eleven o'clock mass at Holy Rosary Cathedral and I'm surprised to find it lets me off at "my corner", close to the bookshops and the Smile Diner in the Magic Triangle. I have half an hour to kill in a Tim Hortons.



I've had no remembered dreams in Dreamland and the trip today is feeling a bit hollow, but maybe that's the point – to feel like I'm not travelling at all, but home. I'm walking, reading and taking pictures like I do at home, weather permitting. That's the priceless advantage here – I could do what I do all year round.

Mass is chanted by a somnolent old priest and I myself fall asleep at one point. I hate the mindless drone of a chanted mass. The readings are jibber-jabber about the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah predicting the New Testament Jesus and the locust-eating John the Baptist recognizing Jesus as the Messiah for the first time, saying he's not fit to untie the Miracle Man's sandal-laces. "I baptize with water," John says, "he with the Holy Spirit." No lesson, parable or insight here. Nothing.

After mass, I walk into Yaletown to catch the ferry to Granville Island, feeling once again cheated of the sun that has begun to hide behind a low bank of spotty clouds. Maybe I missed the best light this morning, sleeping in church.

Granville Island is nice, but crowded with shoppers and foodies. I end up walking up to West Broadway for the third day in a row in search of coffee. The sun taunts: the exact moment I sit down at a table, it slips between clouds in front of me and shines directly onto my table, almost at eye-level. It seems to want me to get moving again but I'm not falling for it. Besides, there's nothing to shoot here on bland West Broadway and it will soon be dark.

I'm getting to know this street well, especially the prim and polished west side. Further on, shortly after it turns into East Broadway near Main in the Old Neighborhood, the street turns dreary, even tawdry at times, until it comes alive again at Commercial Drive.

I can still feel the excitement as a child on the Broadway bus riding west to Kitsilano Beach, the buildings somehow getting more beachy the closer we got. I remember the joy, glimpsing sparkling ocean at the end of streets we passed on the right. I remember loving the smell of salt water and the taste of it on the back of my hand. And the green rubber mask that let me see underwater, into a different dimension, was my prized possession.



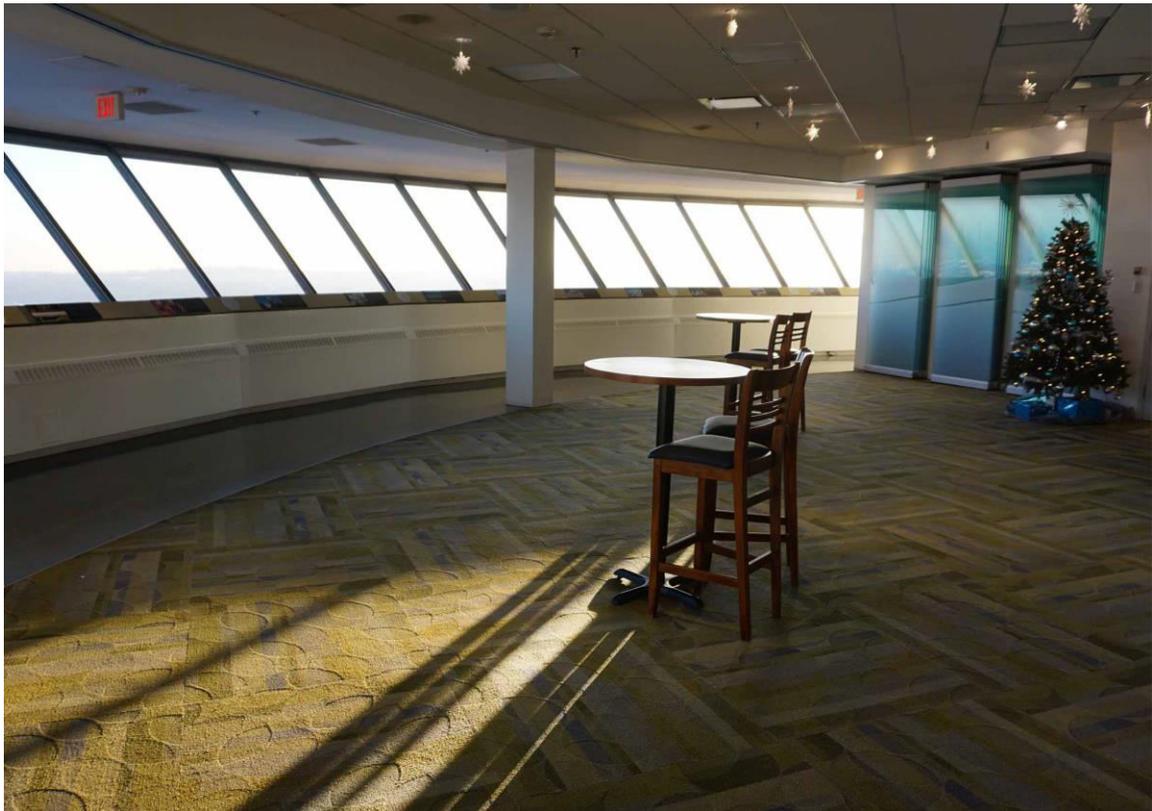
It's another long walk down West Broadway to the Old Neighborhood where dinner at The Noodle Box on Main Street is great, and just before I get home to the purple house on Napier Street, I will step into St. Francis of Assisi Church and hear a younger priest deliver the same Gospel I heard this morning, but with a meaning offered. "Prepare the way for Jesus by removing obstacles such as anger, envy, greed..." he says, adding that we are afraid to accept this universal love because we think we would have to change in order to deserve it, which is not true. The love he's referring to is unconditional. There you go: is it so hard to attach meaning to these stories?

