



My name is John and I'm retired and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log, and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 23 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## The Plague

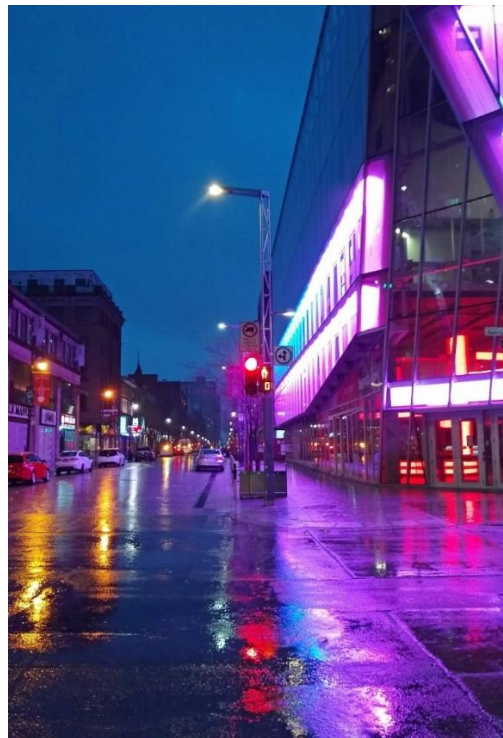
**March 22, 2020, to October 27, 2022**

In the spring of 2020, for the first time since I began travelling in 2008, like everyone else on the planet, I'm being told to stay home and who knows when travel will be permitted again. Can this confinement be a sort of reverse pilgrimage in this small apartment in Montreal, in the midst of a plague?

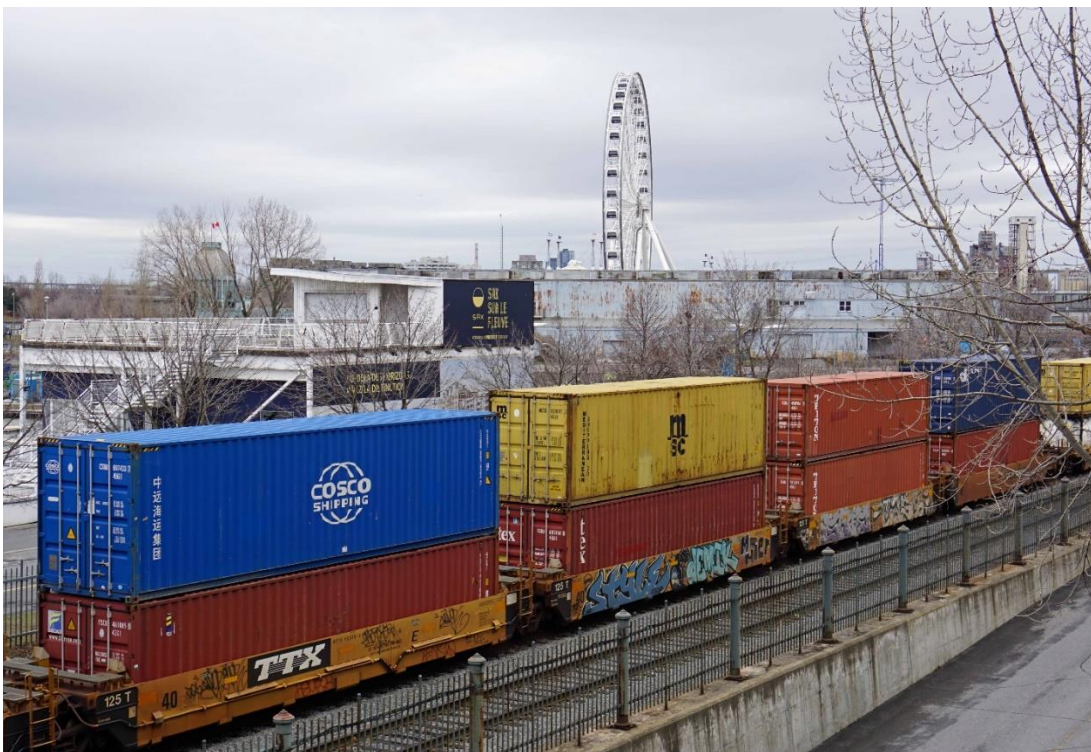
I get bored almost immediately with news, chatter and fear-mongering about the pandemic. I obey the public rules about masks, distancing and vaccines - I do what I'm told for the most part, but I don't confine very much. I make a point of getting out of the house every day and going places. Occasionally I rent a car and enjoy driving on empty streets and highways and visiting friends.

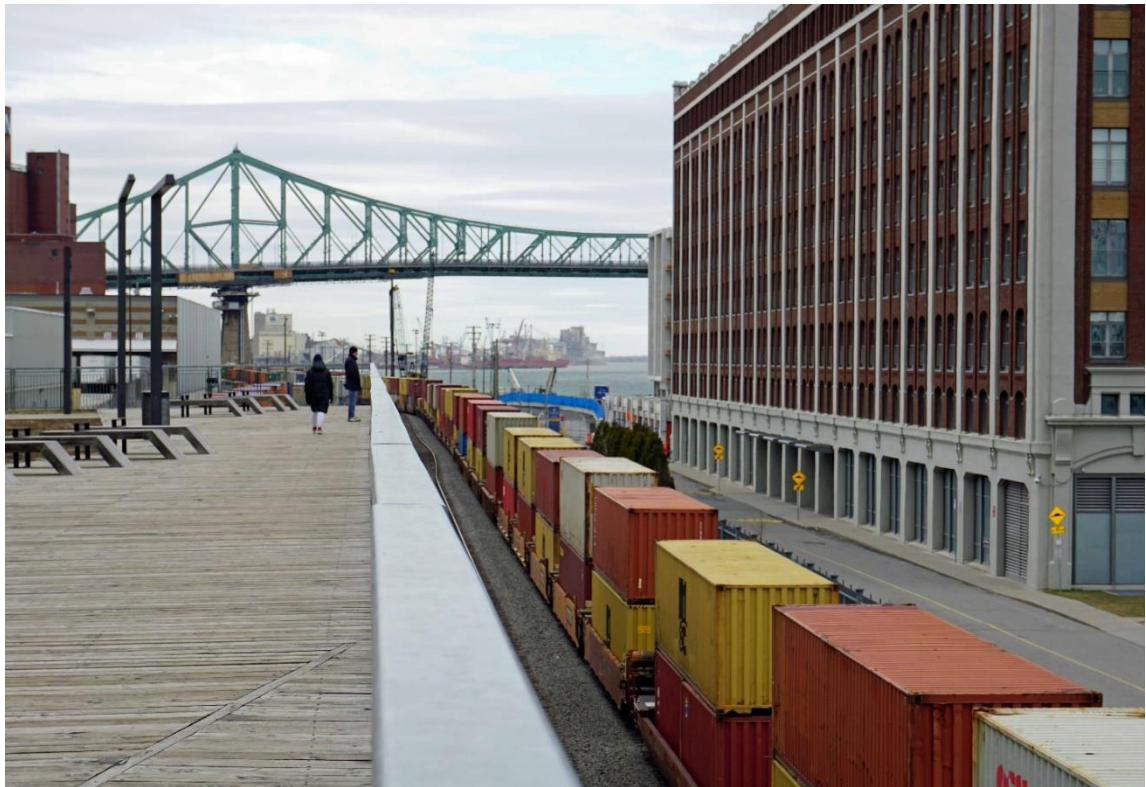
Time feels different in a restrictive, fearful world, blobby and formless in this standstill state. I decide to take little trips, close to home and a bit further out. Long walks will be like mini pilgrimages, as they have always been. I'll take photos and look for moments that might give some form and narrative to this weird interlude. When I finally decide to write about this period of almost three years, it will be episodic, and form will emerge almost entirely in retrospect. And I will often wonder in these three years if this cycle of travelling might finally end with this 23<sup>rd</sup> installment.

My first outing is on March 29. I take an empty bus downtown and an almost empty subway home on a rainy evening. The city is a ghost town.

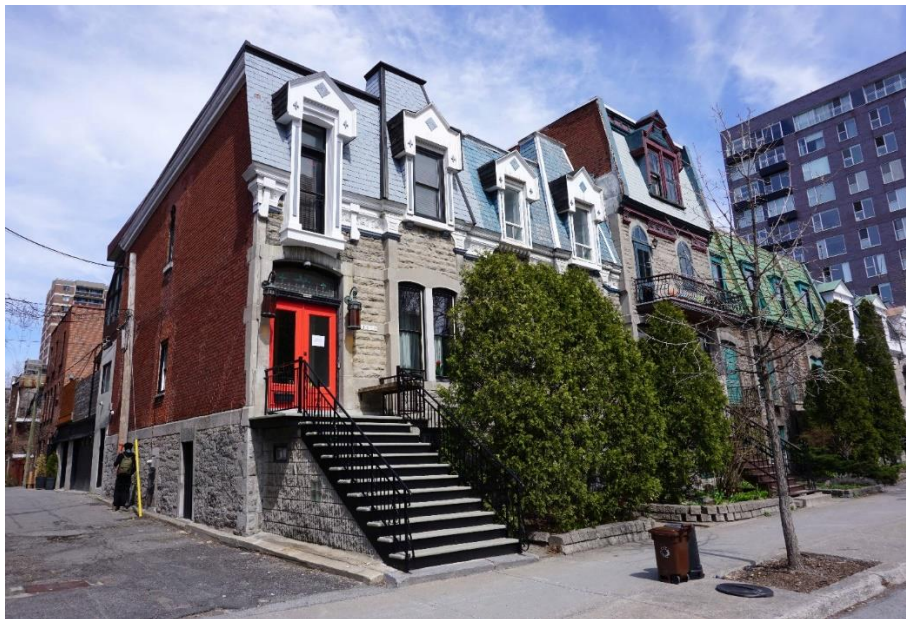


On April 4, I visit the Old Port on the St. Lawrence River on a gloomy day.

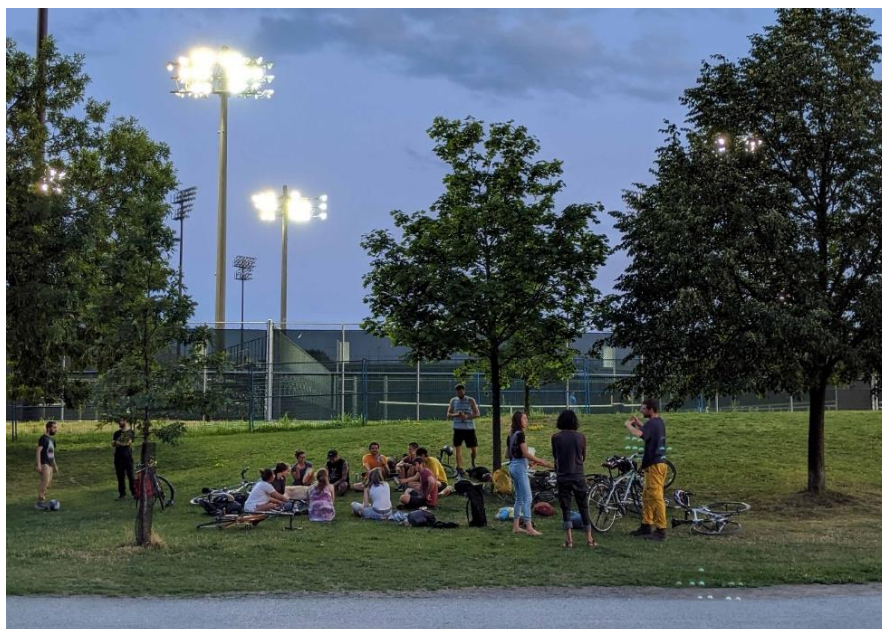




On May 2, I walk down Rue St. Denis to Lafontaine Park where there are lots of people (mostly young) defying the decrees. Public parks will make a big comeback during the plague, rediscovered by the young who are being pressured to sacrifice essential social contact to save their at-risk elders. Like many others in this locked-down cityscape, I sometimes resort to peeing in alleyways.



