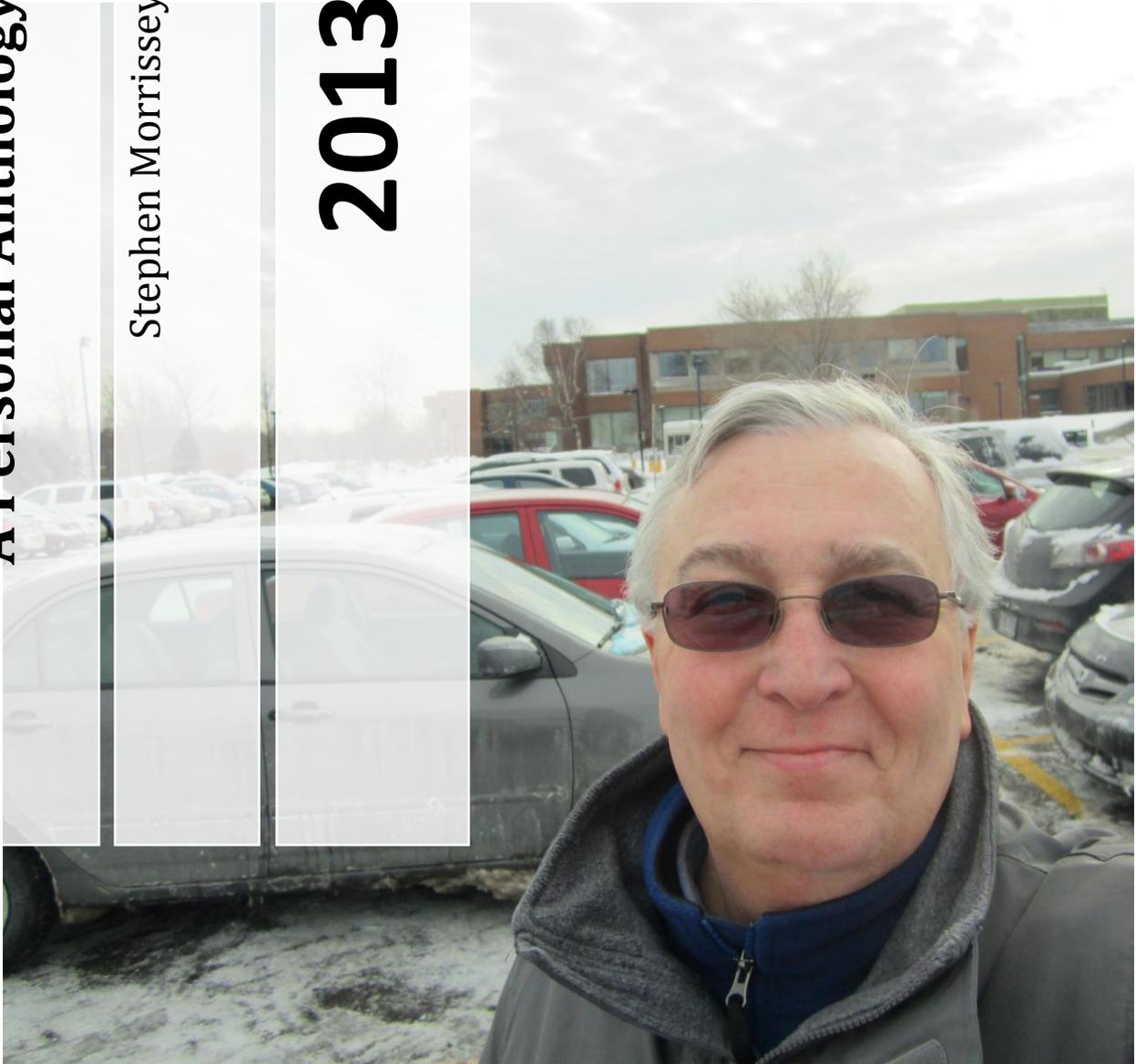


A Personal Anthology

Stephen Morrissey

2013



Individual poems selected from each of Morrissey's nine books of poetry, from *The Trees of Unknowing* (1978) to *A Private Mythology* (forthcoming from Ekstasis Editions in 2014).