My friend calls in the evening. She can't see me tomorrow, so we'll do a birthday thing the next day. I'm going to get to spend my birthday alone! And nothing but sun is in the forecast. I'll buy a day pass and go wherever I feel like going. Celebrate the beginning of my last year before official geezerhood.

Sunny and seven degrees is forecast for Day 11, my 64<sup>th</sup> birthday. The plan is to be a tourist, beginning with the obligatory aerial view every tourist seeks - the Vancouver Lookout. And I need a book: the Adler book is academic jibber-jabber, even worse than theological jibber-jabber. The intellectual argument to support belief in God doesn't engage me at any level. Maybe I'm not smart enough. A quote from the book on the back cover says it all: "I have reasonable grounds for affirming God's existence."

"Reasonable grounds for affirming" is not faith - it's something completely different. To be fair, the subtitle of the book is *A Guide for the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Pagan*, so it's not written for me, but I also don't see the value in logical explanations for unexplainable things, which can only be misleading if the whole point is to uncover and cultivate faith.

It's eleven o'clock when I reach the Lookout where the ticket stub with the printed date is a perfect souvenir of the day. It's wonderful to see the city from the sky - to imprint it from above. And there are only two other people here, so it's very quiet with rays from the low-lying sun flooding straight through the panoramic windows of the observation deck. The ticket is good for the day, so I'll come back at three to watch the sun set.



Next stop is English Bay where I get some nice photos with a smooth, mother-of-pearl ocean as a backdrop. I try to avoid getting too close to one of the only other people here, an angry, screaming bag-lady, and have a great time walking further down past Sunset Beach to catch a small ferry boat to Kitsilano. I get more shots on the other side before catching a bus up to Broadway where I find *Under the Overpass*, by Mike Yankoski, at Tanglewood Books, a young Christian's account of three months spent living homeless in American cities.

Daylight is fading fast so I cut short plans and make a pass through the Old Neighborhood before taking the Number 3 Bus back to the Lookout to watch the light fade to black. Walking around and around the big windows that circle the Lookout, watching the sun go down behind tall buildings from the top of the city, is awesome, a fine birthday present to myself.