*Young man peeing in alleyway*

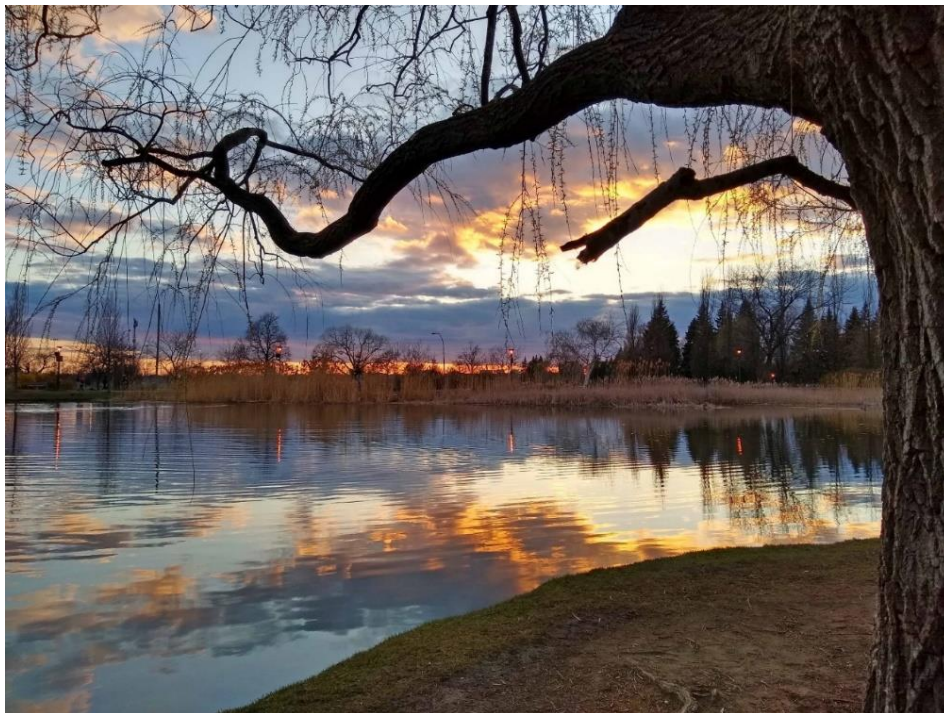


*Young people defying decrees at Jarry Park*

On May 5, I walk to Jarry Park to commemorate an important anniversary, as I've done every May 5 for the last twenty-one years. The sun is falling and golden light conjures an oceanic sensation of a magical world. Later I will look up the Wikipedia definition of this "oceanic feeling":

*In a 1927 letter to Sigmund Freud, Romain Rolland coined the phrase "oceanic feeling" to refer to "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling of "being one with the external world as a whole," inspired by the example of Ramakrishna and other mystics. According to Rolland, this feeling is the source of all the religious energy that permeates in various religious systems, and one may justifiably call oneself religious on the basis of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one renounces every belief and every illusion."*

This is the sensation I sometimes experience when travelling, probably the reason I travel. It's extra special when it happens at home.



*Jarry Park, May 5, 2020*

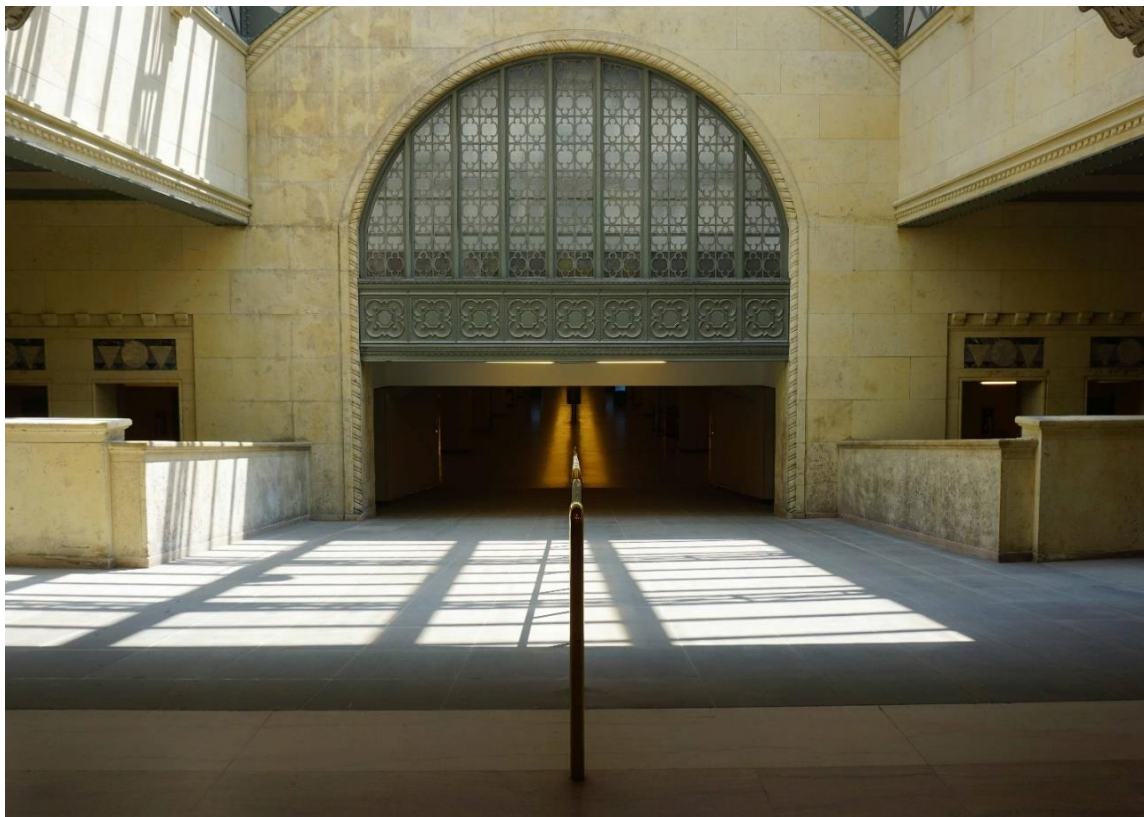
On June 8, I drive to Toronto where I get a cheap plague-rate in a near empty downtown hotel. The city center is deserted and Black Lives Matter demonstrations have forced large stores to board up their windows, making the scene appear even more post-apocalyptic.







*Toronto streetcar*

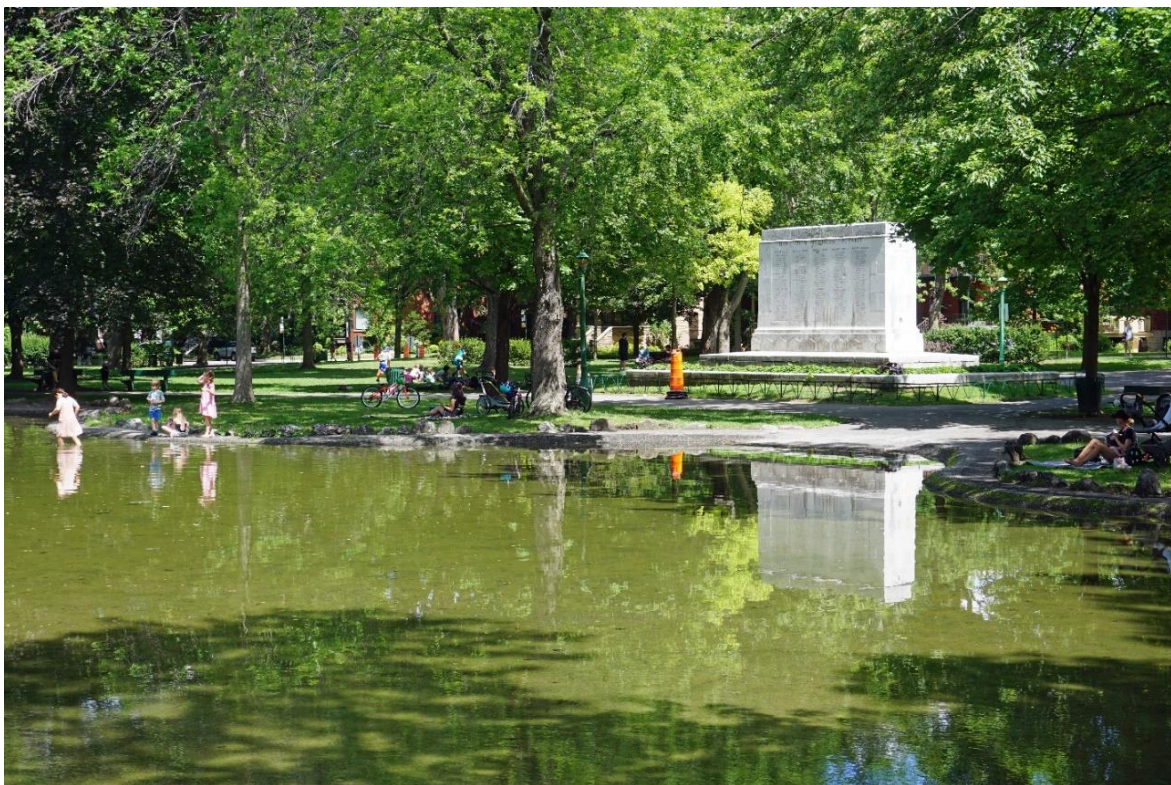


*Union Station, Toronto*

By July, like everyone else, I'm getting a bit loopy. Time is distorted and suspended as the world tries to stand still to elude the virus, like one movie has ended and we are all just waiting in the dark for the next one to begin.

I'm trying to think of this lockdown as a trip, but in what sense is this a pilgrimage? Let's imagine it's a journey inward – to find the oceanic within, in my own backyard. A kind of reverse pilgrimage. As soon as I think this, I know it might be just another gimmick, doomed perhaps to fizzle out, but it feels like it could be real.

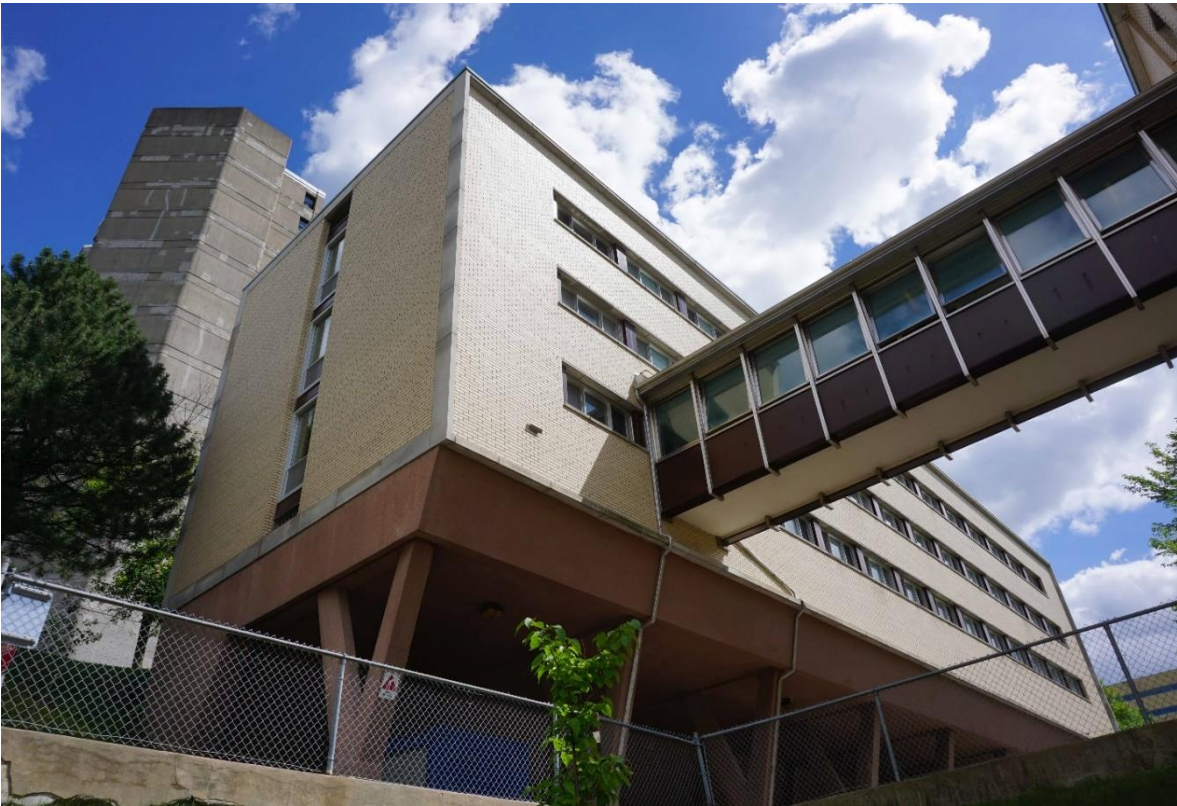
On July 21, I decide to walk to Saint Joseph's Oratory, a Montreal shrine and landmark. Google says it should take 90 minutes, but it'll take me a few hours, meandering and taking photos along the way. Much of the trek is uphill through upscale Outremont and the deserted grounds of the University of Montreal.



*Outremont Park*



*Université de Montréal*





*Saint Joseph's Oratory*





*Saint Joseph's Oratory*

The long walks are sort of like travel, but not. And then there are days completely disassociated with anything like travel, used up seeing friends, doing chores, waiting for a plumber.

On July 24, I meet an old friend and visit the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where there are far too many plague rules, no benches to take a break and linger, no café, and no access to the permanent collection exhibitions. All is barebones, functional, consuming art like going to the toilet. I try going to the movies but end up walking out on a bad film in a near-empty theater.

