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Summer in  
Furnished  
Rooms

*poems*

Marc Plourde

## Other Books by Marc Plourde

*Touchings*

(poems, 1970)

*The White Magnet*

(poems, fiction, one-act play, 1973)

*The Spark Plug Thief*

(stories, 1976)

*Borrowed Days*

(poems new and selected, 2016)

### Translations

Victor-Lévy Beaulieu: *The Grandfathers* (1975)

Gaston Miron: *The Agonized Life*

(selected poems, 1980)

Juan Garcia: *The Alchemy of the Body and other poems* (1983)

Gaston Miron: *Embers and Earth*

(selected poems, with D. G. Jones, 1984)

Gilbert Langevin: *Body of Night*

(selected poems, 1987)

# Summer in Furnished Rooms

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We acknowledge financial support for our publishing activities: the Government of Canada, through the Canada Book Fund and The Canada Council for the Arts; the Government of Ontario, through the Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Creates, and the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: Summer in furnished rooms : poems / Marc Plourde.

Names: Plourde, Marc, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20230562914 | ISBN 9781770867444 (softcover)

Subjects: LCGFT: Poetry.

Classification: LCC PS8581.L6 S86 2024 | DDC C811/.54—dc23

Cover and interior text design: Marijke Friesen  
Manufactured by Sunville Printco

Printed and bound in Canada.

CORMORANT BOOKS INC.  
260 ISHPADINAA (SPADINA) AVENUE, SUITE 502,  
TKARONTO (TORONTO), ON M5T 2E4  
[www.cormorantbooks.com](http://www.cormorantbooks.com)

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## Summer in Furnished Rooms

## In Peace Dale, Long before I Heard of Edward Hopper

One summer in Peace Dale, Rhode Island, long before I heard  
of Edward Hopper, the silence of the small town  
descended on our porch  
and overtook our attention. All summer we were held in

a suspended moment where the silence lengthened  
and amplified while my fourteen-year-old sister  
sat on the screened-in porch  
staring at a road on which not a single car  
had passed that day or the day before,

until one afternoon she bent over weeping  
and wailing Peace Dale was *killing* her,  
rocking with arms crossed and hands clutching her sides.  
That's overdoing it, I thought, acting like she's Janet Leigh  
in the shower scene in *Psycho*. And besides,  
Peace Dale has its bright spots, I thought:  
there's the fair in August and the town swimming hole,  
if you pass over the leeches at the bottom.

After she wept herself dry, a look settled on my sister's face,  
not a starlet-in-distress look, but a look I saw years later  
on the figures in Edward Hopper's paintings. In *Cape Cod Evening*,  
two figures are in a yard in Truro, Cape Cod: the woman  
is sullen, staring down with arms folded over her chest,  
the man sitting on the stoop is gesturing to a dog  
attentive to something else — to a bird or  
the wind rippling the weeds of late summer. On the left,

blue-black locust trees appear to be drawing nearer.  
The faces at dusk are isolate, driven inward.

Faces in a yard in Truro, nighthawks at a dark reflective counter,  
Hopper incised in memory, in the shadings of a moment,  
a time of day, where nothing changes.  
My sister, sinking into this moment like a swimming hole  
with leeches, became theatrically hysterical. I looked the other way.

Other Hopper paintings have no figures at all.  
In *Seven A.M.*, the storefront in Nyack, New York, is ash white  
with black-green woods on the left. In the window  
discarded-looking items are displayed — a few bottles, a few photos —  
and there's a pendulum clock and its shadow on the wall.  
Starkness stares you in the face, and yet  
in starkness Hopper found the suspended moment  
and gelled its passing details on canvas.

In Peace Dale, Rhode Island,

long before she heard of Edward Hopper, my sister  
in the silence of the porch and beyond, turned inward  
after seeing the wind lose its breath in the weeds of late summer.