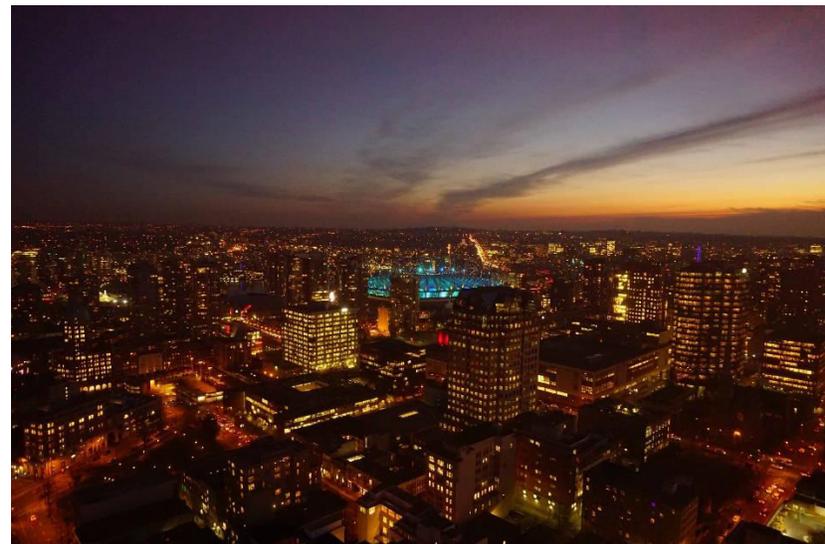
Then it's dusk, and the city begins to fade and we (other people are doing the same thing) wait for the lights in the skyscrapers to take over, and when they begin to dazzle, the sky is still orange and it's beautiful, especially Cambie Street, a line of jewels of red taillights creeping upwards in the distance. I was going to eat supper at the Smile Diner but it's closed, so I head home to feed the cats and myself in the purple house.

I see yet another lunatic while waiting for the bus on Pender, running along the sidewalk screaming and banging hard with his fists on anything that will make a loud noise. And, of course, there are more sketchy and colorful characters getting on and off the bus along Hastings as we pass through the DTES. At home I look at the shots I got today and I'm pleased. It's been a memorable birthday.

Day 12 is forecast to be partly sunny and seven again. For the first time, I linger in the big front room of the purple house most of the morning, waiting for my friend to pick me up for birthday lunch. It's drafty, and when I stand near the front door I can feel the cold pushing through the cracks, something that hardly happens in Montreal where we take the cold more seriously.

Why are the roads wet even when it hasn't rained? Nobody on the Web talks about this, and my friend doesn't acknowledge this difference. Once again, I think that maybe the trees and vegetation are saturated, so instead of drawing water in, they exude moisture. The scent of wet trees is always in the air.

Most of the day is spent with my friend. We have lunch at a good Indian restaurant, then visit the renowned Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, ending with a nice drive through parts of the city I don't know. Back home in the evening, I'm concerned the cats are getting too close, demanding more and more physical attention. Tomorrow, it's back to walking.



Day 13 dawns sunny, another perfect day for walking. I take the bus to Lost Lagoon, the lake at the entrance to Stanley Park, to walk around another sacred place. The sun is hiding when I get there and it's 3 degrees, just cold enough to make sitting on a bench uncomfortable. But when I do eventually sit down the sun comes out and the light turns a bit melancholy.

I like this place. It feels like it belongs to me and my family. I think about what the old man did here and resolve that if my time ever comes to take a walk in the woods, I'll do everything I can to explain myself – to avoid the bad karma of leaving people wondering why or whether there was anything they could do. Of course, in my father's case, a note might have cancelled the life insurance payout that made the return to Montreal possible, blurring karmic consequences.

There's very little color in the surroundings, no people aside from the odd jogger, and the lake looks a bit neglected, maybe because it's winter. But I feel the place intensely. Lost Lagoon was the magically-named entrance to all the attractions in the park, including the zoo and aquarium. There was always a level of heightened excitement and anticipation here. The lagoon is full of life today: beavers, raccoons, blue herons, ducks...