Non-travel days seem to want to evaporate in forgetfulness. On July 25, there's a nice family picnic at noon in Parc de la Visitation. Everybody's checking out how much the other is obeying the social decrees. Are we sitting six apart, wearing masks, using the ubiquitous hand sanitizer?

July 27 is another Monday of volunteer work at my church. This hasn't changed; 87-year-old Father B. is not afraid of the plague.



*Father B.*

On July 30, after three or four indistinguishable days of simply living, I tell myself not to give up on the idea of local pilgrimage, to try a different approach. This is not a pilgrimage with a beginning and end. There's no destination or return date and the oceanic is not to be confused with the ocean. Maybe simplify goals. Today, I'll walk straight up St. Laurent to what they used to call the Back River, the northern shore of the island of Montreal.

I get shots of the summer hockey rink and seagulls in Jarry Park, and a shot of the sky through a hole in the roof of one of the port-a-potties meant to replace locked-down public washrooms in parks. A high school that looks more like a factory or a prison. A plane passing directly overhead that evokes longing: I want to get on one of those! Further up the street, a bank is being demolished and only the vault remains. Lunch is at a donut shop where I'm thinking maybe this template of long photo-walks can actually work. Further up St. Laurent, an odd-looking, possibly abandoned yellow building; what could it be? Jesus in a clear plastic box, watching over someone's unkempt patch of lawn. Beautiful houses near the river.





*High School*

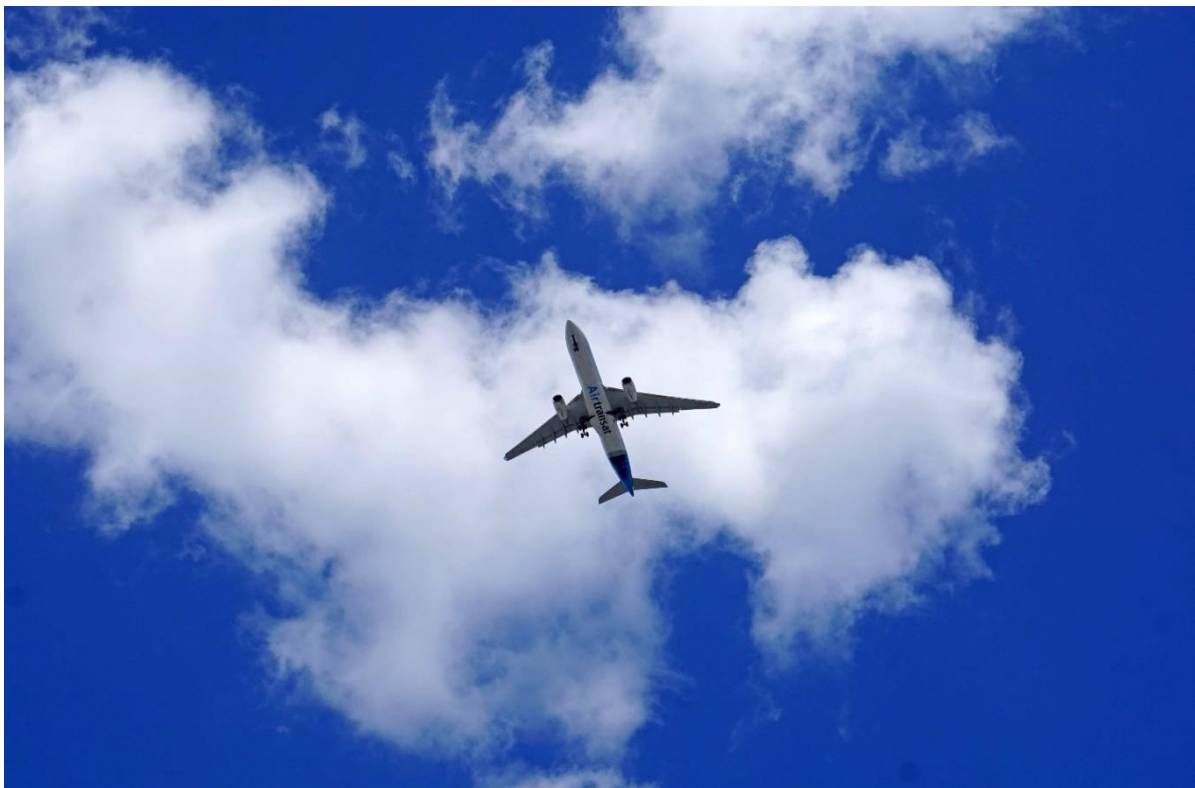


*Jarry Park*





*View from a port-a-potty*





*Bank vault*





From August 6 to 12, I dare to travel a little bit. It's a six-day road trip to Percé Rock in the Gaspé region of Quebec. The trip is just long enough to qualify as a separate story.



*Percé Rock*

On August 22, I take a long walk along Rosemount Boulevard to the Botanical Gardens.



*St. Brendan's, Rosemount Blvd.*



*Botanical Gardens*

On September 1, a friend asks me to look after his car for the next three months, and I can use it as much as I want. This is a game-changer. By September 4 the formless summer of the plague is slipping away. I leave the car behind on a beautiful, crisp day to walk in ancient territory – Saint Helen’s Island and Île Notre-Dame, the scene of adolescent adventures and wanderings.



*Saint Helen's Island*



*Île Notre-Dame*



*Saint Helen's Island*

September 20 is the last day of summer. Where did it go? It feels like the Gaspé didn't count as a trip. I know from experience that it takes two weeks of travel for routines to unravel and the mind to clear itself out. The third week is when different things are possible. On September 26, my youngest son gets married outdoors on Île Notre Dame on a beautiful day and I'm feeling blessed. In step with the plague, I decide from now on my response to *How are you?* will be *Not dead yet.*

On September 28, comes news of a second shutdown. So boring! And yet... I have not felt so alive in (forever?). On September 30, the light is wonderful at Jarry Park where I get a couple of nice shots against a dark sky when the sun comes out for just a few minutes.



*Jarry Park*



On October 1, the sun is shining so I get in the car, but by the time I get to Notre Dame des Neiges Cemetery on Mount Royal, it's cloudy. I pull into a parking area when it starts to rain heavily. I'm listening to the rain hitting the roof of the car when the sun comes out again and a double rainbow appears in the sky, a dramatic beginning to what will become a cemetery photo project. A second cemetery photo day on October 3 will begin at Leonard Cohen's grave in the adjacent Mount Royal Cemetery. Once again, I wonder if this could be the end of the travel cycle, with every day a project.

Three days later, I arrive at the cemetery at ten o'clock on a cool, sunny morning. The light is almost too bright and normal. Lunch is a gourmet hot dog across Remembrance Road in the chalet at Beaver Lake. When I return to the cemetery it's very quiet and it's a treat to drive the empty winding roads as slow as I like, floating around like a ghost, pulling over when I see something interesting, a wonderful feeling of being a tourist in my own city.





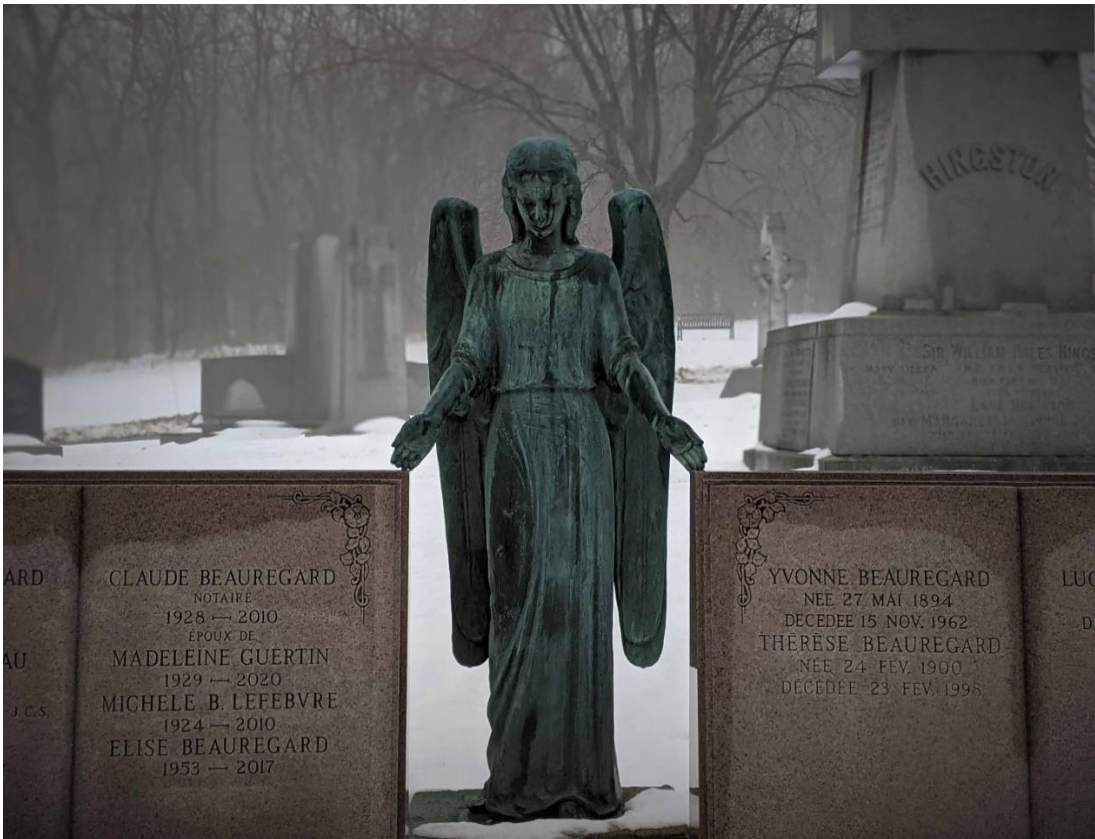






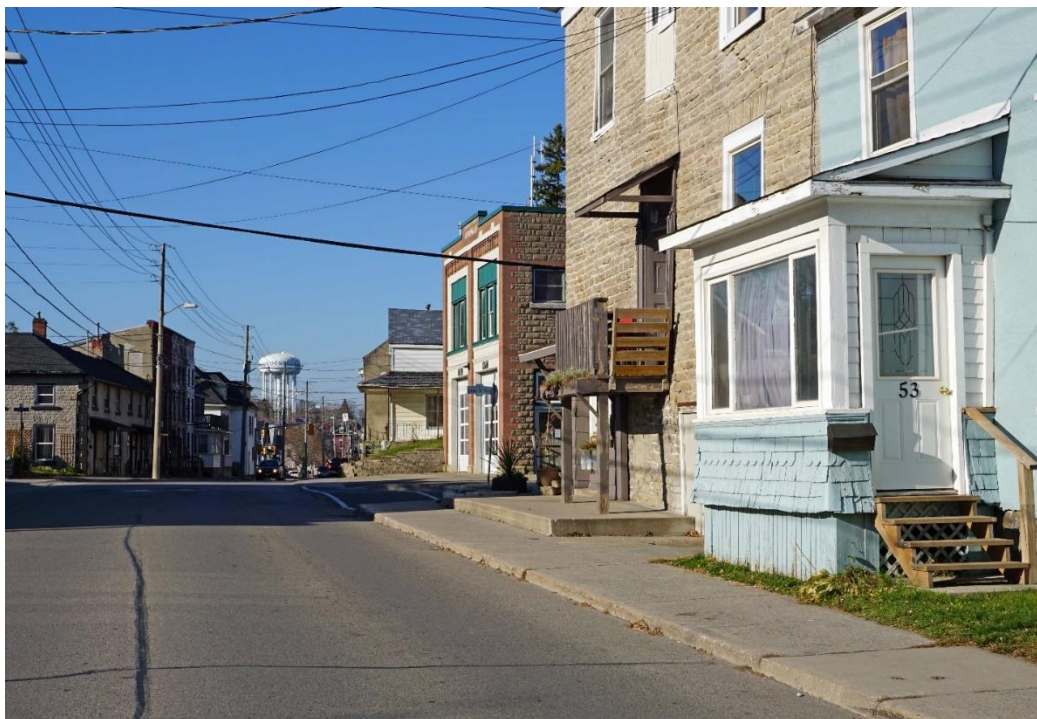








On October 8 I'm off on a three-day trip to Toronto. I'll take a whole day getting there and a whole day coming back, stretching this little trip, driving slowly on secondary roads. On the way back I drive as close to the water as possible through small towns like Belleville and Brockville.



*Brockville, Ontario*





*The car*



The light is deep sunset orange and pink at Jarry Park on October 16.



October 23 is the last day of Indian Summer, and a perfect fall day gives beautiful photo ops at Îles-de-Boucherville, a nearby national park. With the temperature in the low twenties, it feels almost hot at times, but at this time of the year the sun doesn't rise high enough to beat down on me.

