

JOHN LITTLE SKETCHING ON SHERBROOKE STREET

Once, before Montreal's downtown became a maze of steel and glass towers, there were old brick triplexes along Sherbrooke Street just west of Park. One morning John Little drew in pen and ink the tenements' grainy facades, the dormer windows and the rows of rusted fire escapes zigzagging downward; he drew the plain, unornamented signs in front of the Swiss Hut and the Alouette Lounge nearby, and he drew passersby sidestepping the snow banks left by a late winter storm. In the sketch's empty spaces, he named the colors he'd use when he started the painting. This could happen in his studio on the next day or on a day decades later, long after the tenements and walk-in dives that were Sherbrooke Street's little strip of bohemia between Park and Aylmer got torn down and became phantoms occupying people's memories or clinical-style textbook photos of Montreal architecture in the 1950s — became almost nothing, except for John Little's paintings.

John kept boxes of sketches in his home, and the boxes multiplied over six decades. At the start of a day, he'd rummage through the boxes, hunting for a sketch of a certain street corner on a winter morning; then, having found what he wanted, he began painting, remembering the long-ago morning when, after finishing his sketch of Sherbrooke near Aylmer, he walked westward, crossed the street to view McGill's Roddick Gates more closely, walked a bit farther, stopped and looked down Mansfield Street. In the distance, past the Faculty Club, the Rooms-for-Students, the Rent-a-Car lot and the Neptune Restaurant, stood the Sun Life building tall and ghostly in the muted light that follows a late March storm. The sky behind and above the Sun Life was grey to silvery white like a mackerel's belly. In the painting finished in the year 2000, he made the sky a multitude of dashes, of soft brush strokes swirling in every direction. Between the dashes a pale light seeps through while two birds take flight from a winter tree's long threadlike branches. The birds are specks about to be swallowed by the vast sky in motion and disappear like the tree below them, which will vanish soon from Mansfield Street and from human memory, but not from John Little's painting.

Now, to the right, in the painting's middle ground, three women in long overcoats and ankle-length rain boots of a bygone style are primly walking past the wire fence of the Rent-a-Car lot with their purses gripped tight under the elbow, held close to the body. To the left, Sherbrooke Street's blacktop is a wash of charcoal grey, dark green and the luminous white of melting snow. At the intersection a man wearing a fedora has just stepped off the curb; he hesitates, looking over his shoulder for oncoming cars of the 1950s, which are boxy-looking, have wide grilles and a dull, almost matted finish. The cars leave streaks in the wash as they pass by, and this moment at the curb brought back to life from 1953 feels warm though it's wintertime. A fedora, rain boots and cars that become antiques but never age. The painter pulls these things out of the

jaws of time intact while he elsewhere returns the gingerbread porches to the Plateau Mont Royal, the spiralling staircases to Avenue Coloniale, the Kik-Cola sign to the window of a convenience store long gone from Saint Henri — and the sky reflected in the window, a sky that's grey to silvery white.

By Marc Plourde

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Marc Plourde was born in Montreal in 1951 of English-and-French Canadian parents and published his first poem about Montreal, "On Shannon Street," at the age of eighteen. He has to date published five books, the most recent ones being *Summer in Furnished Rooms* (2024) and *Borrowed Days, Poems New and Selected* (2016), both with Cormorant Books.