

*The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* have always held a peculiar fascination for me. There was a time when I would dread picking this “holy” text up. At first I thought this was the hedonistic boozier in my blood, but since I’ve been completely off the sauce for years now, I’ve given more credence to Spicer’s declaration that vocabulary did this to him. I mean that beyond crushing illness, beyond personal injury suits, beyond *delirium tremens* and bleary-eyed dawns and beyond debilitating allergies, this battle with the unseen upon “clerical” territory takes its toll. I am not certain if it is the effect of trying to wring out the spirit drop by drop and make it manifest. There are many grotesque images of this process. Orpheus being torn apart, limb by limb. Marsyas being flayed in the most meticulous manner. The problem with this kind of poetry is that it often lacks biographical excitement. It is about a preternaturally covetous individual who is trying to jar their joys and sorrows, in other words life, in a series of containers, day after day, hoping someone will learn how to take interest in their indexing system. Such is the legacy of a now mythical ‘dead-beat dad’ of Artie Gold.

The second absentee father is Frank O’Hara, a poet who appears to be as much material as Spicer appears to be immaterialist. Where Spicer is in essence a reductionist, boiling down eternity to an infinitely small vocabulary through the narrow neck of a bottle containing an invisible ship, O’Hara is an avid collector of contemporary art who persistently flunked time mechanic school. Although he may be criticized for the same fault Rimbaud criticized Baudelaire for, which is to say being too much a part of his artistic milieu, O’Hara’s strength, aside from his pedestrian New York grace and deftness of movement that is felt upon the page, is his ability to develop a tear-resistant pop art from so many masterpieces and signs in passing. His energy is restless and most akin to that of William Carlos Williams, speedily jotting down the movement of an energized mind on his lunch break, in whatever spare minutes the day permitted. It is this incessant imperative that defines the poet, and it is worth more than a whole academy of poets.

All of this to arrive at [The Collected Books of Artie Gold](#). Why? Because the work of Artie Gold begins with this poetical schism as he tries to decide who is more his immediate parent. The first book in the collection is *cityflowers*, full of experiments that explore his forerunners. Some of the poems read as if they are right out of Spicer’s *A Book of Music*, except with words by Artie Gold:

Having nothing to do apart, the two  
pick petty quarrels and argue in a low voice ,  
his manner – one of that patience that is necessary to be there,  
in infinite amount and abundance . for him  
it is a kinder act than tolerance or merely  
understanding much about her . little  
about his own bent body .

Whether this is about two lovers or O’Hara and Spicer is unknown and hardly matters. It is the rhythm and improvisation that concerns us, the movement of the lines that echo and stretch

beyond mere imitation. Gold also expresses a similar tone to that of Arthur Rimbaud and Jack Spicer, a desperate plea for language to have a transformative effect upon external reality and for poetry to lose its absurd pomp and adopt the circumstance of daily life:

I want to make the space around the poem  
real . solid as the air about kilos of cotton  
or the air things fall between  
my muse must be a neighbor with  
a street address

We are left to follow “footsteps without the rhythm of the man, the hand that / moved to make the footsteps real” and left to ponder the deficiencies of what is uttered, to fret in the face of what is being compared, asking ourselves whether this is reportage or mere hyperbole:

Perhaps  
what I really wanted was not the sun  
but some metaphor  
for yellow  
imbued on a white moon.

Gold is very open about his alchemy in *cityflowers*, applying the false historic style Jack Spicer enjoyed to Frank O’Hara, offering quantum permutations quarking off the poet’s death, in surrealist cinematic takes giving O’Hara multiple deaths.

he had fallen off a stepladder  
awkwardly rehearsing his death  
a daisy  
grew among his teeth and one  
curved up his ass curiously orphic

Gold de-emphasizes the biographical part and asserts the mythic and artistic end of of the poet’s life, which is presumably deferred to eternity, or at least as long as their work lasts.

And if there were ever any doubt about the influence of these two American poets upon our Canadian friend as a budding poet, it is cleared up by Gold’s inclusion of a dialogue between J and F (who sound suspiciously like Jack Spicer and Frank O’Hara). This staged conversation is reminiscent of John Donne’s “Eclogue”, a talk between Allophanes (All Forms) and Idios (The Fool). Allophanes can assume the guise of anything and everything in poetic terms, but Idios, through a particular type of reclusion and contemplation, may achieve a specialized kind of knowledge. In literary terms, the fool is the only one who can tell the truth, on account of his unique post. And some would agree that if the poet is not the fool, this should at the very least be his lifelong ambition.

In the dialogue, F is a bit hooked on referents to the celebrated, just as J moons over the despairing lack of language to affect life. As F offers a quick flourish of words, J responds by refining the hyperbolic use of language:

F: I can see birds glance off the edges of the sky. I cannot see the end of the blue, I'm sure goes on forever.

