

West Coast

artists
for
kids

West Coast

a selection of simple memories

Douglas Coupland



Steller's Jay

The provincial bird of BC is the Steller's jay. Its feathers are a deep dazzling Prussian blue, with an expressive black crest and black body markings. It's a *corvid*—a cousin of the crow and the Eastern bluebird, and its personality is unmistakable. Nearly anybody in the suburbs is happily familiar with this, the most emotionally transparent of birds whose greatest desire is the unshelled roasted peanut. *Greed! Pettiness! Energy! Curiosity!* They hang around our houses. They sit on your windowsill and stare inside looking for you. They tap on your windows with their beaks. They just can't help themselves, and that's why we love them, even as they invite themselves to your alpine picnics and even when they leave peanut shells in your drainpipes causing big plug-ups. Curiously, social as the Steller's jay is, it does tend to avoid downtown, so if you can make it into the burbs, it's worth the trek



Blossoms

I've said it before and I'll repeat it here: Canada's east might have Technicolor autumn displays of leaves, but Canada's west has springtime displays of colour and intensity equally hard to match. Aside from rhododendrons and azaleas (they're technically the same thing) the most beloved spring colour comes from the hundreds of thousands of cherry and plum trees planted in Vancouver's lower mainland and on Vancouver Island during the 20th century. It's a rare local who at least once a year isn't hypnotized by the sight of fallen petals eddying and fluttering across a road's surface—or been caught off guard by the heart wrenchingly sweet smell of the ornamental cherry and plum. For many, it's one of life's first memorized odors, capable of transporting a person right back to kindergarten. And at least once a year the local radio stations warn drivers on Vancouver Island's Malahat highway of 'pink-outs.'



Maples

On the west coast when you think of maples, you think of the feathery light-soaked gentle souls that grow in pretty much all yards, even those with pit bulls. If no Japanese maples are to be found, most often there'll be an indigenous acid-green green vine maple. In the wild, vine maples live far beneath the evergreen canopies of the coastal forests, or grow beside creeks and rivers, thriving on bad soil and limited sunlight. In eastern Canada, the word 'maple' means something different than it does in the west, so much so, that when we colored in the flag in kindergarten in 1967, I refused to believe that the maple leaf on the flag was a real maple. It wasn't until 1969 when visiting relatives in Ontario and Quebec that I finally saw a genuine 'flaggy' maple.

I have a number of species of Japanese split-leaf maples growing in my yard in Vancouver, as well as some vine maples. It's pretty hard to imagine going out in January and tapping the ornamental weeping maple beside the bamboo clump for its sap, and yet they feel as Canadian to me as any leaf that ever glazed a Quebec hillside with orange and red and yellow in fall.