## Pocket Change

(Boarders leaving *Collège Notre Dame* on a Friday)

For *Pierre Fortin*

In memory, their look is changeless as the look of faces on old coins — young faces flushed with expectation. The grey slacks, blue blazer, and tie, which some have pulled off and crumpled into a pocket, are incidental. We know these boys are from a past almost a fiction now, a story whose details change though its look stays fixed, like a traffic sign in our peripheral vision.

They stream out the door of the old school with the latticework of ivy over grey stone, the school that was always old. Pushing their way into the autumn light of 1963, they cheer. As suitcases scrape cement and briefcases are raised high like trophies — and knowing they look like fools — they cheer again for the pleasure of it and the weekend ahead, but not for *Frère Émilien* behind the door.

This term the eight-graders are learning the ropes — seeing how a *niaiseux* gets dunked in the School Annex pool and who'll nail a rum-and-coke at *Le Crazy Horse Saloon* and whose notes you should crib to get out of a fix — for their eternity in the *cours classique*. Eternity proved short somehow. Its eight years frittered and thinned like the pocket change a boy spends, barely noticing the dates and faces on the coins soon out of circulation.

Above the lawn of the old school, cars idle in the drive.  
In the cars, adults sit stiffly mute while prep-school boys  
labour toward them with their baggage of laundry and books.  
Over time models change, but the look of Friday afternoon  
settled here once and never changed: a line of cars  
in the drive, elongated, dark and polished to a glow,  
like a funeral on an autumn day.

## On the Road to Havana in 1986

For Gregorio Fuentes,

1897–2002

I

Twenty-five years later, the old man still lived in the fishing village though he'd vowed at Hemingway's death never to fish again.

Passing Cojimar that morning, I saw in my mind's eye an old photo of a gaunt Cuban with a watchful look — the cap on his head reading *Capitan* — and Hemingway beside him, brawny as the Hulk.

They're in front of a sign that reads *Bienvenido a Costa Norte* in bold script.

Hemingway is smiling — and the smile for once seems authentic — while his right forearm curves round and rests on the thin man's shoulder.

The writer looked affectionate, even solicitous, then, for he was standing next to greatness manifested as a fisherman: Gregorio, his friend, skipper of the *Pilar*, whom he later transformed into Santiago, the old man of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Once, on the road to Havana,

I saw the village through a tour bus window; it was almost nothing — a few cottages below an incline, a few skiffs in the water — a small place under a cloudless transparent sky, before the precipice of the sea.

2

Dusk at *Playa del Este* advanced by inches: waves resounded, the light thinned; still, full dark wouldn't settle. On the beach outside the hotel, I waited out the minutes, watching the sun's afterglow diminish. Next day on the road to Havana, the tour stopped for some reason at an abandoned prison. We were led past rows of empty cells; I looked into one and saw Hemingway's photo fixed to a grainy cement wall. There, he was staring at his typewriter as if each word he pounded meant life or death. A prisoner slept and woke each day under that photo until he died or was released. Was Hemingway an uneasy ghost to live with, I wondered. Why had no one taken it down? That day on the road to Havana, I saw in Cuba they sometimes let things go a long time; I saw cars at the side of the road, old fin-tailed hulls left to rust, and no one hauled them away.

3

Gregorio Fuentes lived on in Cojimar into the next millennium. Interviewed on film, he sometimes seemed sour, protesting that *señor* Hemingway was never drunk on the Pilar and the questions journalists asked were only meant to demean him. The old man smoked cigars almost as long as his thin sun-blotched face looking straight into the camera's lens. Looking out the bus window that morning, I wondered how much of Gregorio was in Santiago at the end of *The Old Man and the Sea*, which I read as a boy. Santiago, with his great fish shredded and devoured by sharks, was stripped to almost nothing at the end. He lay on his cot, dreaming of the lions he saw in his youth on the coast of Africa — lions that came out in the evening to play and lie on the cool sand.

That evening I sat in a rattan chair in the dark, listening to the surf outside and its echo rumbling in the walls of the room. I listened until the newlywed couple from the tour came into the hotel and mounted the stairs.

I heard them laughing on the landing as they entered their room.