A Personal Anthology, 1978 - 2014

Stephen Morrissey

From *The Trees of Unknowing*, Vehicule Press, Montreal, 1978:

"there are seagulls and cats..."

there are seagulls and cats
and on the beach which is a line

of grey sand there are people standing
where the sky meets the earth

if there was a photograph
it wld show 30% earth and 70% sky

if there was a photograph
I wld place you in it

standing in front of a white house
just behind where the photograph was taken

and inside the white house
there are empty rooms and quilts

and you are saying "reason over passion"
in 40 foot high letters as I take your picture

when it is developed all we see is the white house
and think how silent it is with only

the sound of the sea
and a seagull circling over the white house

and then flying back out to sea
where it circles a fishing boat

in one room is a lobster trap
and a mantel and on the mantel

are shells that you have pickt up on your daily walks
there is one room which is filled with rocks

that you have collected with smoothness and
roundness in mind

later you took these rocks to montreal in a truck
& had a show which was documented with photographs

and these photographs now lie in a drawer
in that white house

in one window which has caught your reflection
and seems to hold onto it like a negative

there is a cat sitting and watching you walk along
the beach and I am taking your photograph

in your hand is a shell that you pickt up
and I have arranged rocks on the beach so that

they read "leave off fine book larning"
and I am taking all of these photographs

which I tack onto trees and we watch the rain and wind
wear them away and wonder abt the passing years

and some photographs I drop into the lobster trap
and you take it down to the sea and when you return

they have dissolved in the salt water
there is a quilt lying on the bed and in the quilt

there is a sleeping cat
and as I turn to photograph the house

she rises and yawns
and you have your children whom you teach to draw

and they are walking with you along the beach
I do not take any photographs of myself

but once I caught a likeness
reflected in a pool of water

it is an image I sometimes catch
among all of the images I have had of you

From *Divisions*, Coach House Press, Toronto, 1983:

The Dead in My Life

to see the trees' branches
grey & archaic

against a sky
far whiter than the moon

an old woman's hair
tied in a bun

it is my grandmother's
hair as she embraces me

she blows a strand up through yellow
& absent teeth the hair
fallen over her forehead

o the moon is my grandmother's
bun tied in a million

knots tied to her
ancient head with the stubby

fingers of time

her gold wedding ring

has become a part of her

hand the flesh grown
around it so the finger

the flesh itself

is one with that
circle of gold

aureole of light
on the moon

2.

how often I return to them
the dead in my life
who inhabit dreams

memories while rocking
my son to sleep or a
dream that my Uncle Alex
was alive although we

thought (in the dream)
that he had been dead
these seven years

they are like flies
beating against an autumn
window

flies that bang
into my face & enter

the mouth to come out
as words this language
of flies & the dead

this ever diminishing
circus parade of old
people I hang onto
as though without them
I too would cease to be

3.

their benevolence
is there too

the kindness
at leaving shadows

those who have become
memories to bury our

memories in their real

& most noble grave the soil of
anonymity we who
till the past & leave
cemeteries of memories
behind us until the mind

itself enters the earth
& holding handfuls of dirt
sees whole decades

removed from our
fingers as

the earth falls
& we say
our final & most
complete goodbyes

From *Family Album*, Caitlin Press, Vancouver, 1989:

Preludes

1

my mother in the kitchen
didn't have to mingle
with the guests
while someone took snapshots
leaving out us
at the end of the couch
children fell down the stairs
then hid behind a chair while
I joked with my sister-in-law's father
I reflected on being
someone I'm not
as we drove fifty miles home

2

we don't mind winters
the old get up
and are found in the spring
curled in new grass
with crows
singing overhead
I think of one thing:
waking one day and
finding an old man
in my bed
he is indifferent
to his surroundings
pressed against
the white sheets
like a pinned butterfly

3

that I have lived
so long and still
not at ease
in my skin
seeing in the store's
window the reflection
of one lost in himself
pieces of a life
always about to unravel
skin like
synthetic cloth
the harried expression
hands
torso and brain
vibrating to a frequency
conscious only
of itself

4

evening's light
at angles
not seen since
grandmother sat
in silence
on the living room

couch light
moving across a room
so slowly it becomes
a vine growing
a geranium red
against
the white wall

5

the maroon couch
covered in white sheets
visiting at Christmas
two great aunts
deafness and old age
the ancient wreath
on their door
behind it
a place of silence
a reliquary of
events
existence reduced
to tea
and sitting
waiting with them
my brother and I
snow falling on the
empty street below

From *The Compass*, Empréal Press, Montreal, 1993:

The Compass

On the four corners of the bed
the body becomes a compass
describing the direction
of passion. Months of desire
arrive at this destination,
rocking on a single almost silent
wave we are sheltered
by darkness. The body
is a compass needle;
you turned me from east to west
awoke a sleeping giant that moves

between your mouth and breasts and legs;
the room illuminated by static electricity
thrown off by our bodies.