overleaf: a selection of maples from my yard





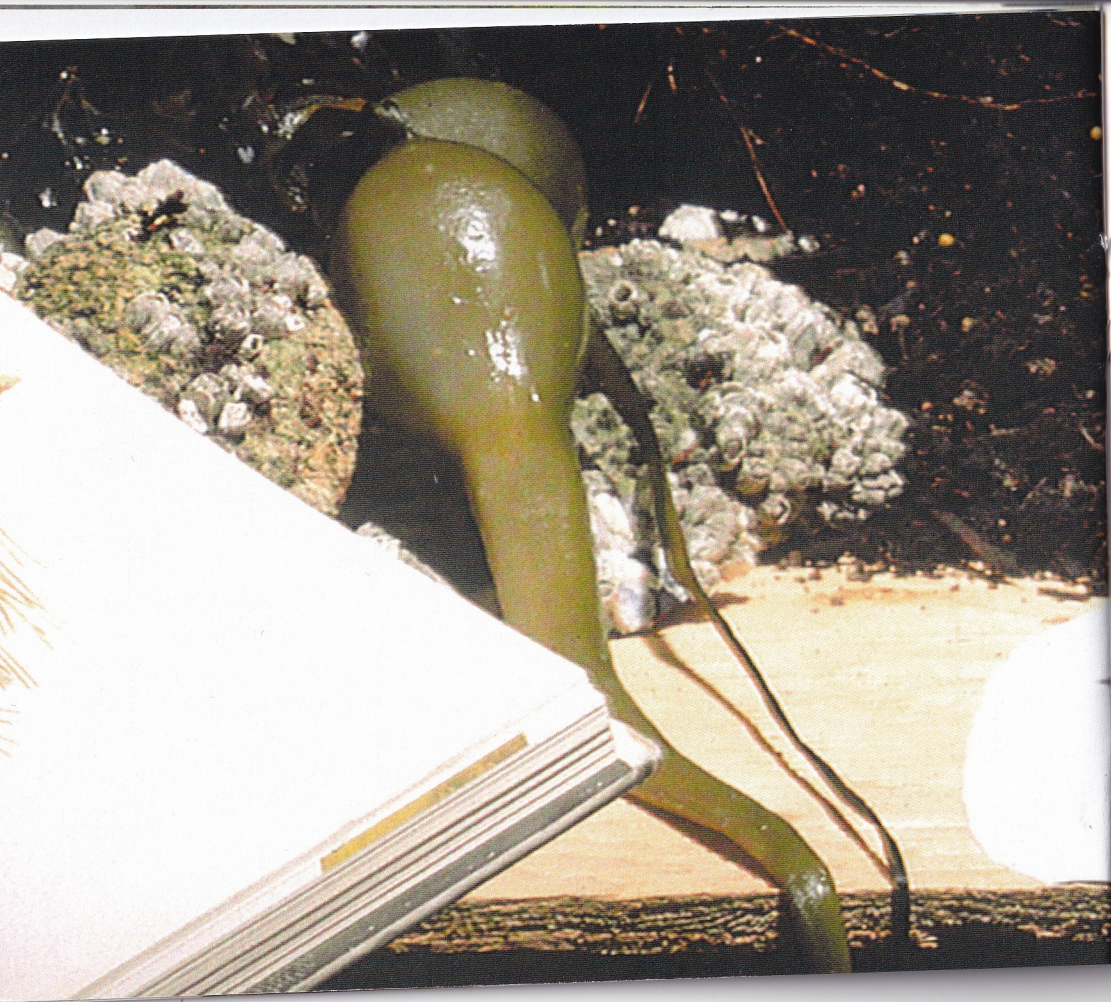
Pacific Milk

The Pacific Evaporated Milk can is my favourite product label of all time, even more than the Campbell's Soup label or the Brillo box. It says many things to me—purity, health, calm—utopia, really. And those cows—they look so clean. They're in a lovely clean field dreaming of milkshakes and butter.

Recently the Pacific Evaporated Milk can has been modified and, as a result, from my curmudgeonly standpoint, wrecked. Fortunately I knew a redesign was inevitable, and hence kept a stockpile of the old cans which, honest to God, I'll sit and stare at happily when I'm seventy-five. I suspect I'm going to be one of those people whose living room has a ball of string the size of a Volkswagen, and every wall stacked to ceiling height with old newspapers, which, conveniently in this photo, rest just below the can.

Chinese

Mixed-ancestry marriages are common in Vancouver in a way matched only, perhaps by Honolulu. Pretty well everyone in Vancouver is either in a mixed-ancestry relationship or has several coupled friends who are. No one thinks about it all too much, and it only ever seems like a big deal when people from outside the city come and express surprise. In a poetic way, it feels as if human history, which began in Asia and moved progressively ever westward across the centuries, is now making the final connection in hooking up western North America with Asia. Or ...it's almost impossible to say much more on the subject because what's there to say? It's just a part of Vancouver life, like the air, beautiful and clean and scented with salt water and plum blossoms.



Kelp

It sounds infantile to say this, and yet many people forget it: the sea is, in many ways, just like the land—except that instead of birds there are fish, and instead of trees and grass and flowers there is—kelp. To witness Tofino beach at low tide is to marvel at the planet's fertility. You'll find a richness and variety of kelp and seaweed that makes you envy the diets of seals and otters.

Kelp is often thick and chewy looking; sometimes it looks like it might be tasty with a bit of vinaigrette dressing. The Japanese have understood kelp's yumminess for thousands of years, while the Irish know that a dash of kelp in the garden can work fertilizing wonders.

Back in Canada, anyone with older siblings knows what it's like to be whapped on the head with a kelp bulb. If you're a younger sibling, kelp is a weapon.



Cowichan Sweaters

One Monday morning back in high school in the mid 1970s, every other student showed up to school in a Cowichan sweater—named for its fabled birthplace of Vancouver Island's Lake Cowichan. They're made all over the place now, but they remain justifiably popular because of their indestructibility, their capacity to conceal stains, their undeniable warmth and—in a very anti-industrial and 1970s way of thinking, obvious lack of machine-made-ness. In Cowichan sweaters, dropped stitches and dirty wool are all pluses rather than minuses. Machine-made versions look just that, and never seem to do well in stores. FUN FACT: the wool in Cowichan sweaters is never dyed—it comes directly from the sheep.