As I near the western edge of the lake I can't say I remember that there will be a wooden bridge, but something deep inside knows it's going to be there, and when I walk across it, I remember the thrill of finding that from here you can continue on to Second Beach and the ocean or turn back into the park, passing the mini-golf course on the south end of the lagoon on the way.

I want to use the bathroom at Second Beach but there's a homeless man camped out front who looks like he's just getting out of bed and, sure enough, when I finally go in, he enters and stands next to me at the urinal, wearing no shoes with one cuff rolled up to mid-calf, clearing his throat. I feel like I'm in his home and of course he speaks to me, asking me if I know what time it is.

There's much more light on the beach than around the lake, probably reflecting off the Pacific Ocean which, like the other day, is calm and still. I was going to turn back and continue walking east along the downtown harbourfront, but it will probably be mostly expensive boats anyway and I feel like I've already done enough today. I got some nice shots and had some nice thoughts, re-experiencing a sacred lagoon from the distant past.



Lost Lagoon



It's good to sit down in a warm café on Robson, reviving frozen fingers on a coffee cup after two hours walking in the cold. I'm not sure about *Under the Overpass*. Yankoski says right up front that he's going to Sunday-school his report from this underworld, and I have a feeling he's not just referring to glossing over sinful language. I'm sure he will leave out incidents as well that would give a better understanding of the sorts of things that actually happen in these conditions. His Christian agenda is tainting his credibility, rendering the words a bit lifeless.

Christmas carols are everywhere now, adding a layer of anticipation to the nostalgia that lingers even after thirteen days. The nostalgia is starting to dissipate, though, being slowly replaced by an imprint of a bigger Vancouver beyond the Old Neighborhood, Stanley Park and the beaches, that includes places with little or no magic dust. I'm starting to get comfortable in this city. The final rainy weekend coming up will decide how I feel definitively, I think.

Laziness prevails and, instead of walking home as planned, I take the Skytrain to Broadway Station and find another book at Canterbury Tales on Commercial Drive and "The best cappuccino in town" at Joe's Café (it's actually pretty good). *A Fortunate Man*, by John Berger and Jean Mohr, tells the story of a small-town doctor with prose and photographs.

Day 14, the last day before the rainy weekend, starts slow, reading and lingering before meeting my friend at her workplace nearby for lunch, after which the plan is to walk downtown again. I finish *Under the Overpass* disappointed.

Most of the people living on the street are addicts or mentally ill. Yankoski says it's not enough to get them off drugs, they need to "build a new life out of the rubble," but he doesn't say how they can be motivated to do this. And he doesn't address the issue of mental illness. He says living rough can be "refreshing" in its freedom, honesty and simplicity. The fun side of destitution and deprivation - the thrill of the unexpected windfall, the sudden gift of a basic treat or comfort we take for granted. Do we get vicarious thrills from looking at destitute people?

It's a weak book but redeemed somewhat in the end when he says that real love always shows itself in actions and suggests practical ways to help by bringing food, clothes and conversation to these people. And "be relentlessly suspicious of your comfortable life," he says. Good advice under any circumstances.



Lost Lagoon



When I leave the house, I see more quirky people on Commercial Drive: an ultra-fashionable, gender-fluid teenager with a Naloxone injection kit (for opioid overdoses) displayed on his or her knapsack and a fortyish woman (my friend will later tell me she's a transsexual) clownishly dressed, carrying a giant lollipop, smiling ecstatically and completely bare-chested. Things you don't see in Montreal. I also see people walking around in pajama pants, which my friend says are acceptable here, possibly an Asian influence.

