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160 km

HOURS

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& by appointment

Opening Sat, Oct. 8
6 - 9pm
to Sat, Nov. 6th

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PRESS RELEASE

160 km / West Coast Edition

It's just sitting, is what my Scottish great-grandmother used to say about the weather on Canada's British Columbia Coast. That's true. Look out the window and you won't see any sky, just some version of cloud cover. White and diffuse like the instant a screen flicks off. Step outside and you feel the air: not cold, just lower than body temperature. And you'll probably get wet without a jacket, although it's not really raining either. This can go on for months.

The BC Coast is a rainforest climate, and I felt kind of plantlike when I lived there: my paths of activity grew like moss or fern, biologically plugged into the ecosystem. I stayed up late and drew pictures of densely ornamented buildings and fantasy cities, filling them with transparent flora and liminal human inhabitants. The way me and my friends lived was kind of liminal too. The doors of my apartment building were left open to the neighborhood and visiting drug users occupied the hallway bathrooms for hours. Any night of the week, people I didn't know that well might shout my name from the street outside my window.

West Coast Canadian author Douglas Coupland once said this about his parents and childhood: "We had food, a bed and TV, they just didn't tell us anything...There was a culture of reflection and introspection...but nothing was ever explained to me and it did leave me clueless." The flipside of cliched Canadian politeness is passive-aggressive and alienating: don't ask, please. Sorry, but you can't come closer.

Canadians live so close to Americans that it feels unimportant to talk about the differences between us, especially since America has so much variety contained within itself. In comparison, Canada seems to have embarrassingly little regional variety, and what variety there is appears to correspond with a comparable section of the US: the Pacific Northwest, the Rockies, the Prairies, the Northeast, the Maritimes. Maybe we can attribute this to the fact that Canadians reside in such regular formation: an often-cited statistic says that between 90-97% of Canada's population lives within 160 Km (100 miles) of the US border. Except, as Americans sometimes point out, "The only thing you don't have is the South," and one of the things the US doesn't have is the North. Canada is home to the Northernmost permanently inhabited place in the world: the town Alert, in the province of Nunavut. And North even of that is Canada's other border,

in the Arctic, where the country is “commencing the collection of technical evidence...in support of claims for continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from its declared baselines...as stipulated in Article 76, paragraph 8, of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”* There’s room up there. Barely-populated, rarely-visited, partially uninhabitable, that frozen space represents lifetimes of dormant energy, beyond ski resorts and hiking trails and climbing routes.

It’s been almost four years since I moved to the US and I still don’t have my Social Security number memorized. And come to think of it, I don’t have any of my Canadian numbers memorized either. In Canada, I have some left-over bank accounts and credit cards that I don’t use anymore. In the US, I have a single overworked checking account and no credit. Every year or so, I reserve something like a month’s wages in order to prepare and travel to keep my immigration paperwork up to date. Remember, it’s the longest border in the world, patrolled by an armed staff employed to check your identity and screen for illicit substances.

We mirror US trends but they don’t mirror ours. When you experience everything in multiple – American, Canadian, and even British versions – ambivalence is a matter of course. When I was growing up, TV and magazines were full of stories and images that I could look at but didn’t have to take seriously. Not every product advertised would be available in Canada. Statistics from the US could often be considered a rough reflection of the facts, but technically they didn’t apply to me. Since I was going to college in Canada, I would never have to take an SAT, or go through life knowing what my score would have been.

In my head a vision of ocean landscape mingles with a fragmented guitar track from one of the albums that I used to play on the stereo in my family’s van, on a weekend trip from the island to the mainland to the mountains and back.

We did this often, and each time I packed a duffel bag full of CDs in jewel cases and piles of books and magazines and more clothes than I would be able to wear in a weekend. It was as if I was secretly preparing to leave home forever. Something might happen. I remember once staring at the ocean flying past, listening to another track of noise, thinking, this is exactly what I want played at my funeral.

I’d watch from the backseat of the musty unheated vehicle, hypnotized by the wet landscape moving by. Inside, the glass of my seat window was cold, something like the temperature outside, and my dad would allow a 10-minute-long section of guitar distortion to stretch out in silence as we drove on. Looking through tall trees – on the left if driving toward Whistler, on the right if heading to Vancouver – I could see the Pacific Ocean far beneath us, extending into the distance and dotted with islands that were textured dark green with forest.

My eyes used to be good enough to make out the silhouettes of the trees on some of the faraway islands. I liked to choose one tree and imagine switching places with it, seeing myself standing way out on the island, looking back at the van as it raced along the highway, leaving me alone.

Kayla Guthrie
October 2011

*According the “World Factbook” section on Canada found on the CIA’s website: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ca.html>