

*Rebuild*

Sachiko Murakami

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Reviewed by John Kerkhoven

*Vancouver is not a resource economy.  
It is, and always has been a real estate economy.*

Vancouver: condos, stucco, beach, mountains, views, holes in the ground, holes that will hold the new. Vancouver is Sachiko Murakami's focus in this collection, a case study in digging up, building, and carving up the views, in the imposition of an architectural and market-driven ethos: prestige at a price.

It's hard to imagine the condos  
as unintentional. I can't see myself in one.  
I can't afford the view. I can't help.  
I can't help wanting to.

Murakami observes with both familiarity and detachment her urban setting and scene, the commodification of views from windows, the never-ending near-completion of the city, the habit, as she calls it, of development: "[e]mpty suites never inhabited / held safe for future profits". Vancouver may be a glass-shining example of Gertrude Stein's

remark about America that “there is no there there.”

If we are never living here and there is no time  
to sit a minute and think at the centre

(there is no centre) near a monument  
near a marker of history (there is no monument)

If we are always looking forward to the future  
If my subject is not actually here

Where pyjamas pass for clothes, where Starbucks and strip malls and bookstores, ocean,  
mountains and trees are backdrop for the real estate market, all passes for a sort of illusion.

If, in the middle distance,  
a bus, a great big brute of a bus,  
should flash by and exist there  
in your field of vision,

just blink. Then cross  
the street. Don't look for me.  
Caught imagining, I am in

a different environment altogether.  
Understand? I was never here.

Murakami writes as an outsider. Indeed, she is a recent arrival, a third generation  
Canadian of Japanese descent whose father, to whom the book is dedicated, was a  
travelling salesman, and a renter. The book's closing section concerns his death.

... Now a child born in exile.

Now he becomes a father. Now redress.  
Now he's a father, a body. Now ashes.

She mentions redress in another poem: “the official redress, rolled up, not hung / ever  
on the walls of the home / he didn't own.” And so, like so many Japanese, her father was,  
we gather, interned during the war. She does not explore this violent uprooting further,  
but portrays her father as unhappy, a salesman who “hawked electronics to feed his

family and his ego”, “a curse rising in his throat against some new injustice”, a man who died alone.

To die with empty hands, to die a renter  
in a city of homeowners, to die in a land mostly owned  
by the state, to die and be buried in a little plot and become  
again the land that will be bought and sold;  
not even a highway will bend to your little will.

She ends the collection with the “[s]cent of coming snow”, a naturalistic release after eighty pages of hard-edged verse, and plays on the various meanings of “let”: to rent out, to yield, to allow.

Let the city stay silent      let silence be virtue  
let the snow stay until      let spring

Murakami leaves us on this note of acceptance, resolving the poet’s search for place, for home (the last section of the book and three of its poems bear the title “Return Home”), and for a beginning in which she can trust, in contrast to the apprehension expressed early in the book:

If I can’t account for the woman missing from this city  
(*the woman, this city*)

In a world of real-estate, the basic elements are not wind, water, earth and air, but “glass, steel and concrete”. In Vancouver, “always the convo turns / to condo: prime plus five, / what point did you get?”; “for home, read high-rise”; and the rain rains “on pissed-on concrete. Hard and wet as home.”

Murakami contemplates real estate not only as investment in high priced developments but also as inhabited domestic space:

Here are the delineate edges, here is where inside will start. Here is the kitchen the hallway the master bedroom, big enough for six to lie prone, two for fucking, her dragged by the hair to the dirt on the ground, he hiding in the closet as though it were work, here are the beams that will hold this house up, let the hammer fall

here. It falls here in its natural strike. It falls here in its natural strike. Build bigger than taste dictates. Start big, larger than the family that comes with you....

Throughout the book, Murakami digs at our unstated beliefs about real estate. “Build bigger than taste dictates. Start big....” These ideas are not set in stone, but arise in the context of a given real estate market where there are buyers at different levels of the market, or, again, renters, shadows of home-owners. Murakami does not show us the homeless, an omission. She does, however, acknowledge the history of the place, “the sea they might call Salish, / the land taken there, taken again / from another family....”

The poems themselves are architectural, constructions and deconstructions. The very first poem of the book is the literal source of the second, which retains the shape on the page of the first but with erasure of words. The first poem is titled “The form of a city”, the second, “The form of a”. This immediate second treatment of her own text calls into question the very idea of a set form of either city or poem. It declares the poet’s consciousness of her craft and snaps us out of any lull of attention. And Murakami never lets up.

Some of the poems require a key, or a clue to understand. Sometimes this can be figured out, as when in one poem based on another she leaves in the first several lines, and then removes from the remainder the letters of her last name. Other times, it is not easy to figure out why an obviously derived poem has the form it has. Some of the things she says – for instance, “Size of a fist / through iris / self dugout” – although forceful, are unclear.

Her Vancouver Special poems work wonderfully. They each bear the same title and convey the same, or nearly the same, thoughts, expressed in varying ways, capturing different voices, different outlooks. Sometimes the line breaks make the difference, but

the poems, like the houses, are similar to each other. And whereas the houses have different occupants, the poems have different voices/voicings. For instance,

... How can I fit  
my family into my mortgage?  
How can I live on the land  
allotted? What *can* 't I afford?

How may I fit my family into the equation?  
How will we make the mortgage?  
How much land will be allotted,  
and to whom? What can't I afford?

Grace of a front lawn, stucco sophisticate.  
All that glitters stuck in the surface.

The grace of a lawn, stucco sophisticated.  
All that glitters blocks the surface. ...

We are witnessing now active protest against the forces behind, among other things, real estate. The occupy movement has brought to life the contrast between resourceful, collective, communal living and the towers of glass – tributes to corporate practice, the presence of corporate power. The mainstream is beginning to see what economic alienation looks like in our time. *Rebuild* is a dynamic collection that comes out at this moment when consumption and the fallout of the sub-prime mortgage crisis and control of wealth are on people's radars, when we need actively to think and feel about how we occupy the places we live.