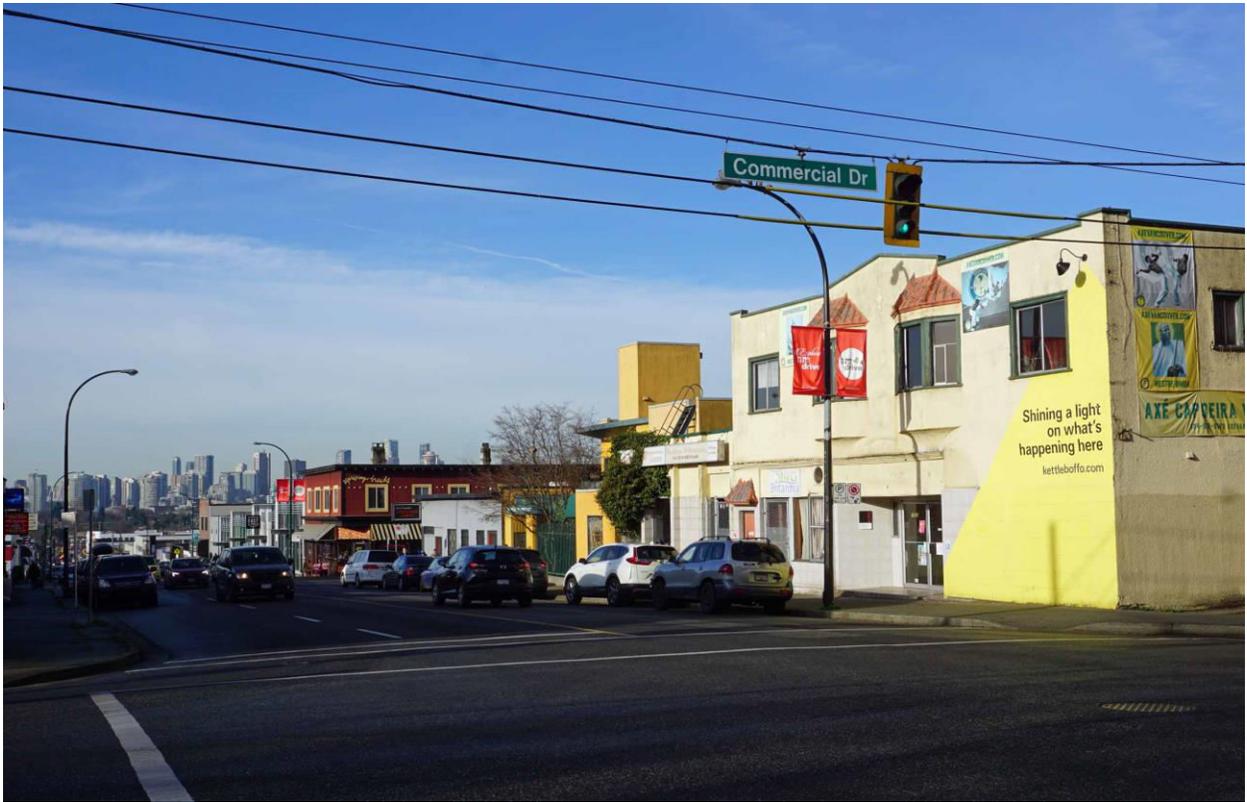
Before meeting my friend, I kill some time at Uprising Breads on Venables, the sort of bakery-café I like very much. Again, I notice how less discrete people are here. Across the street, a young woman is sitting on the curb, head down, long luxurious hair falling onto her knees. A hipster boyfriend shows up and places a caring hand on her head. Very dramatic. Then two women cross the street with a young teenager who looks severely mentally handicapped following a few paces behind, followed by a man in a motorized chair, a common sight here.

My friend buys me lunch and gives me a quick guided tour of Commercial Drive, one of the places I will have imprinted before I leave. Then, I walk into Downtown one more time, stopping at the Carnegie Community Centre, ground zero of the DTES on Hastings and Main, which I remember from its days as a natural museum. It's cleaner and calmer than I thought it would be, with a cafeteria, a small library and many Chinese seniors playing what looks like Mah-jong at tables on the first floor. Then it's back to Pender to walk through Chinatown, an area definitely imprinted now, and one more fruitless visit to the library.