J: Forever is an adverb, may be dispensed with if considered simply a vast space of time. Perhaps a lifetime, even greater, but must end must terminate in the place of its generation.

With the image of the poet asleep, on a personal level (is anything not on this level?), I had one of those eerie moments where the resonances between Artie Gold's book and my own homage to Spicer reached one of those inexplicable Wordsworthian spots of time (at least according to the imagination of Jorge Luis Borges). Not having heard of one another, it felt like Gold had been reading my book published this year, except decades earlier. F describes the painting of the poet asleep by Chagall:

my sleep was short like Rousseau's poet asleep or even that of Chagall's. I awoke bruised at the foot of the ladder I'd stumbled from.

And here is my poem from [After Jack](#) about the same image:

**The Poet Reclining**

Beneath the purple haze  
Holding his throat. The horse and pig  
Dog graze upon green  
Motionless as dream  
Do they also dream  
Outside the frame, the  
Sleeper has been soundly  
Shot. He is dying from  
Lack of poetry, from  
Paint beneath the purple haze  
                            That horse and pig  
Dog freeze  
graze upon green

The second book in the collection *Even Yr Photograph Looks Afraid of Me* is the one lack of curiosity, at least for me. It appeared to be an self-conscious post-Beat experiment, and perhaps a training ground for a young Artie Gold. Although I understand it was published previously in 1974, its inclusion in the collection serves mainly to show how excellent his other books are by way of contrast and his own improvement.

Of note is the early development of his comparative style. A few of the poems smack of someone who is repeatedly reading Rimbaud and O'Hara and mimicking their hyperbolic *sang-froid*:

we had nightmares our bodies older than the ancientest sea tortoise  
in blue detroit aquariums that slowly cruised into surgery  
where artists labored into the small morning hours in mirrors  
to restore the pain that falling away  
let the cold winter light in.

It is clear which parts of this previously published book have the skeletal structure of his later work and reveal the embryonic form of what is to become Gold's genius for constructing an image that won't sit still:

I am going to make the dirtiest book of them all and this will not  
even have redeeming literary graces  
it will turn young ladies grape-cheeked  
their mouths agaped and wondering finally  
what the point of clothes was.

When the reader turns to his book *Mixed Doubles*, there is the sense of a fully formed Artie Gold, one capable of tracing the catching his thoughts right in the middle of their most recent rhetorical act:

What does one do with all this crap?  
My o'ertaxed brain, in its units, hangs on between  
Bright cornices of eavesdropping palaces  
And it is such a private thing the thing they do

It is the work of any poet who has come to terms with their own world to the point of deciding to love it beyond the world at large, and to spend the rest of their time softly arguing this point in the dark, although aloud, possibly for "eavesdropping palaces":

Pleasures to enter the dream, to enter together we said  
and hold your hollow breath there in the dark.  
Therefore, this afternoon, as never before, I walk

Gold expands upon the role of the poet, insisting that "We build upon a field of lies / Truths of the imagination". Or consider this sonic image of love he offers the reader:

The mute intention we call love  
Klong of gong hit with sock full of sand

Although [Ken Norris](#) has suggested there was a Jewish cultural spin to the Véhicule Poets, including [Endre Farkas](#) and Tom Konyves and his own New Yorkish leanings, Artie Gold's poetry actually dispels any uninformed notions of him having anything in common with Jewish Montreal poets like Leonard Cohen and his lifelong mentor, Irving Layton. Gold does not assert a particular cultural viewpoint in any of his poems, although as the descendant of Jewish shmutter merchants and pullers with so much *shmata* (thank you for fully edifying me about this term, [Adeena Karasick](#)), I cannot help but feel a faint smiling atavistic force in these Duddyish lines:

And in this storm, along the tooth of the street  
Shards of instinct, nonetheless, compel me  
And today is not worth haggling over  
And today is not worth haggling over

If there's anything to say about a particular Jewish quality in Gold's work, it is more something one bears witness to in the mysteriously radiant black and white photographs by Christian Knudsen (who also designed some of Gold's books), in which Artie Gold is caught laughing, rather like Sarah at God's madcap proposition in The Book of Genesis. What, who me...HAH!!! That is a good one.

Of course, if I ever needed to feel at home in the familial sense, there are always these lines:

You know I know there is not much point getting interested in poetry  
for *my* sake I will die...and not leave you the business.

