

JOHN LITTLE SKETCHING SHERBROOKE STREET AFTER A STORM

Once, before downtown became a maze of steel and glass towers,
there were old brick triplexes on Sherbrooke, west of Park.
One morning John Little drew their grainy facades, dormer
windows and rows of rusted fire escapes zigzagging downward.
He drew the plain, unilluminated signs outside The Swiss Hut
and The Alouette Lounge close by, and he drew passersby
sidestepping the snowbanks left by a storm in late March.
Then, he put away the sketchbook he'd take out when he started
the painting the next day or on a day decades later, long after
the corner stores selling Sweet Caporals and *Labatt Cinquante*
and the down-at-heels tenements and walk-in dives
that were downtown's little strip of bohemia, got torn down

and the sketches were all that survived, pen-and-ink drawings
awakening phantoms in memory. John Little remembers how,
that morning, he drifted west to Mansfield Street and looked down
past the Rent-a-Car lot and Neptune's Restaurant
to the Sun Life Building tall and ghostly in the half-light
that followed the storm. Behind and above it, was an unsettled sky,
a sullen greyness streaked with shimmering fish-scale clouds.
Now he makes it a multitude of dashes, of brush strokes swirling
across the canvas, and he inserts, amid the dashes, small birds
taking flight from a winter tree's threadlike branches.
Below, in the foreground, a man in a fedora and topcoat
is about to step off the curb, into the intersection: He glances

at the oncoming cars trailing a backwash of melting snow
painted charcoal and luminous white. The cars are ageless
and antique, moving toward and not reaching
the man poised at the curb with his hands in his pockets
because the moment, gelled in memory's pigments, doesn't change
into the next moment or fade. Its features are so vivid, John Little
forgets he's remembering while he paints the sign outside
Neptune's Restaurant as it appeared in the dusky light that settled
one morning on Mansfield -- Was it as long ago as 1953? --
and he sees how the sky reflected in the restaurant window
is changing from grey to silvery white.
On the windowpane, he sees clouds scudding across a mackerel sky.

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.