After dinner, I try to read more of Tic-Tac-Toe but I'm getting frustrated with the monk. I seem to remember the same feeling reading him before. He lures you in with simple concepts, then gets more and more complex. But his concept of *here and now* is simple enough:

- 1) Time can only be local and not universal
- 2) This is why the concept "now" can be applied to nowhere else but "here".
- 3) Likewise, "here" can only be applied to this instant, "now", and not to any point in the past or future.

We can't inhale and exhale at the same time (just like we can't experience stress and gratitude at the same time). I struggle to stay awake until 11.



The cats climb onto the bed to wake me up at 5:30 now, like clockwork, they have me well-trained to get up and feed them immediately. They seem to think I won't remember where the kitchen is, that they need to lead the way by lying directly in front of me on the steps, especially Fava. I have to stand and wait for him to get out of the way once he realizes I'm not going to step over his sprawled body.

When I finally make to the kitchen, they stand beside their bowls rubbing their heads together, licking each other's faces in anticipation (or mutual congratulations maybe). So single-mindedly focussed on food. And hedonistic too, each demanding a head rubbing from me at least once a day now.

Day 15 is garbage and recycling day, all the week's disgusting chores concentrated in a few smelly minutes: the compost, the garbage and the eye-stinging litter brimming with treasures. I feel my senses heightened to both good and bad in this city. A good thing at my age.

Today I'll be done with the microfilm once and for all - my last visit to the library - and maybe see a film at the Park Theatre on Cambie. Washed and dressed and prepared to leave, I notice how quiet the house is and that I've kept my distance from it, never getting past feeling like an intruder, not wanting to look too closely at other peoples' things, aside from the photos on display and their books. My eyes are always drawn to peoples' books and these books are very interesting, many of them I've read myself.

It seems to start raining the moment I leave the house at ten and takes some time to get to Commercial Drive, taking photos of Christmas decorations in front yards along the way, with no place I need to be aside from the library. I start with coffee and a scone at Uprising Breads where I linger comfortably, with no guilt or feeling that I'm missing something at this point of the trip. I'm even enjoying the carols today.

Then, after one last visit to the Vancouver Public Library, the search for the mysterious Jew is over. Failure. Close the door. I find lunch at a Noodle Box on the southern side Library Square, a neighborhood I hadn't visited yet, full of places to eat.

Tic-Tac-Toe says that to cultivate awareness we should overcome the fear of solitude and "close our windows" to the noise of everyday life. And, so appropriate in this particular place: "The fresh and silent woods help you remain in awareness." The sun comes out for the first time as I sit in The Noodle Box reading this, but just for a few moments.



I make it to the Park Theatre after an easy walk over the Cambie Bridge where the sun peaks out of dark, heavy clouds again for just a few moments and I get some unexpected beautifully spot-lit shots of False Creek from the bridge. Strange, how the tops of three churches on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the Old Neighborhood are visible from here, so close to downtown. I get a whiff of ocean breeze and vividly recall missing this scent as much as anything as a young exile in Montreal.

And I remember the excitement of walking up Cambie to Little Mountain for a Sunday family picnic, picking up exotic bagels and olives at a delicatessen along the way. The Park Theatre, like my arthouse cinema in Montreal with the same name only in French, is large and mainly empty, most of the patrons my age or older, pensioners for whom a four o'clock screening is perfect.

The film is a disappointment but it's good to be in one of the cinemas where a life-long habit began, tagging along to see foreign films with my father. Good to be somewhere from the old life and very nice to walk back through the Old Neighborhood on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue afterward where for the first time I see signs of life in the old homestead. Looks like a young couple with a child judging from silhouettes in the front door window.

I finish Tic-Tac-Toe in the evening and begin the John Berger book. The title, *A Fortunate Man*, refers to the doctor who is the subject of the book. It's his vocation that makes him fortunate, "like an artist or anybody else who believes that his work justifies his life."

On Day 16, with the trip winding down, I realize something is missing: the yearning for home. 'Going home' actually feels like going away. It's a bit disorienting, especially at this time of year, the same time I left 55 years ago. This feels like a proper winter, much more livable (and walkable), not like the brutal cold of Montreal. Long walks are something I feel like doing every day now so, practically speaking, I could say I *need* to live in a place like this in winter.