Yet it is the book *before Romantic Words* that offers the full realization of Gold's artistic style in a cohesive collection of faux-romances that reveal a loose sonnet structure under their dusty vellum coverings. Here, as wild as the rhetorical flourishes become, they reveal a carefully controlled structure reminiscent of Latin epigrams and elegies. The speaker, the subject, the event itself are all visibly transformed into a linguistic musing twisting midair. Once again, I thought of the image of Lancelot coughing at the premiere of Wagner's *Parsifal* [in my own work](#) when I read these lines:

and nothing throughout the course of this act raised itself to the level  
of even mild drama; I walked vaguely uncomfortably away thinking, shit,  
why didn't I fart during the silence instead of yelling halfwaythrough

It is not that Artie Gold is hyper-self-conscious, but that he utilizes and moves beyond this mode in order to sculpt a vigorous poetic form. The act of questioning often leads back to what the language is doing rather than what the speaker is thinking about. In one of the most astonishing poems in the collection, he starts the poem with a commonplace comparison that strives to produce an experiential effect that transcends mere metaphor:

Strange to compare the laundromat  
lit at night, with my heart. The lights  
jarr, as in any analogy there are  
elements that mean something because  
they must ; but mean nothing  
because they cannot

We aren't dealing with that scoundrel laundromat lover of [Lionel Kearns](#), that's for sure. Then once again, in another poem, the speaker tries to elaborate, but instead of a clear statement, we get a poetic effect and this is refreshing:

It is impossible to give assent  
the self is caught in the zipper  
of crazy erotic stammering  
and chewn to pieces.

It is often startling how with Artie Gold, the simple turn of phrase turns into something else not so simple. Is it an act of speech, a living experience?

I kept looking away. you know—  
like those streetcorners where everyone  
is looking up  
because  
the first person  
looked up ?

One of the main aspects of Gold's style that fills the entire collection is his knack for the uncanny simile or comparison:

Changed, suddenly and love dies like drool on a napkinless chin  
like a poor hand of scrabble without vowels...  
like the only 2 solutions to some quadratic equation

Plenty of his likenings are puzzling and positively *unheimlich*:

sphincters of salal donut the corridors of the year

In one of the poems, we get an image of the poet as Baudelaire's washed-up clownish figure, weeping through one of the more amusing pieces of fruit:

I cry through my banana like the failures of vaudeville  
until later dawns and I die as a success because vaudeville  
has been withdrawn

The poetry of Artie Gold appears to make synaptic leaps at the verge where the line ends, an area that often felt like a slightly more static region with Jack Spicer. Also, his poems are not as simple as they might appear. They are not simply long sentences in handy slices (for those who believe that is poetry). Some of the phrases stand alone, challenging the reader's imaginative willingness to form a connexion, here or there:

when I speak to you the cities cease to exist  
there is only you  
a pencil of doubt, no larger  
than a tenement

The thought is often caught scarcely aware in the middle of thinking:

and while I go through  
my peregrinations  
do I doubt, of course, :I doubt

In one of the most amusing and interesting poems to involve comic book characters, Gold examines the heroic figure of Superman, asking the reader to consider his dangerous foibles and capability for eccentricity:

when superman peers through you to see some spot far off  
you get cancer, gamma radiation. his overhead flights  
are crumbling the masonry of metropolis. metropolis,  
built on a fault. superman has a rare and sentimental collection  
of everyday household objects he has stolen from open windows  
out of people's homes

He imbues this particular book with a wonderful nonchalance that tempers the sense of desperation about—what else but the difficulty and often failure of language to serve as a vehicle for our thoughts and emotions, at least not without a great deal of tinkering. Artie Gold leaves behind one poem after another for us, “like a cake placed in a two hour oven / in a building with a bomb, not caring.”

[The Collected Books of Artie Gold](#) includes a fine introduction to *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz* by [George Bowering](#) that touches upon the individuality of Artie Gold as a young urban poet in Montreal who styled himself after Frank O'Hara and Jack Spicer, creating his own sense of culture somewhere between the artsy and the accessible, between the eternal and the quotidian. In this introduction, Bowering makes one of his more important points about these poetic antecedents and therefore Artie himself:

Spicer and O'Hara reminded their readers that poetry is made of speech, and speech can be exciting no matter the subject. In other words a young poet doesn't have to write about suicide or seduction to be interesting.

Bowering also credits him with the "daring ability to objectify his voiced poem by starting a new one this side of it" which is perhaps something I have been trying to say without quite grasping how to. There's me told.

When I first was asked to write about Artie Gold, bolstering my own immediate desire based on the excitement of this discovery, I considered asking for more information about this warm amusing fellow writing poem after poem behind safety glass in the company of the cats he loved, the cats that exacerbated his health problems. Then I realized that I must apply my own golden rule to this body of work, because I felt Gold's poems were asking me to do so, to separate the man from the living being and impish consciousness and beating heart in his work.