The feet get weary, so I take a break at a picnic table on the eastern tip of the main island, the old part of the town of Boucherville across the water. I'm hungry too, like when I was a teenager wandering around like this all day without eating, a hunger that heightens alertness and perception. With the light of a retreating autumn sun and the sweet scent of dying vegetation, October is by far my favorite month, the best month to be in Montreal.



*Boucherville*



*Îles-de-Boucherville*

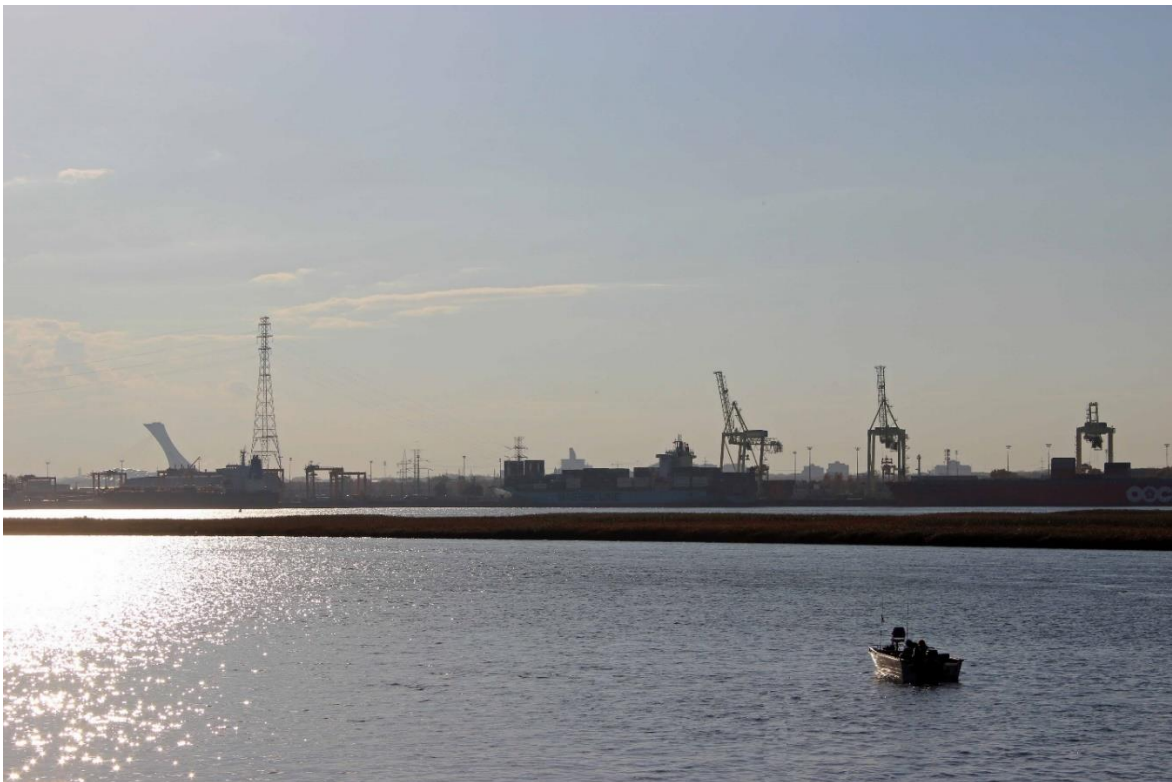


*Îles-de-Boucherville*



*Îles-de-Boucherville*





*Montreal East from Îles-de-Boucherville*

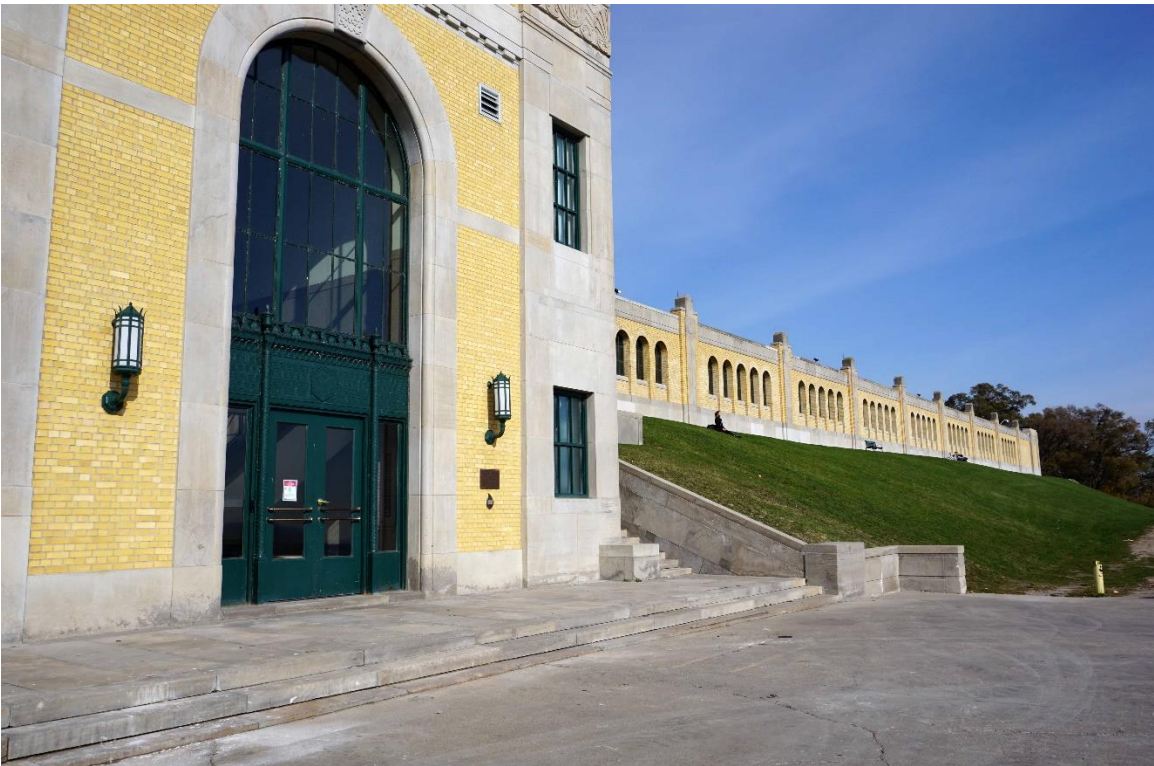
In the evening I meet three people for an end of Indian summer illicit gathering at a nearby, isolated spot between a bike path and railroad tracks. Magic mushrooms, wine, good food, and visits from a rabbit and a skunk make for a long, memorable night. I step through a hole in a fence at one point to stand next to a noisy freight train rolling by. A week later I will receive official news that my brother is dying.

On October 31, I finally replace the camera lost 83 days ago on my road trip to the Gaspé. I've bought the exact same model, so it's like it never disappeared or somehow been recovered from the abyss. The next day is a day of finishing things: a book, a big piece of a project, setting up the new camera. I make meatballs and pasta sauce for the first time in many years. My son is coming for supper.

November 5 is the first day of another mini road trip to Toronto. The sky is grey, making the day a bust as far as photos are concerned. I'm staying at the Holiday Inn in Richmond Hill again, a good deal in a suburban wasteland. The weather is unseasonably fantastic in the morning, and I get some nice shots at the RC Harris Water Treatment Plant in Scarborough, where the Great Lake Ontario looks almost like an ocean.



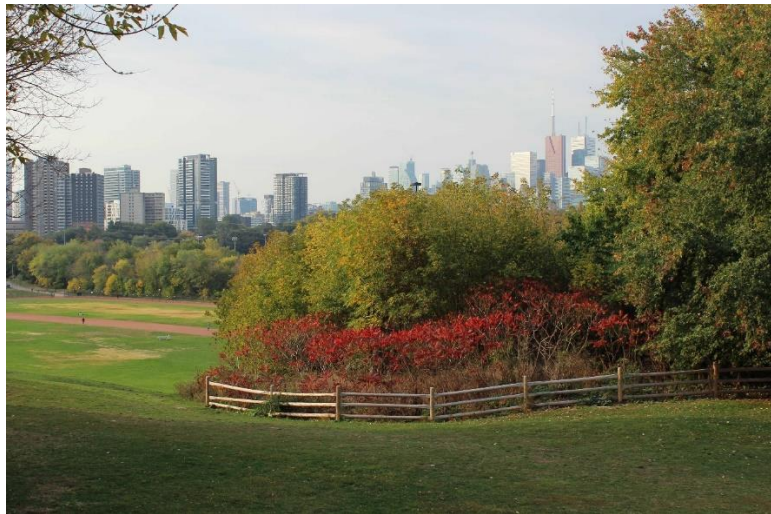
*RC Harris Water Treatment Plant, Toronto*



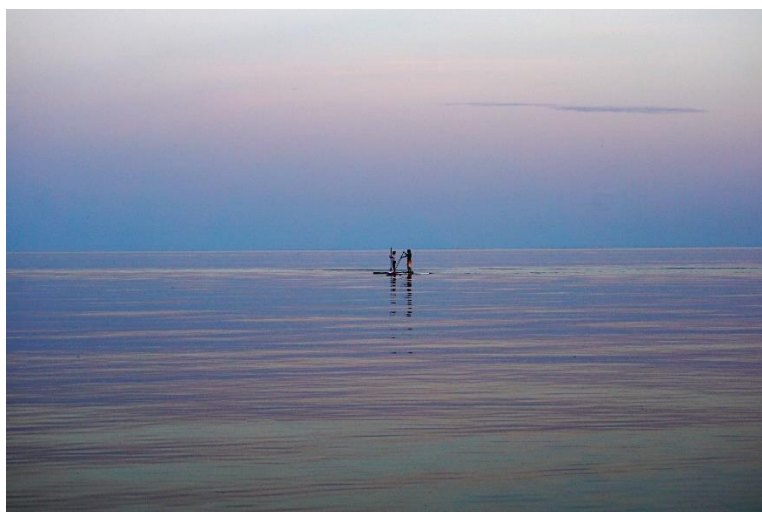
*RC Harris Water Treatment Plant, Toronto*

I park the car and call my estranged brother for the first time ever, dialling a forgotten phone number from my youth. Once dialed, the number seems to immediately reclaim its place in my memory. Where was it for the past forty-six years?

Day 3 in Toronto is pleasant, visiting High Park with my son and the Beaches neighborhood in the late afternoon. I've had friendly conversations with random people here, something that doesn't happen in Montreal where strangers avoid talking to each other due to the language divide. In the evening the world breathes a sigh of relief as Joe Biden is finally declared the winner of the U.S. election.