How many decades did I sleep
waiting only for you; I lust after you
in all the directions of space.

Meeting at the airport
your foot touching my leg
beneath the restaurant table,
we secretly entered an empty banquet
hall where the caterers chattered and
poured drinks behind a wall partition
then quickly leaving
we found a deserted hallway
of open office doors
where we embraced.

All the others in my life
fell away, I was ready
to abandon my old life for you,
for the touch of your hand
and mouth, the apple red and delicious
cut in half that I eat.

Tied to the four corners of love
as to a bed which becomes a compass,
I find you on your stomach,
on your back, in the morning
lying pressed against me.

It is not possible to return
to sleep now, it is not possible
to forsake your touch and love,
black lace, fingers, wetness,
your mouth, words. The compass
needle turns finding north switched
to east and west to south, night
becomes morning; nothing remains
as it was. You pointed my life
in a new direction, towards a corner
of the world only dreamt of before.

Outside the sun is red
descending behind a row of trees,
shadows fade into the other
unexplored regions of night.

From *The Yoni Rocks*, Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1995:

Reincarnation

We meet again, again flesh
and blood, again bone, tendon
and memory. Events of old lives,
clothes divested as I divested
the past in meeting you,
in meeting you again
and again and again
into infinity.

Forty years of waiting for you,
a dark delirium of the soul;
we met apparently for the first time
but home is where we are together
in this room, this house,
the two square feet we occupy
in a single embrace. The embrace
of memory, bred in muscle, eating
or favouring one side in sleep,
falling asleep in your arms.

The arms of many births,
deaths, incarnations of
gods and goddesses,

Bardic voices, Druid's potion.

Listen, we share the sounds and sights
of a summer's evening, fireflies
across a field seeming
distant but as close as
a hand before your eyes,
breath on the back of your neck,
or is it the darkened field
and firefly lights
repeating their journey
between this life and that?

With you I have
returned home, not a place
walls enclosing silence,
but soul meeting soul
in the ancient movement of time.

I lie asleep on the floor
ear pressed to the darkness
and hear the hum of earth,
the generations of families, priests,

and existence of all living things
like listening, ear to a pregnant
woman's belly, baby's rapid
heart beat; shadows fall hundreds
of feet, listen into the soul
of man preparing for its journey
of final sleep, we came
from here and return, forgetful
of our origins, or of the
father and mother who created us.

From *The Mystic Beast*, Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1997:

Lines From Magritte: (Excerpt)

The Forbidden Universe (or Olympia)

A man refused
transformation—"not
yet" he argued "too busy
with family, job, mother,
no time"—always he held
back, remained in
a chrysalis state,
like putrefied matter, undigested
food, or a giant tumour
in his body
clogging all arteries
that lead cosmic
energy into the central
nervous system.
For forty years
a giant organic blockage
grew in the middle
of his body
until he bulged
at the waist;
it was a tumour
on his soul
or the soul
itself expanding
disproportionate
and constricted
by its cage of ribs

and internal organs.
He was sick
with undiagnosable
illnesses, his face anguished,
even walking across
a room became difficult.
The Forbidden Universe
is like a forest bordering
on the ocean
in the imagination's
geography; there
on the sand,
a naked woman
is half sitting up,
half lying down,
a giant conch shell
balanced on her stomach.
The man who refused
transformation could not
have met this woman
before this exact moment,
the juxtaposition
of stars, moon,
a meteor with a green
tail streaking across
the sky, a glow worm
illuminating
a half inch of grass,
a child drinking
milk and then
glancing out a window,
a fly at the window,
a cat jumping onto
the couch to wash
its fur.
The man needed the woman
on the beach
if he were to live;
he thought "Every woman
is a Goddess
when desired by a man."
Every woman
is a Goddess:
milk-white breasts,
legs and hips,
fingers and toes,

the secret wonders
of a woman's body—
there is no greater
object of love
than Olympia
lying on the beach,
the shell
on her stomach,
the sea behind her.

From *Girouard Avenue*, Coracle Press, Montreal, 2009:

GIROUARD AVENUE FLAT (Excerpt)

Not for me this shroud of ashes.
—John Glassco

One

I had forgotten
the dead
but they had not
forgotten me.

I had forgotten
myself as one of them.
Now I cannot avoid
the return of dreams,
the listening room
where I find
myself
most fully.

(November again
when dreams, urgent
with memories
and the dead, remind
me of their presence.)

I had forgotten
the season of dreams;
the days of the dead,
one for children,
one for adults.

