Rebuild
by Sachiko Murakami

Reviewed by rob mclennan

THE LAST WATERFRONT PROPERTY

No scandal on Olympic land. No theft on stolen scandal. Say first we were here then
define we. Sift midden. Whose bones, whose refuse and this is what we are refusing: no
solutions to stolen scandals. First shoes then feet then all drift is suspect. Say more
land on Olympic solutions. Put your foot down. No final scandals. No cost overruns
on reclaimed waterfront. No reclaimed waterfront on stolen scandal. Stolen millions
set adrift keep saying scandal. Get the storeys up and scaffolded, dig
sand out and call it condo. Call castle village, village scandal. Fill village with Olympic
dream and call Pacific false, call False Creek real, call your realtor, call me on this.
Please. Call me on this. (76)

In this her second poetry collection, following The Invisibility Exhibit (Talonbooks, 2008), Vancouver
poet (currently living in Toronto) Sachiko Murakami explores the complicated relationship she has
with the constantly renovated and rebuilt City of Vancouver, and the social repercussions on a city-
space and its populace. Hers is a collection of frustration, anger and loss, from losing aspects of a city
and responding to confused constructions to a loss made more concrete through the death of her
own father. For some time, Vancouver has been one of the sites of some of Canada’s most valuable
real estate, much of which exists without any consideration to those who have been displaced for the
opportunity, whether low income and the homeless from the Woodwards Squat in 2008, to
displacements made for the sake of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. What kind of legacy does such a
consideration leave, and how does it affect Vancouver’s complicated relationship with home
ownership? It’s complicated even further, given the incredible costs associated with home and/or
condo ownership, and the ongoing legacies of Japanese internment camps (something Murakami’s
own history is sensitive to) and aboriginal land claims.

TOWER …

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

Imagine her life and the wholeness
that may or may not have happened

Can I mention the occupants
missing from the tower
Empty suites never inhabited
held safe for future profits

Every surface void of thumbprint
Thrum of refrigerator, lullaby, full belly

How long will they wait for life to be written
in the gleam of stainless steel

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

If the foundations are speculative
and our present is built on impatience for the future

If I can’t get anywhere with Japantown
and it isn’t neighbourly to mention it

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 (33)

Certainly, Vancouver isn’t the only city that seems determined to overwrite its own history and neighbourhoods; Toronto’s waterfront comes to mind, written of in Michael Redhill’s novel Consolation (2006), or even Ottawa’s enormously frustrating Lebreton Flats project of the 1950s. Vancouver, much like Montreal, also shares a history of the Olympics spreading out over neighbourhoods, “improving” by replacing not only buildings, but in many instances, the people themselves as well. There are other histories too, of total erasure, such as Africville, and similar Black histories erased in Southwestern Ontario, as well as Vancouver’s own Hogan’s Alley. Without community, without history, sites lose their meaning, and Murakami struggles to explore that lost meaning, and the meaning of those losses, as well, with the final section in the collection, “Returning Home,” more overtly dealing with the themes of the book as a whole alongside the loss of her father. As she writes in the title poem, “Now he becomes a father. Now redress. / Now he’s a father, a body. Now ashes. // Now begin. // Now begin again.” In an interview I conducted with Murakami after the publication of The Invisibility Exhibit, “Invisible Participants” (posted February 8, 2009 at Agora), she responds:

Is it surprising that poets feel friction in their environment? I’m not sure that writing preoccupied with place is unique to Vancouver. But it is a compelling environment, at least to me. Maybe it’s because Vancouverites in general feel that friction too – being Canadian without Winter, being in a city dwarfed by Nature . . . And maybe it’s because Vancouver is still quite new, and the building of the city – and the idea of the city, what Vancouver means – is still happening all around us. Maybe it’s that newness and the feeling that we are all participating in that project, that what Vancouver means/looks like/isn’t yet set in stone
(or stucco, or glass, or cedar) is what compels us to write about it. I suppose that’s what I’m writing about . . . that project, that negotiation. Maybe it’s less emotional because the subject is a building rather than a person, but I’ve yet to see a building that wasn’t meant for a person to inhabit it. I guess it’s still a similar strategy I’m using, though. It started with the question: What can a person’s reaction to a Vancouver Special (and Vancouverites have very strong reactions to Vancouver Specials) suggest about the person, and that process of city-building?  

rob mclennan is the author of some twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, an editor and a publisher. He regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at robmclennan.blogspot.com.

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