*Riverdale Park East*

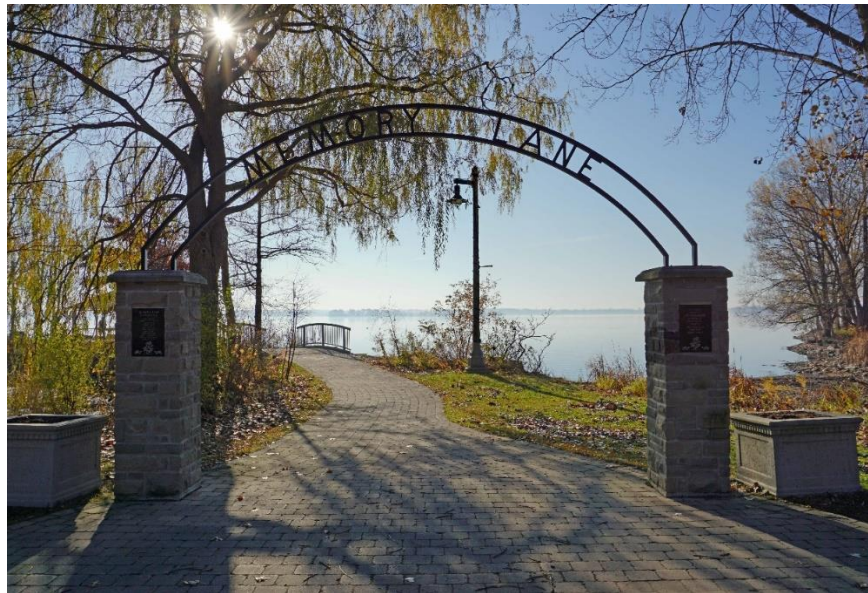


*Lake Ontario at The Beaches*

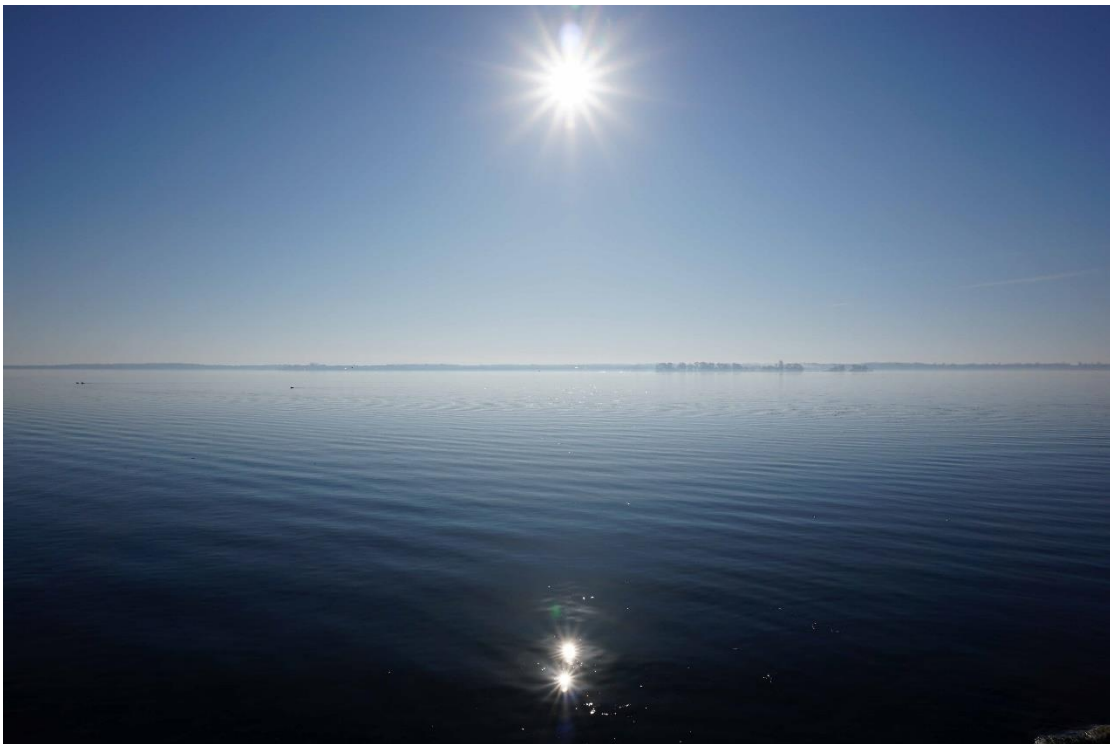
On the way back to Montreal, I inadvertently kill a pigeon. With cars close behind and beside me on the highway, the bird suddenly appeared in the air directly in front of my car. In a split second I decided the best course of action was to take no evasive maneuvers at all and let the bird decide its own fate. It seemed to fall directly into the path of my right front wheel - a loud thwack and slight bump followed by an explosion of feathers. A direct hit and a pang of guilt.

A few minutes later in the town of Belleville, looking out over the perfectly still surface of Big Bay in John Foster Park, the sun reflecting off the water in front of me blinds me for a second and I experience an oceanic moment. When I return to the car, I make a gruesome, peculiar discovery. The bird's head is stuck to the front bumper of the car, hanging upside down perfectly intact with open eyes. After pushing it off the bumper with my foot, I decide I shouldn't just leave it on the gravel surface of the parking lot. Lifting it by its tiny beak, I prop it up at the base of a large tree I had photographed before walking to the water. There's not a drop of blood on the perfect little head and the soft furry skin is folded shut at the neck.

It seems to come back to life after I take a photo, head drooping before coming to rest on the ground. Days later, I will get a notion to count the pigeons in a photo I took at Riverdale Park East in Toronto, intuiting that there will be 23, and there are in fact 23 pigeons in the shot.



*John Foster Park, Belleville, Ontario*

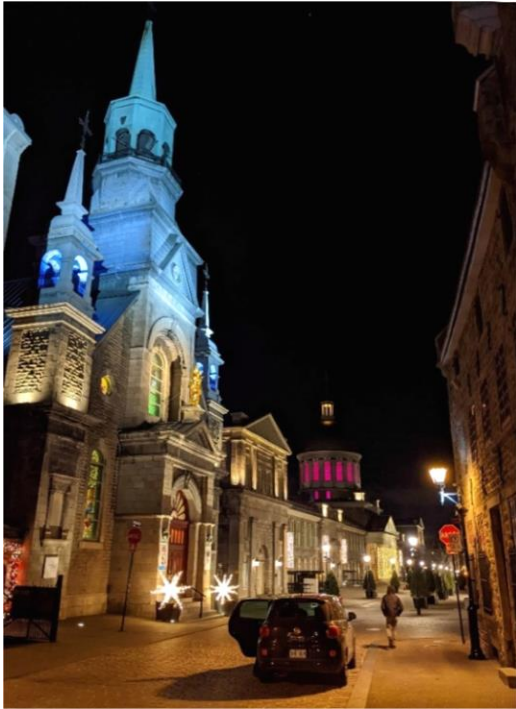


*Big Bay, Belleville, Ontario*



*Riverdale Park East, Toronto*

On a cold evening on November 18, I take a walk with a friend in deserted Old Montreal.





The last week is usually the quietest week of the year, the period between the two big holidays of Christmas and New Year. Life feels languorous and a bit pointless now, but I tell myself how good it is not to be dead yet in a plague (or any time, for that matter). Awareness of being alive (not dead) is a sort of bliss. In this state, the world fills with promise and possibility, creation and wonder. But the spectre of death is close behind this feeling of aliveness – the knowledge that since I live, I will of course die. The spectre is so real I can almost feel what it will be like.

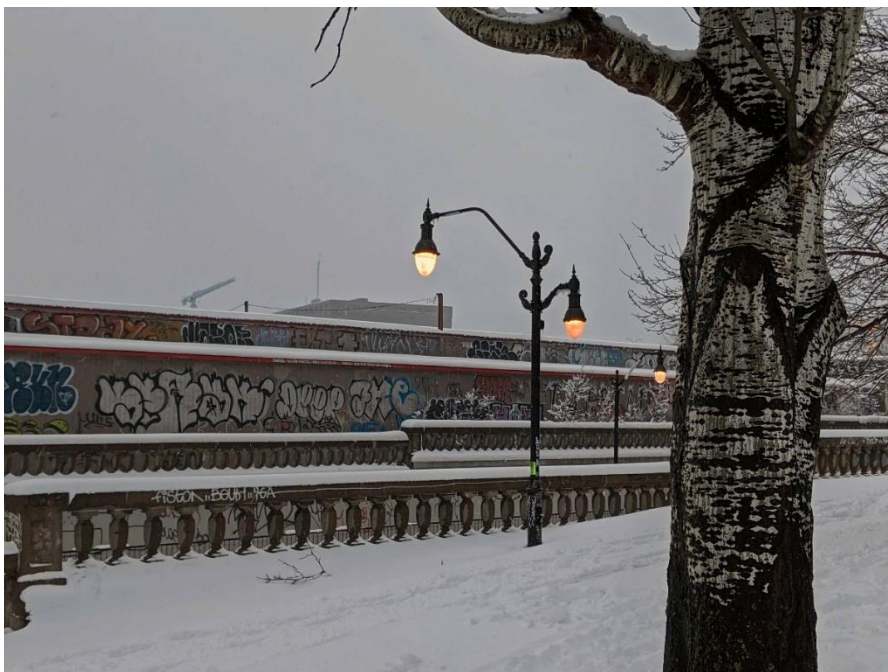
On New Year's Eve, my brother will enter a palliative care facility. It's a mild winter day and I'm able to go for a pleasant walk around midnight.

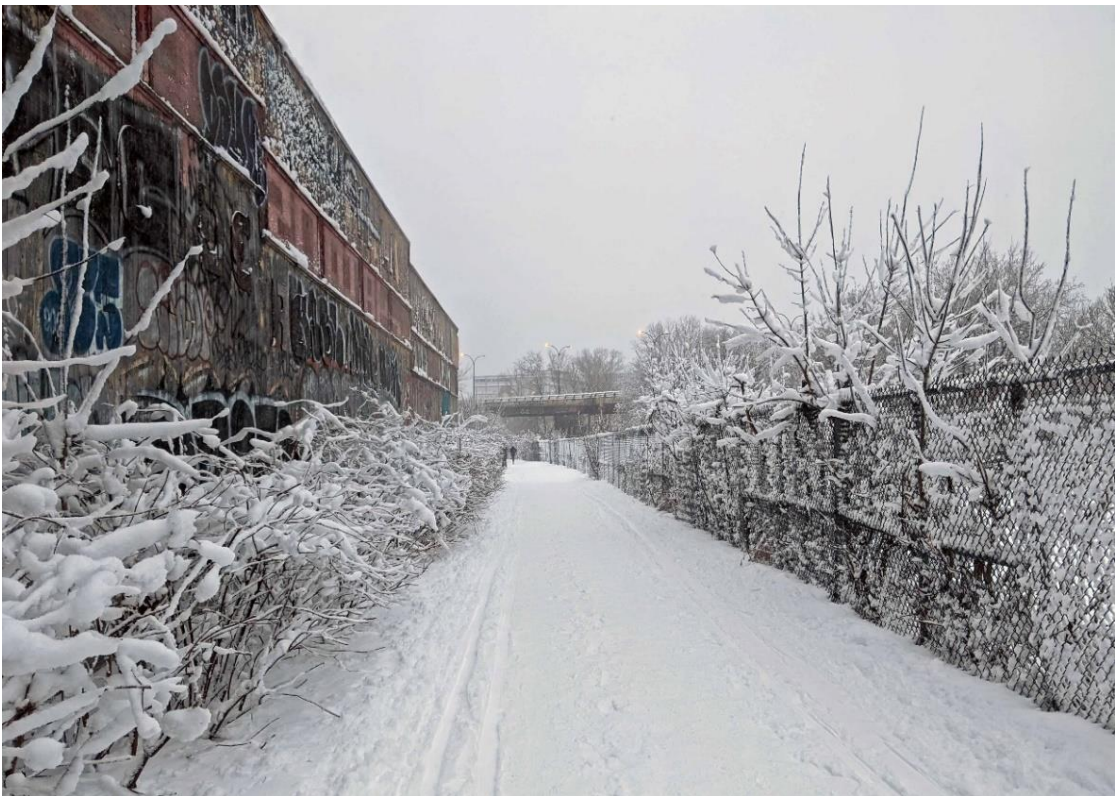
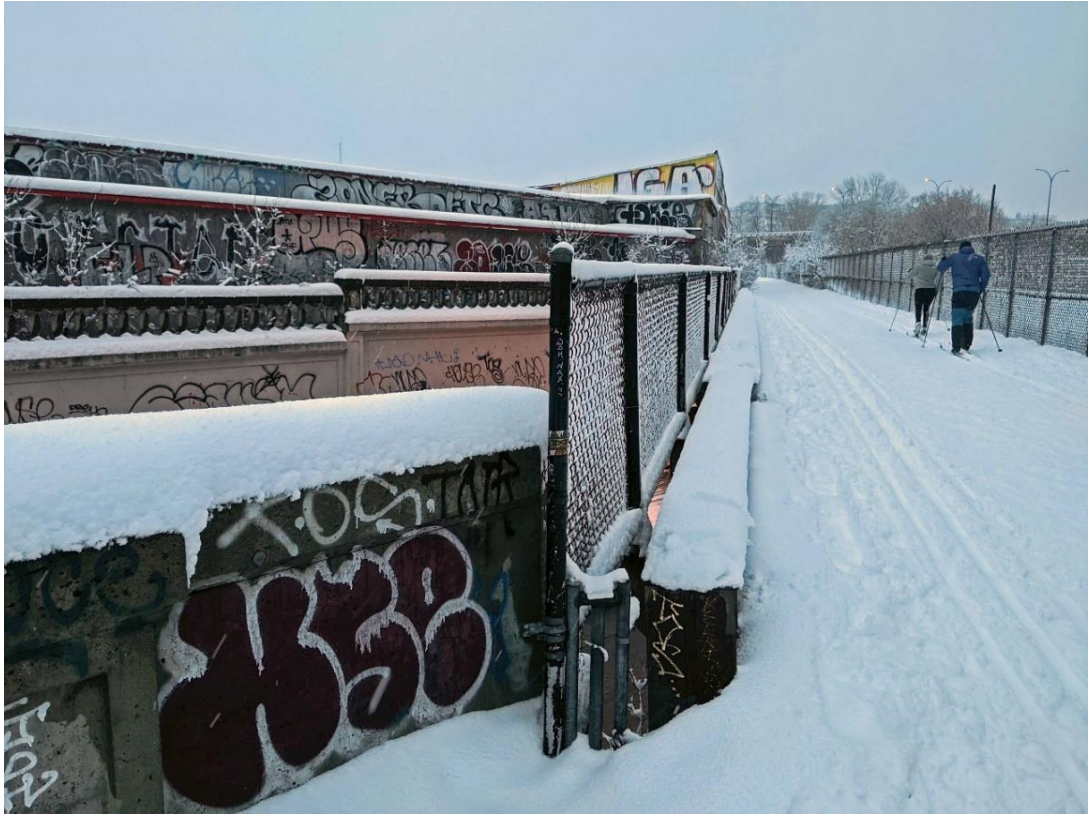