Selected poems in *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz* are more erratic, although they continue in a similar vein to the poems in *before Romantic Words*. In fact, unlike the poems in many collections, often bereft of a title, the poems in Gold's books are not easily partitioned off. They have an organic cohesion which renders them parts of a continuous whole, enriching the experience for the reader of this collection.

Yet we find that the weepy banana of vaudeville has become more than a prank, something more fatal to human frailty:

and what a mosh the concept of the soul somewhere along  
someone has gotten a wedge of pride into the spirit, it  
is like some banana peel, slippery fatal. it will floor it  
I look beyond the winter white the mammoth growls of  
tractor  
I look beyond the winter night

And indeed, there is an expressed wish to redress perceived forms of injustice, even on a minor scale in this book, accompanied by a sense of affliction as admonitions are doled out in Spicerian fashion:

This malarial life we feel cold we feel hot  
the order of sensations confuses us  
our blankets are as clumsy as our decisions  
and we must doctor ourselves against our own cures.

Even more than in the other books, Gold's lines focus on the inadequacy of language and what he refers to as "desperacy" in the face of it:

The nouns are hungry for sense  
The facts are not known  
They are tasteless by which is meant



They are hard to transcribe  
They taste the colour of the sky against cement

The images he cycles through are also reminiscent of William Carlos Williams in the midst of his quickest rapidity, warning us not to treat life like a bag of food we are forever afraid of tipping over:

Hurrying to spill what I had  
like a man who was writing a phonenumber  
across the cover of a book—where was I  
grinding a world at a wheel down to a  
substantive

The R.W. series of poems in this book is intriguing and appears to be a heartfelt exposition concerning the nature of love. There is an openness and sincerity in the voice of these poems that moves the book in a slightly different direction, including what Gold refers to as a clumsiness he affects:

You've been willing to love me.  
I've been high-handed and heavy, a fool,  
believing what we had was perishable  
I was all around it with my protective hands—  
a fool. I smothered it. I think I put the flame out  
every time you fought to keep it alive

He proves in this series that he is able to welcome the reader into an intimate space without becoming too intrusive or maudlin in his mood or tone, once again dropping us in it, in terms of the experiential:

I want to slide on my knees into some open corner and be small  
and wait.

[Ken Norris](#) is fond of the bittersweet poem R.W. 2 and [George Bowering](#) is so stunned he readily genuflects for the image at the end of the poem R.W. 11. Myself, I am partial to R.W. 17, probably because I rarely ever like to know exactly what I am digesting. In this poem, to paraphrase Bowering on Leonard Cohen's work, Gold doesn't know what the hell he is doing so well:

I hold my breath  
not like the mouth dealing with celery  
certainly not like the sound of me  
travelling over ordinary gravel  
has it rained between myself

and life  
to produce you?

Artie Gold's description of the poetic process is similar to the fakery of Jack Spicer, the rope of talk one must believe is there for the trick of language to work. In his case, the poet is like a magician drawing out the lines of his escapism, or at least burning desire for it:

The magician doesn't draw kerchiefs voilà voilà no.  
The kerchiefs are knotted together like  
the bedsheets of an escaping prisoner. He lowers  
the length endlessly before your vision...the lines of  
a good poem come like that.

It is not necessary a melodrama or tragedy, but in this series, Gold expresses the dilemma of the poet that is so seldom understood, the struggle deciding between life and art, with love performing a duplicitous balancing act between either:

too awful if  
your love for me is merely a weakness I prey upon  
the point of love is lost somewhere in living  
art's trace vanishes invisibly while  
the science of living  
abruptly perverts.

The collection of poetry concludes with *The Hotel Victoria Poems*, which contains another of those delectable experientials that evokes something at once distinct yet elusive for the reader:

and sometimes the phone rings  
that is in the morning. one night  
a hand, pausing on its way  
down the long hallway, for a second  
felt my doorknob  
but it was not my hand  
so it went on, on to its own.  
like a waterfall behind a lightswitch  
things wait there just out of reach.

In this perusal of [The Collected Books of Artie Gold](#), there is still much I have omitted, although of course, these are all additional discoveries for readers to make. What impresses me is how Artie manages to "stay Gold" throughout the collection, creating several books that introduce to many a unique and singular voice in Canadian poetry, at last getting much of the unsung sung. Although I am often wary of such comparisons, I think that [Endre Farkas](#) is spot on in his description of a "Glenn Gould-Bach-like complexity" in Gold's work. As Gould interprets Bach in a way that reveals something about the musical process, Gold interprets poets such as Spicer

and O'Hara and ultimately himself, revealing something about the process of writing poetry, while subtly performing the act itself.

I will close with a pleasurable koan by Artie Gold from *before Romantic Words*, expressing the curious and quirky sense of futility that is characteristic of so much of his work:

if nothing was to happen in autumn  
why would the wind enter the woods