I knew death as a child,
and so my soul knows
the finitude of things.
Now the soul demands its audience:
the return of dreams,
the dream of the dead
who come to me
with their insistence
and words: "Remember us,
do not forget us."

Two

I tried to piece together the remnants,
life become a reliquary, a Joseph Cornell box,
a strange puzzle of events
even as a child
I needed to hold together in my mind;

now I become
one with the past, the old ones
speaking through me:
poetry the voice of the soul.

We return to Girouard Avenue
walking down to 2226,
Grandmother's flat the center
of imagination:
 $2 + 2 + 2 + 6 = 12$
 $1 + 2 = 3.$
Three old women lived in the flat,
and before that, many people lived there;
I, too, lived there
when Father was too sick for Mother
to care for alone.

On Girouard Avenue
I lay in a pram looking up,
noticing Mother's dark hair—
now I walk down Girouard
and imagine having my photograph
taken in exactly the same place
as Father stood with me in a pram
beside him, remembering

other photographs taken on the back porch
with Mother and Grandmother.

But first we cross
Sherbrooke Street always busy with traffic,
past where Grandmother's finger
was caught in Uncle Alex's car door
one Sunday afternoon
and she, dragged along the street,
lost the tip of one finger;
passed where Grandmother shopped
and then her front door,
where the spirit resides
and memories converge
to form this poem.

Now, take me down the vista of years,
the push and shove of time and place,
where the present, past, and future merge
and temporality ends—and I am
suspended in time and thought:
I came to record
this life of odds, ends, death
and life, the Alpha and Omega
and whatever can be recorded,
what the soul remembers,
and loves:

When will the sleeper
awake from his night
of remembering?

He is cast down the vista
of years, snow falling
at Christmas.

The sleeper will awake
when the poem
is written

and the dead are no longer
disturbed by his call.

New and unpublished Poems:

From *A Private Mythology*, Ekstasis Editions, 2014 (forthcoming):

Winter 1957

This life that is born unto me:
spirit moving across a body of black water,
where the sick and wounded are healed—
a circle, a square, a cross,
the names of the months of the Great Year,
Adamic and pre-Adamic times—
a new heaven and a new earth are created—
at the center of which is the arrow broken in the hour of birth—

I did not break the arrow that is my life,
that shot through the air on its projectory,
shot through space, the bow pulled taut
and the arrow released like a wild animal,
like a bullet or a missile to its unknown destination,
entering the air, penetrating the darkness,
penetrating the flesh of the bear, ripping into the stag's flesh,
ripping apart the paper on which is written indecipherable notes,
bouncing off the rocky cliff, falling to the ground
to a field of weeds, missing the bull's eye—

The Room of Love

We sit eating supper
at small wooden tables,
the kind with folding legs
that collapse to be stored
when not used; I sit
on the edge of the bed
while you are on the love seat
only feet across from me,
bundled in a maroon blanket
looking like the child
you were, adorable
at age eight with feet

not reaching the floor;
the room is illuminated
by a single sixty watt
incandescent light bulb
inside a brown lampshade,
and the small black Grundig
radio is tuned to Radio Classique
from Ile Ste. Helene.

It is this moment,
sitting here, eating supper
together, when the room
seems the only place
that exists; outside these walls
there is outer space
and darkness—stars, moons,
planets, asteroids, comets,
and black holes—and beyond
space, God, angels, and saints
are in a chorus of celestial music,
but even God can't stop
the slow turning wheels of endings
and beginnings that remind us
of our mortality—only love
seems to transcend time and space—
and perhaps God stands in silence
in the presence of love.
Some lovers know the room
of love, placed at the center
of existence, and having
visited this room they know
the meaning of life is fulfilled
and nothing has been in vain.

Visiting Girouard Avenue in 1963

As a child, I walked up
the grey wooden stairs
at Grandmother's flat
on Girouard Avenue,
it was Christmas
and what remained
of the family gathered,
Grandmother, Great Aunt Essie,

Uncle Herbie and Auntie Dorothy,
Uncle Alex and Auntie Ivy,
my mother, brother,
and I. Late one Christmas Eve,
almost forty years later,
after driving friends
home, I parked the car
outside the old flat, the only place
on the street with lights
still on at that late hour,
and sat in the car outside
Grandmother's door
where I waited as a child,
waited that night
as though she would
appear again, walk down
the grey stairs and call me
to join the family
for Christmas dinner,
as though
they were all still there,
and no time had intervened
since I was a child, as though
the years of my youth
had not passed and the man
I was to become—
sitting alone in a parked car
on Christmas Eve—
did not yet exist
except in some cold
distant future night.

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