*New Year's Eve, 2020, corner of St. Hubert and Belanger*

## 2021

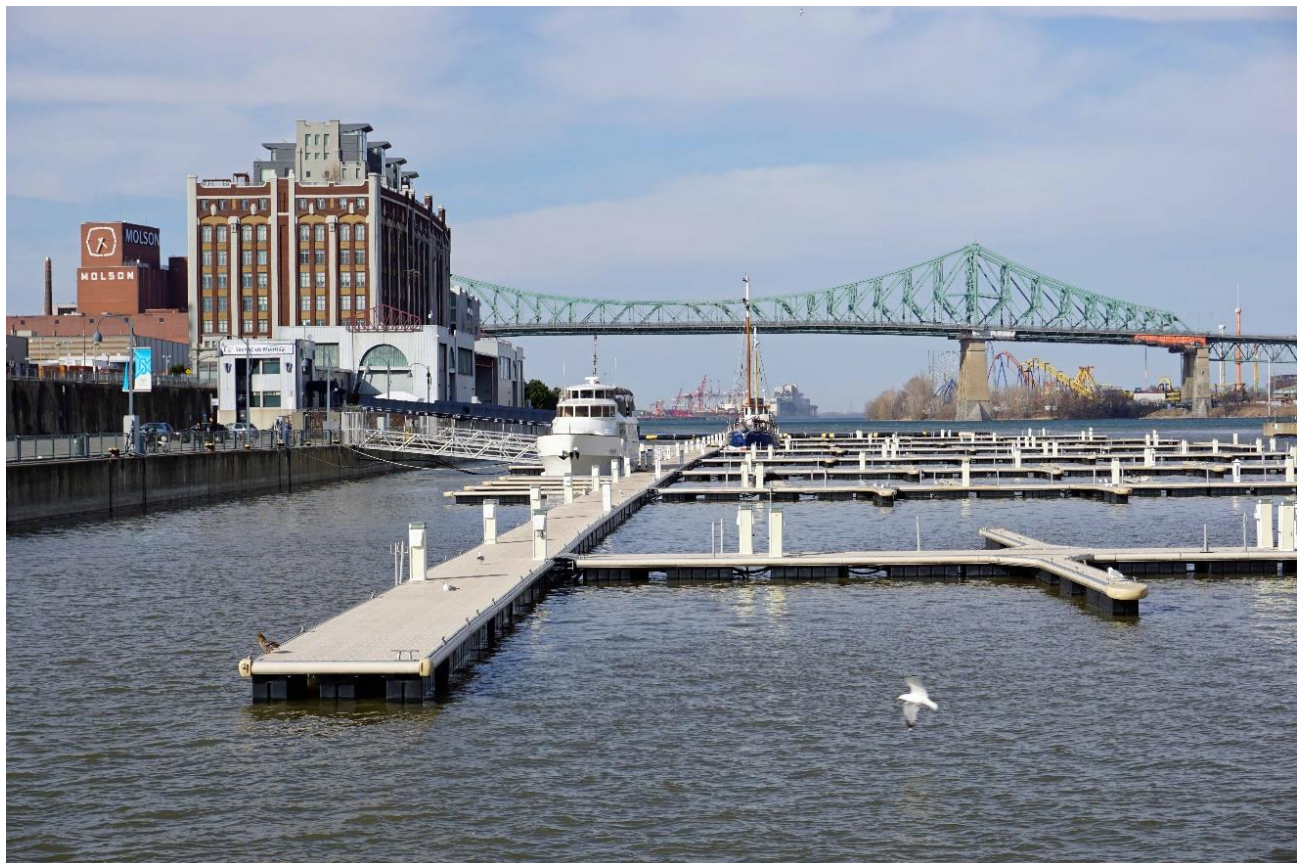
January and February are months of limbo and hibernation in this climate. Not many photos or walks or anything else of interest happens. On January 16, I take a rare long walk in the snow.

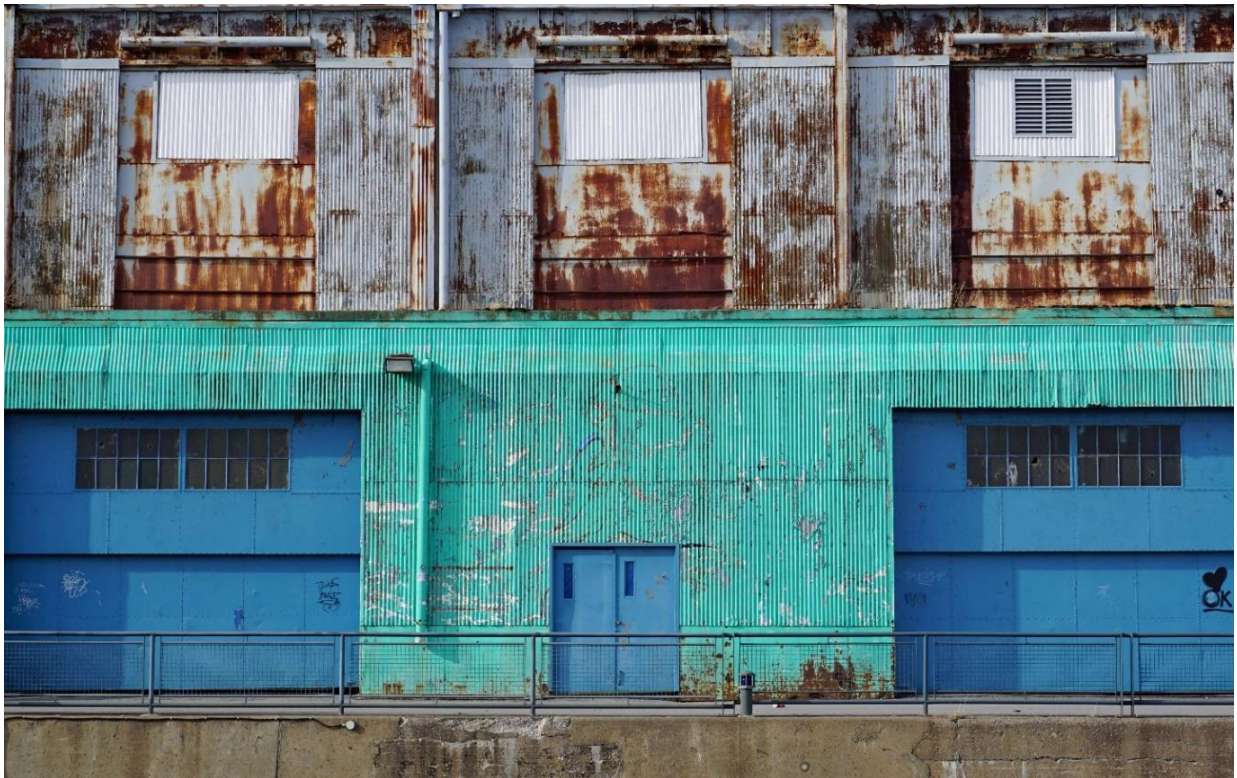






In March my brother dies. He wanted to tell me something important in his last days, but couldn't remember what it was. On April 3, I shake off the doldrums of winter and go for a walk with my camera on a bright but colorless, dusty, early spring day, but there's nothing interesting to photograph. Feeling listless, uninspired, old... but somehow more spiritual. A 49-day vigil of saying a short daily prayer for the recently departed is probably a factor. At least once a day there is a hyper-real reminder of the unimaginable. On April 5, I visit Old Montreal again and have a bit of luck with the camera.





On April 8 I'm sitting on my balcony, watching the world wake up on the first summer-like day of the year. After a night of painful quasi-sleep, I've woken up with my first official geezer affliction: sciatica. Could be worse, I tell myself. Remember, you're not dead yet.

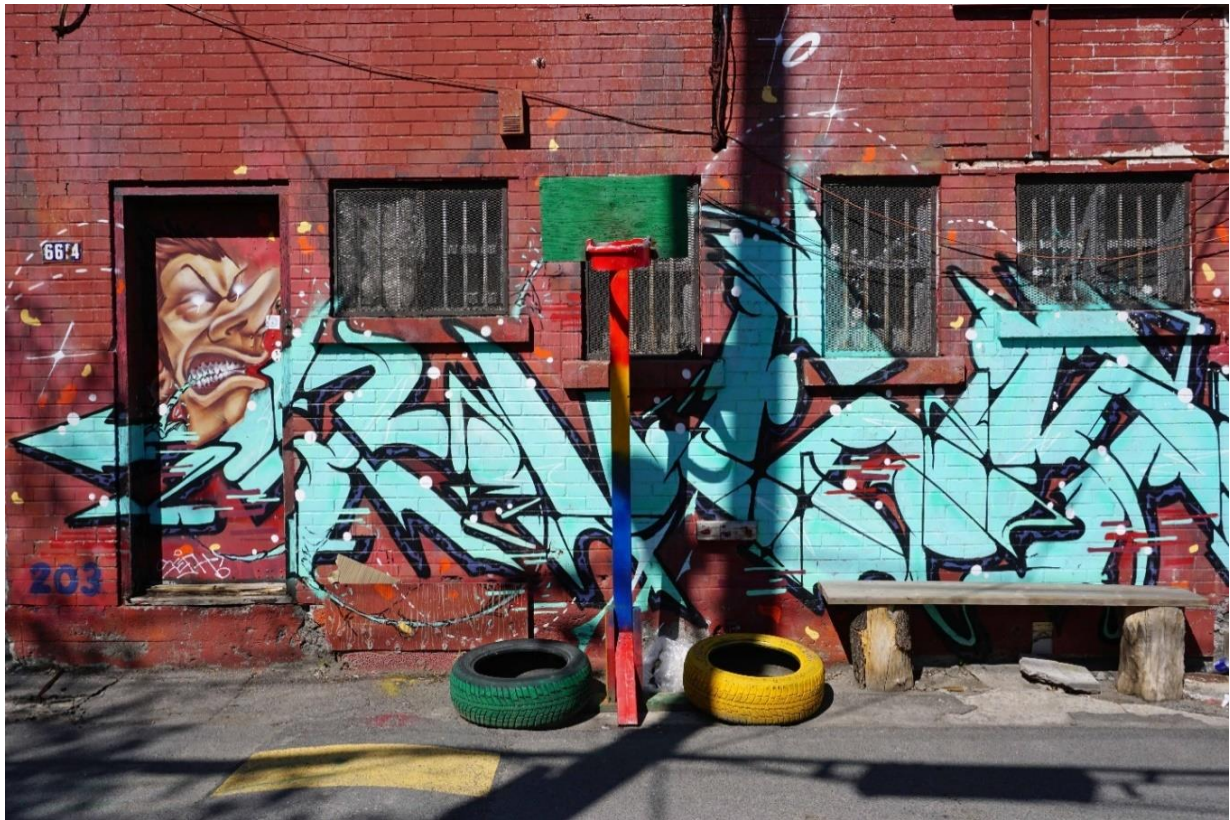
There's a monastic prison-cell aspect to life these days that brings a sense of grounding, a sense of being more aware of (and attached to) a home life I often regard as less than real, a world that doesn't seem to count as much as my pilgrimages but is actually *my life*. Who needs to travel when you can dream anywhere? On May 2, I photograph some of the alley graffiti behind St. Hubert St.











Nothing is planned on the special anniversary day of May 5, just the obligatory visit to Jarry Park in ugly, damp weather. I walk around the lake clockwise, then counter clockwise. I find a weather-beaten wooden heart on a string on the way, and I know it will become a keepsake.



On May 8, I join a demonstration protesting the rising cost of housing, a pyramid scheme spreading rapidly everywhere like a cancer, aimed directly at the disadvantaged. Social justice continues to slip backwards in the world these days.



On June 14, a group of men enter my apartment at eight in the morning to destroy my kitchen and bathroom, which they accomplish in only a few hours.

June 21 is day 8 of renovations and I'm exhausted. I've been sleeping on an air mattress on the floor of my living room and using other bathrooms in the building. I'm anxious for this to be over so I can put my life back together. I realize how much my apartment has become a part of me, a reflection of who I am and my sanctuary.

June 29 is day 16 of renovations and still no kitchen. With everything displaced and covered in a layer of gritty dust, the experience has been like travelling to a chaotic other dimension, with the chaos reflected in my mind and behavior. Zero project work accomplished in this state. Tonight, I will start putting a few things back where they belong. And do some more cleaning.