At a bit of a loss as to what to do today; I just don't feel like I'm travelling at this point. I feel like I could easily enjoy a day of leisure and light housekeeping, but I need to take advantage of this last day alone – tomorrow I'll be with friends most of the day.

I walk up Commercial Drive to take a closer look at the shops, which are bit prim. I see more strange people and think there's definitely license to be weirder here. Born and bred in Lotusland, maybe I should give myself more license to be weird when I return to the east. Be more myself and indulge my eccentricities. In a mindful way, of course.



I wander back to the Old Neighborhood and end up in the Timmy's on the corner of Broadway and Main one last time. This would probably be my default café if I lived around here again. I'm not cool enough for the hipster cafés. I dreamt last night that someone was tucking in my shirt, but who? Mother?

I take the 19 bus to Stanley Park from the Old Neighborhood (I remember it being this easy) and briefly visit the Seawall area around the Yacht Club before crossing the road to visit Lost Lagoon again. But this time I veer off to Second Beach, English Bay, Denman Street, reinforcing more Vancouver imprints.

Once again, I feel at home. The light, the smells, the air, the trees. Even the wind, which the Web says is lighter here. I will also discover with a little research that Vancouver lies in a coastal rainforest. It's one of the wettest non-tropical areas, and the largest temperate rainforest ecosystem, on the planet. One source says it's technically a jungle, not a term normally used to describe temperate rainforests, but with thick underbrush and gigantic ferns thriving under a canopy of gigantic trees, this is jungle.

The prehistoric-looking gigantic ferns remind me of the silverfish I've seen in the house. I actually had to brush one off the dining room table. In my bathroom in Montreal they're so small they're barely visible, and much more discrete – I only ever see them if I get up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night. The two I've seen here were not shy and an inch long. What looks more ancient than a silverfish?

It's relentlessly grey and dark but I continue to walk and take pictures anyway, this being probably my last chance. I end up in a Timmy's for the second time today, needing to warm myself up at 3:30 with daylight already slipping away.

Walking through a shopping mall to get to the Skytrain I find the carols pleasantly nostalgic today. I have a nice dinner at 5 Elements on the corner of Commercial Drive and Napier, in what feels like my new neighborhood. The day winds down with less and less desire to leave Vancouver.

Day 17 will be dark like yesterday but with much more rain. I finish the Berger book in the morning without ever figuring out exactly what it was trying to accomplish. Too abstract and intellectual for me; I take away one thing only.



Everybody knows that time passes faster as we get older. But Berger writes about the opposite effect: how slowly time passes for the child and how childhood could actually be “equal in length to the rest of a lifetime.” He says this is because children are naturally aware of the *irreversibility of time*, not constantly being taken out of the moment by the expectation of patterns and repetition, slipping into routines that eat up time. “Such awareness of irreversibility slows down time. Moments can seem like years because... one feels that everything has changed forever.” Maybe this explains why this place still feels like my real home.

I hardly feel like an intruder anymore in the purple house and I wonder what it would be like if I was here when the real owners returned. Would *they* seem like the intruders? It’s already hard to imagine others living here besides me and the cats. It will be strange to be back in a house with curtains again.

10:30 mass at St. Francis Assisi down the street is nice enough but squirming, pew-thumping children ruin any possibility of solemnity. The priest, decked in bright pink robes, sounds very sincere but the gospel is not interesting and his sermon focuses on traffic, of all things: What is the traffic obstructing Jesus from entering our hearts? Pride? Anger? It’s very close to what I heard him say last week when I stood at the back of the church for a few minutes. He’s one of those passionate religious that seem to feel genuine love for Jesus. The congregation is asked to recite the Nicene Creed, a statement of belief in one God with the one magic son and something called a Holy Ghost. This isn’t required in my own church and I can’t participate.

