

381 E. Cordova Street

There's a bleak whiteness
on Cordova Street mixed
with rain and battleship gray.
Smiles are sad, even laughter has an eerie clang.
Whispers prevail and a fog off Burrard Inlet
settles in at four o'clock as the Sisters' Sandwich Line wraps
itself halfway around the block to the back alley
where wine, urine, vanilla extract and after-shave commingle
into sickly stench. Men and women in their twenties, thirties
forties and fifties have a sameness of pallor and age,
share needles, jugs and sex.

A half-crazed, rheumy-eyed woman
knocks on my parish door insisting I exorcise her.
I protest with words she can't comprehend
like, "needing the archbishop's permission," and "needing the holiness I do not have."
Nothing I say matters. In frustration I give her my blessing....
the one I'd bestow on a child, a rosary, a holy card.
She thanks me. I watch her step out of my door,
walk down the steps to the sidewalk
belt across Cordova Street, not looking east or west,
oblivious to swirling traffic. She makes it. I wonder how.