*The door between me and chaos*

On July 20, the plan is a seven-day trip to Georgian Bay and Toronto. With rain and thunder and even the possibility of tornadoes forecast throughout Day 1, all I want to do is get to my destination, the town of Midland on Lake Huron. Grey skies and smoke from forest fires in Northern Ontario make this a colorless day of travel. In a town called Egansville, the sky blackens and a big storm crosses my path. I pull over and wait it out in a supermarket parking lot. At least there's no tornado, and it feels good to be away from the apartment.

On the morning of Day 2, I visit Midland harbor and Sainte Marie Among the Hurons, a reconstruction of a Jesuit mission and fort that ended in tragedy and martyrdom. Hard to believe all this drama took place almost 400 years ago, all of it occurring within a period of only ten years. In the afternoon, I get a ridiculous parking ticket at Balm Beach which, though it feels like it's in Midland, is in a tiny adjacent Township actually called Tiny.

I had parked the car for no more than ten minutes, facing the water in the parking area of a busy strip of shops and restaurants. It turns out that the beach side of the parking lot is reserved for residents only. I never saw the ticketer who must have been lying in wait for unsuspecting tourists. Feeling cantankerous and with all the time in the world, I Google Tiny Town Hall, which happens to be just up the street, and decide to contest the ticket. Everyone in the office is extremely nice and polite and the young female officer in charge immediately offers to reduce the fine from \$75 to \$35. I would have to come back and see a judge to cancel the ticket outright, she says, explaining that you need a permit to park just about anywhere in the township whose council came up with this unfriendly scam supposedly meant to keep urbanites away during the plague. I end the day at Little Lake Park.

It's a beautiful morning on Day 3 and it's a pleasant two-hour drive to Phoenix Books in downtown Owen Sound. Nearby Bruce Peninsula National Park and the town of Tobermory at the northern tip of the park are a bust. Visiting the most scenic areas is by reservation only and there are only two colors here today anyway (blue and green). To top it all off, the sky is overcast and blue and green without sunlight might as well be black and white.

Back in Owen Sound, I visit Kelso Beach Park where the light is perfect for a while, especially the way it shines on a handsome grain elevator at the entrance to the harbor. I will get shots of two grain elevators on this trip, monumental reminders of what used to support the economy of these Great Lake towns.



*Midland, Ontario*



*Midland, Ontario*



*Sainte Marie Among the Hurons*





*Sainte Marie Among the Hurons*



*Georgian Bay*



*Midland, Ontario*



Owen Sound

It's another beautiful, quiet morning on Day 4, so I delay leaving Owen Sound as long as possible. After coffee and a scone downtown, I end up at the harbor on the other side of the same grain elevator I photographed yesterday. The town feels sleepy and dreamlike.



*Owen Sound*

Then it's an ugly two-hour drive down to Toronto where I meet my son and a friend for dinner on Danforth Avenue. There are three used bookstores on this stretch of the street. One of them, The Scribe, calls itself a "rare book shop" but should really call itself a "vintage book shop" since it clearly caters to hipsters interested in books as objects. A sign on a table covered with books announces, "lesser-known titles with great covers," literally promoting defiance of the adage not to judge a book by its cover.

Day 5 is mostly time spent with family and my friend. At one point I ride the subway, thinking maybe this could be another subway photo project, but the Toronto stations look like public bathrooms.

Saint Michael's Cathedral in the morning of Day 6 is freezing, perfectly appointed, and totally lifeless. The meticulously dressed and coiffed priest reads a dry, humorless sermon. He says one interesting thing: that the prayers of the elderly can sustain the world. My geezer life of leisure has a purpose! Most of the day is spent on a jaunt to Hamilton to see the house and neighborhood where my granddaughter will begin her life in a few weeks, a new member of the family.

On Day 7, I'm heading home. I stop at Port Hope for a nice walk, then at Kingston to visit the old Penitentiary, which is now a tourist attraction.