The rain is steady, not heavy but dense - tiny drops wrapped in a thick, falling mist. Once again, I notice a whole other level of wetness here. After an hour in church, my umbrella is as dripping wet as when I came in.

My friends pick me up in the afternoon for a guided tour of Richmond and Steveston. They say the weather is usually better in Richmond but it’s raining even harder when we get there. We visit a former salmon cannery in Steveston, which is now a museum, and enjoy lunch at Dave’s Fish & Chips, where I tell my friends that the act of displacing oneself on Sunday morning to leave the house and go to church has value in and of itself because it’s an action taken, a step towards an opening to the place where the supernatural lives. Tic-Tac-Toe says we all need a spiritual homeland to belong to, where everything is “designed to remind us to return to awareness.”



In my last evening I walk down Commercial for a final visit, but the streets are cold and abandoned in the winter rain – probably as inhospitable as it gets here. I buy two slices of pizza and go home, still feeling like I don't want to leave this city, feeling like I belong here - feeling more of everything here. Not a single photo taken on my last day.

I decide to ask my oracle, the I Ching, if this is home. The response is long and obscure, with many changing lines, and the only part that resonates says I should “find friends in the west and south and forego friends in the east and north.” It seems to confirm the plan to spend more time in Vancouver and Southern California.

The cats and a wonky stomach have me up ridiculously early on Day 18. I had closed the French door of the bedroom to keep them away, but I can still hear and see the starving little buggers scratching at the bottom window, determined to get me out of bed, convinced I've forgotten my purpose in life. For them, time is irreversible, each moment a life-or-death situation with no expectation that what happened yesterday will happen today. I'll miss them.

As I write this on the sofa, Fava comes and pushes my pen away with his big head, demanding attention one last time and reminding me of the real purpose of this trip. Does he sense my departure? The true owners of these beasts and the purple house come home now and the intruder leaves, probably never to return, but who knows? “Find friends in the west and south,” says the Oracle.

Fifty-five years ago, I was leaving for Montreal at the same time of year, excited to be setting off on an adventure to a strange land. Now, there's reluctance, and thinking about family and friends doesn't help. No one takes much interest in my life anyway. A solitary man is a solitary man wherever he goes. I just feel more like myself here and I'm still not sure if I should even count this homecoming as a pilgrimage.

Getting to the airport is easy with a lift to the Skytrain from my friend, and the flight back to brutal winter is smooth and almost pleasant with not a single bump of turbulence. But unpacking, usually so much fun, is a bit sad.

The day after I return I watch *Haida Gwaii: Restoring the Balance*, a short documentary about what used to be called the Queen Charlotte Islands off the coast of British Columbia. One of the Haida women interviewed says, “Today, the curtain that separates us from the supernatural beings has become thicker. It's harder to go there.” The curtain is definitely thinner here than back east, not just between us and the supernatural, but the chaos of nature as well.

It's the trees more than anything. This is where they live, where they exude their energy and make people crazy. I'll have to come back if only to photograph them. But of course it's not just the trees that exude energy and make people crazy: the mountains and the sea have the same effect. And the thick moss that grows on the trees – maybe it grows on the brain too.

Maybe this place feels more real (and me in it) because I was a child here, living in irreversible time. But, as Tic-Tac-Toe says, here and now (place and time) are the same thing, which makes place irreversible too. It doesn't matter where I am.

The family got happier the longer my father went missing because they were exiles in Vancouver. As was my father, exiled from Italy, as was I from this place and am still, as maybe everybody is from one real or imagined place or another. Maybe home is a state of mind, like nostalgia or a daydream.

When I finally get around to reading *The Imitation of Christ*, the 15<sup>th</sup> century priest will have the final word: "If you will stand on your feet and learn, think of yourself as an exile and a pilgrim on this earth."

Vancouver still feels like home, but if home is where the heart is and if I accept the sun as my second heart, as Tic-Tac-Toe says it is, I'll always be home. I established a foothold here, not based on memories only, so mission accomplished. And finally, after sixty-four years, I've learned how to properly tie my shoelaces.