

ANNE BURKE

Postcards

picture
a young western city
in the first decade of this century
the reporter wrote
capture the spirit
of dust and dung
mediated
by botanical gardens
the first clapboard
firetraps beside
elegant sandstone
buildings, three and
four storeys high
men wore hats, vests and
watch fobs with a raffish
Edwardian air
women wore long skirts
carried parasols, and tied
their hair into buns
everyone wore dark clothes
even in summer
but where are the wan children
sick with typhus and cholera
women dying in bed from childbirth
at twenty-six from septicemia
because men did not bother
to wash their hands
immigrant labourers starved for work
bankrupt farmers moving out and
moving on
the watercolour cards fail to capture
these images
the mind blinded
in the blink of an eye
the camera always lies

2.
we entered the 20th century
with a human population of about
4000 and a horse population of
about the same men outnumbered
women three to one eligible
women (we are told) could find
no better hunting ground the news
travelled quickly to faraway
Toronto
well the gardens are still
there behind glass and plexiglass

mirroring office workers
women wear short suede skirts (again)
everyone dressed in bright colours
even in winter
almost all carry leather briefcases
there are more women than men
and very few horses,
having been sold for their bones
freighted alive in layers to the east coast
the burrowing owl english ground
squirrel
(gopher) coyote black bear and grizzly
hunted or poisoned to extinction
except for the municipal zoo
which has some stuffed ones
on display or captured on Kodakolour
postcards

3.
the salvation army feeds it flock
each day at the harbour light district
opposite prefabricated towers
which reflect the faces of
desperate men and women
the Food Bank is closed
some prefer the park (Fort Calgary
to be exact) to the men's hostel
a few women are allowed in
if the YW is full
others sit in the rain
on the cement steps
of the old sandstone City Hall
natives and new immigrants
muttering curses
at the Public Library
they wear plaid shirts
and old ski jackets the zippers
broken open the lining
half falling out
dirty hair adheres to their heads

4.
I secretly hope
they will not speak to us
the librarians complain of
their clientele illiterates
feign reading although
a few are poets or street artists
crude writers with discarded aerosol-
propelled spray cans of paint (unaware
of the ozone hole slowly killing us)
their

canvas being hastily erected fences
around construction shacks huddled
over a pot on fire to keep from freezing
an old woman carrying a plastic bag of
bottles
stands outside the movie theatre waiting
for the heat to waft over her as patrons
open and close the doors some crawl
under the ground into vacant houses
scheduled for demolition (to widen the
boulevard)
with the windows boarded up some
start fires while others sleep in the
smoke
and never wake up in the morning
and what I most dreaded
has happened
for sport one man
tries to trip my
six year old son
and laughs a gentleman
down on his luck approaches us
panhandling for drink money I
immediately think but he touches
my arm says he is sorry for
his friend's lack of manners
is the young man o.k. he asks
I had a son too and I do not want
him to see me this way I swear
there were tears in his eyes as
he spoke he was half human when I
handed him some bills but he refused
saying it was nobody's fault life
is just like that sometimes

5.
I found her on the C train
heading towards downtown
she was carrying cans of soup
at the escalator everybody
was pushing past her she was
holding up rush hour and
I took her hand loading
myself down with her groceries
we made it to the police station
I telephoned for a cab and gave
the driver my master card number
because I only had six dollars
in change after my shopping spree
I said I wish I knew somebody when
she asked me for a job but I am only
a housewife