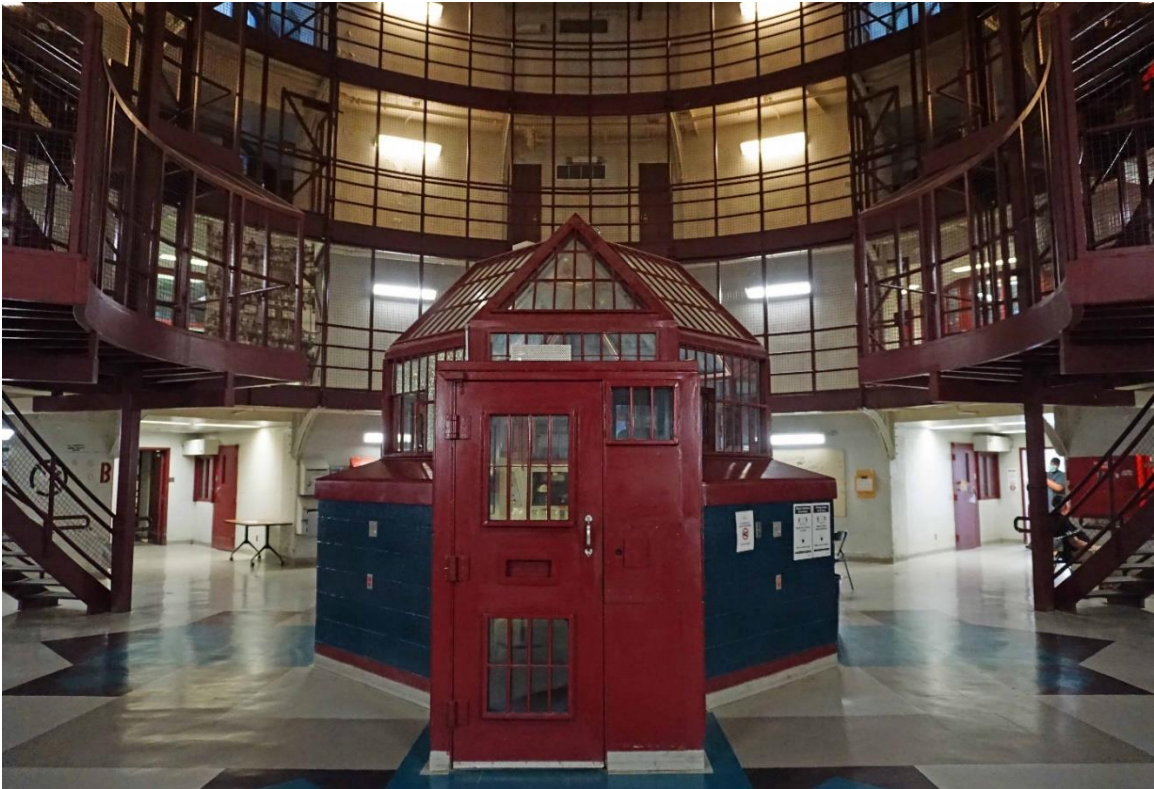
*Saint Michael's Cathedral, Toronto*



*Toronto subway station*

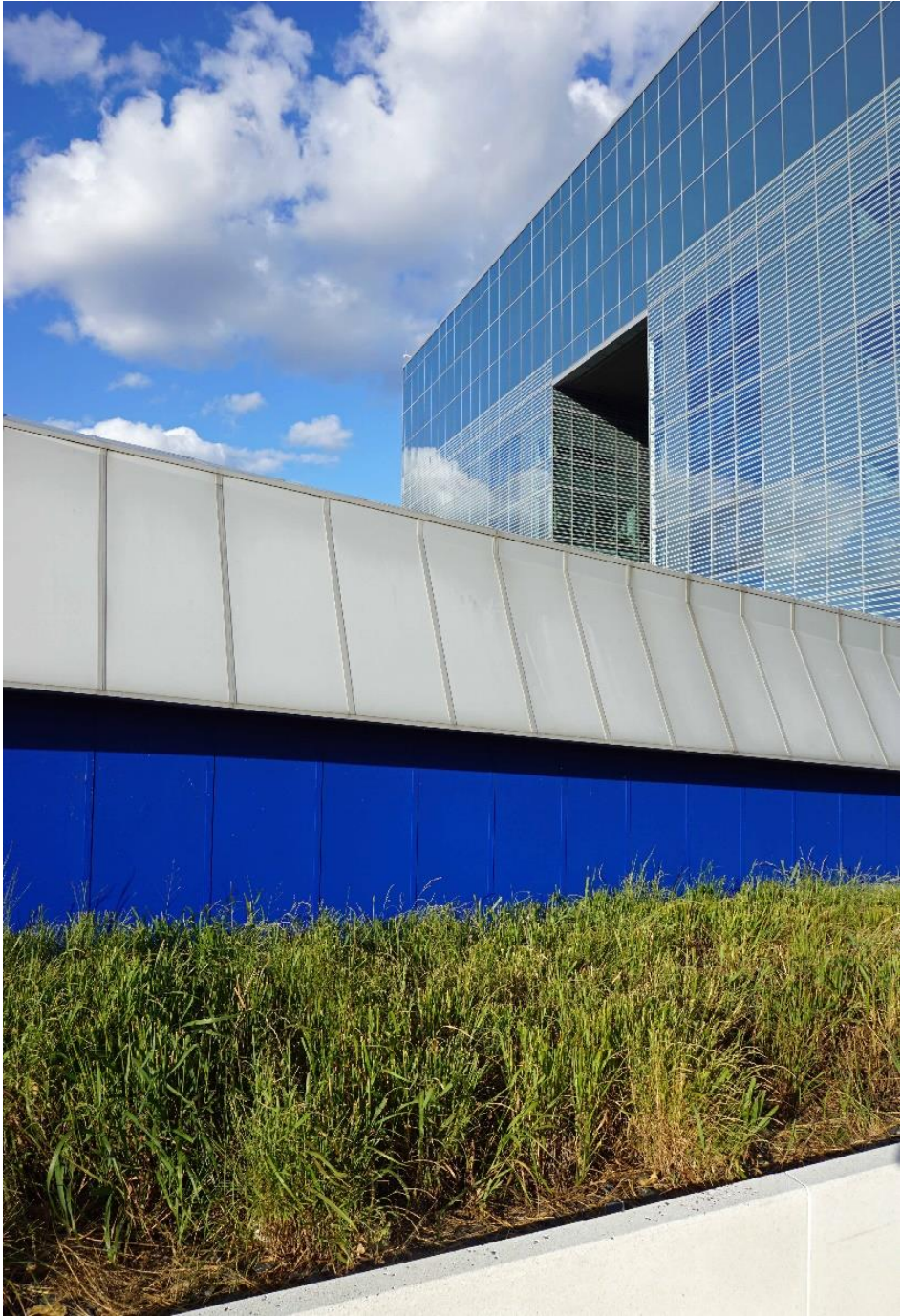


*Kingston Penitentiary*

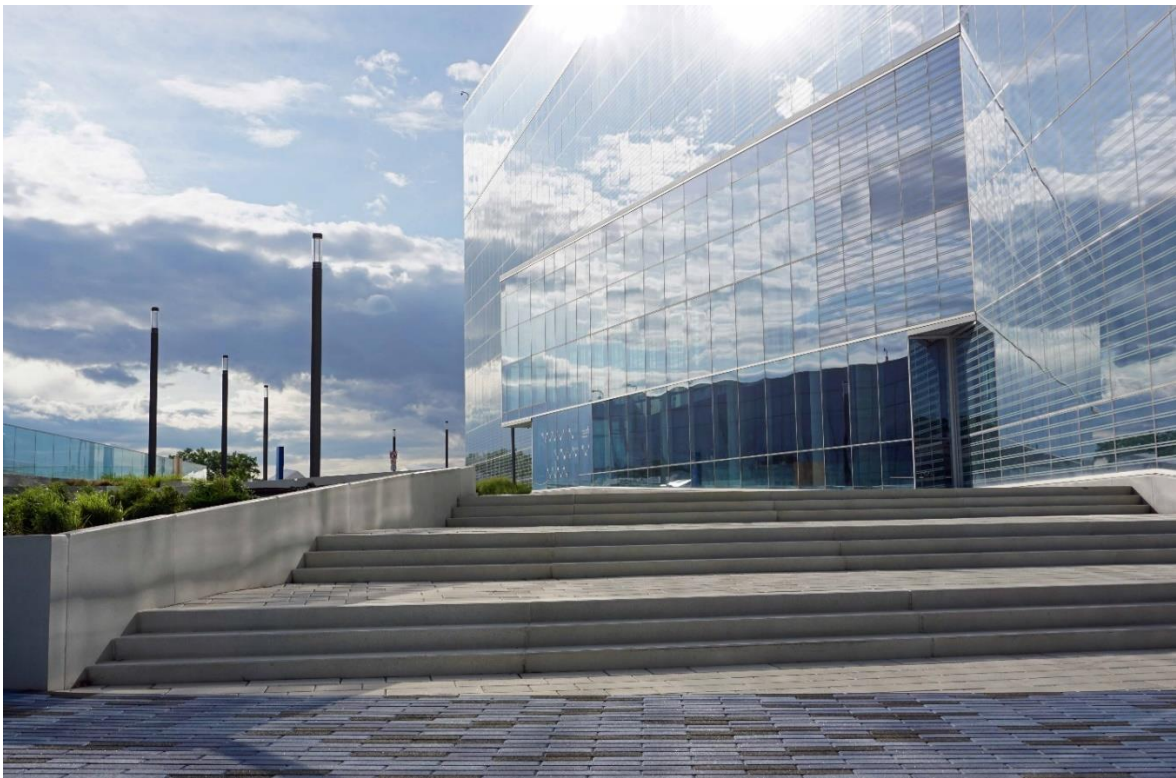
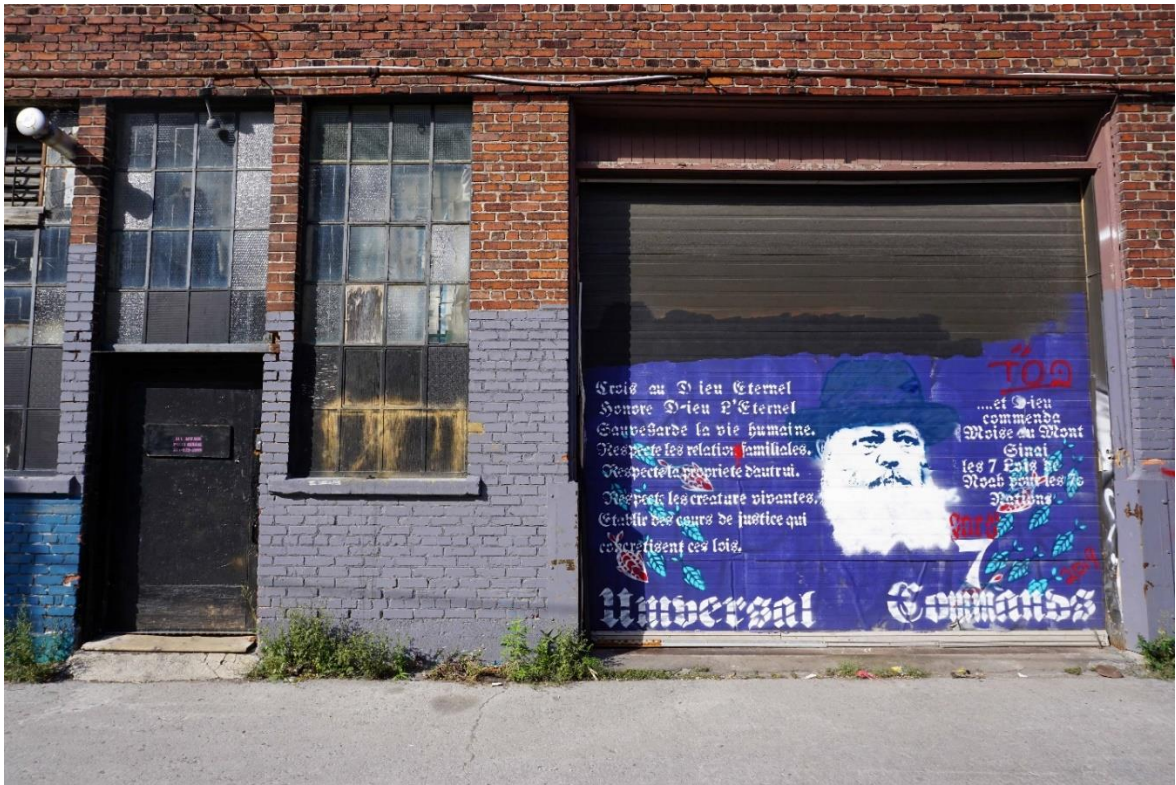


*Kingston Penitentiary*

The rest of the summer and autumn fly by with only a few highlights. On July 31, I take a long walk to a brand-new neighborhood in lower Outremont.

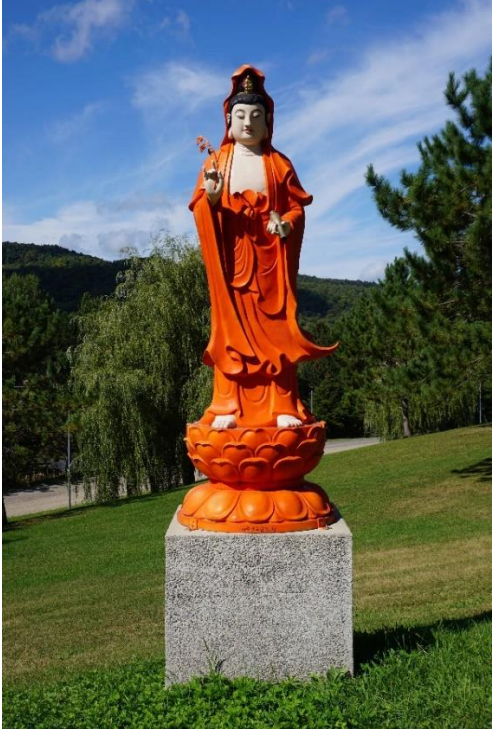
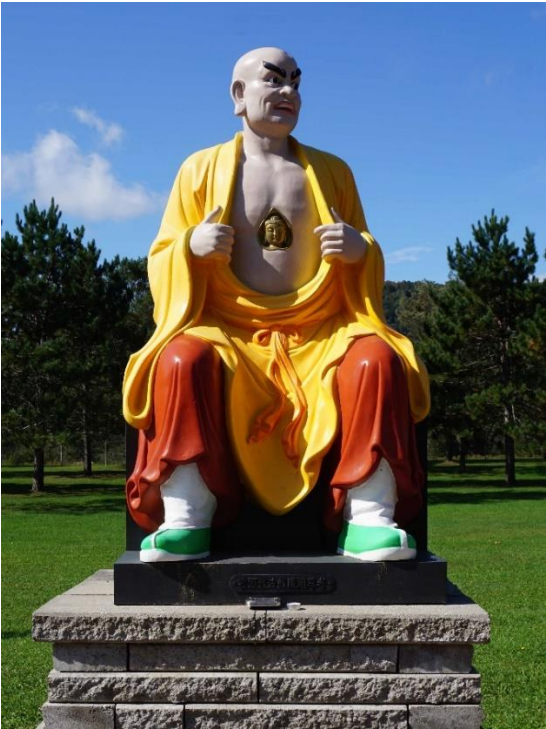








On September 11, I visit the Tam Bao Son Buddhist Monastery in the Laurentians, about an hour's drive away. It feels like a travel day and I get lots of photos.







On October 8, grandchild number four is born in Hamilton. She's beautiful and wonderful and looks like she's come from another planet. Hamilton is a strange, liminal, slightly distressed city of half a million souls. I will find it weirdly photogenic whenever I visit.



Hamilton, Ontario



*Hamilton, Ontario*



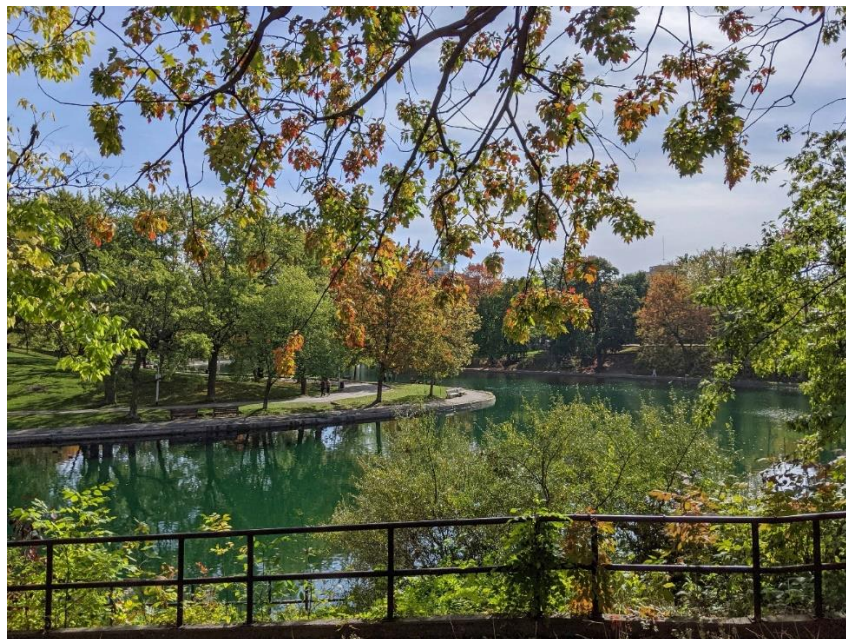
*Hamilton, Ontario*





*Hamilton, Ontario*

On October 12, I take a long walk down to the Grande Bibliothèque. The city is eerily quiet and calm. Even the ducks are sleeping at Lafontaine Park. I have never seen sleeping ducks before. Soon I will learn that a close friend has been diagnosed with terminal cancer.



*Lafontaine Park*

## 2022

January 1 is a dull day. Everything is closed, with yet another lockdown imposed, hopefully the last. I don't leave the house and the only productive thing I do involves the finishing of a project to copy the New Testament by hand.

The rest of 2022 will see the world gradually return to normal. A ten-day trip to California in March will qualify (barely) as a pilgrimage and merit its own story. I continue to see my friend with cancer, taking her for long drives and sitting on park benches. In August strange synchronicities will occur, the weirdest one involving Room 334 at the Mount Sinai palliative care center. My friend ends up spending her last days in the same bed in the same room as my brother last year. She dies on August 31.

In October, I decide on a Montreal parks photo project. Fall is the most beautiful season in Quebec. I will end up liking the photos very much, which gives hope for the time I might decide to stop travelling and stick to nearby places.



*Beaver Lake, Mount Royal*



*Mount Royal*



*Mount Royal*



*Botanical Gardens*



*Botanical Gardens*



*Jarry Park*



*Parc de la Merci*



*Parc des rapides*





*Jarry Park*



*Parc Jean-Drapeau*



*Parc Jean-Drapeau*



*Parc Jean-Drapeau, Jacques Cartier Bridge*



*Parc René-Levésque*



*Parc René-Levésque*



*Botanical Gardens*

On October 27, 2022, the last of the four trees I commemorate at Jarry Park each May 5 is taken down. It had failed to produce leaves this year, probably due to Dutch Elm disease. I knew for a while it was condemned because of the orange band painted around it and was checking on it almost daily until one morning there they were: an entire crew of people and equipment preparing to bring it down.

I had been photographing this tree I called Beauty for twenty-three years, so its death from what is essentially a tree plague is a significant event which I will use to end this chronicle, my personal declaration of the end of the plague.



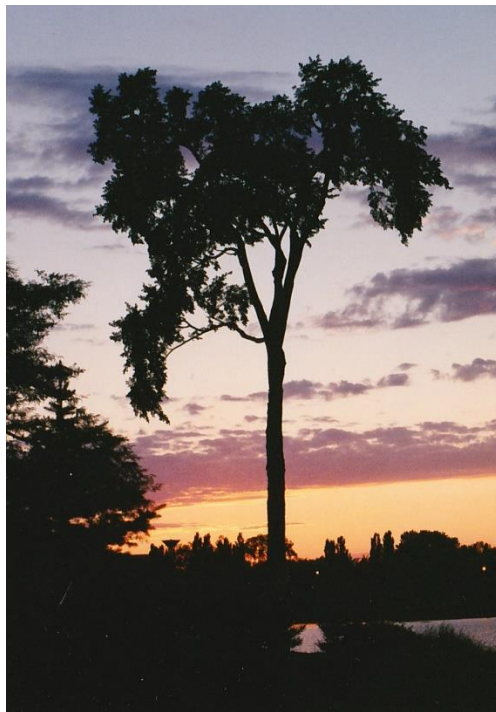


In December I will get sick for the first time in decades. It's not COVID but RSV, one of the weird viruses that popped up after the plague. High fevers result in vivid, bizarre dreams. The RSV will develop into pneumonia and the three-week illness will feel like a trip in the way all routines are suspended; the opposite of a trip in the way I am forced to sit still and do almost nothing.

The most significant fever dream seemed to explain many things, maybe even the meaning of life. But all I remember, the only thing I wrote down, was something told to me at the end of the dream:

*It reaches a point where no one really remembers what or why we are here, we just are. What's left is to imagine is a unifying central force.*

Like everyone else on the planet, I feel like I'm waking up to a different world. And I never caught the plague. And I'm not dead yet. I'm still not sure if the pilgrimages will continue, but I'm thinking they will. They might get smaller and closer to home but it feels now like a way of life, even when it's just a trip to a park where the oceanic seems always close at hand.



*Beauty in 1999*