

Remembering Artie Gold

Stephen Morrissey

his death is a great shock that
I cannot express
I wonder why he died like that?
now, his living seems
so perfect!

—Artie Gold
cityflowers (1974)

Artie Gold died in February 2007, a month after his sixtieth birthday. Artie was passionate about poetry and art, a friend to many people, and a highly intelligent man. My intention here is to offer a portrait of Artie as I remember him, the Artie that I knew and loved as only old friends can remember each other, making allowances for behaviour, and humbled by time and age. I have many memories of Artie Gold. I even remember the first time I met him.

It was the spring of 1973. I was completing my B.A. at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in English Literature. As a young poet—I had just turned twenty-three years old and had been writing poetry for the previous eight years—I attended all the poetry readings, at Sir George Williams, McGill, Dawson College, Karma Coffee House, and other places. I had already published my first poetry chapbook, *Poems of a Period* (1971). In March of that year I met Guy Birchard, a poet from Ottawa, a year older than me, who had also published a poetry chapbook, *First Sight* (1973) and who lived on Durocher Street. We became good friends and began to meet and talk poetry. One evening in April we met at Karma Coffee House, on the north-west corner of Crescent and de Maisonneuve; we heard someone read their poems and afterwards Guy said he was reading there the following week and would I like to read after him? That was the first poetry reading I gave.

At the time that we met, Guy was also organizing a poetry reading at Vehicule Art, an art gallery on Ste. Catherine Street. One day he mentioned another poet he knew, someone called Artie Gold, whom he had invited to read at Vehicule. Would I like to meet Artie? He had spoken of me to Artie who said he wanted to meet me. So, on May 24, 1973 I met Guy at his place; later, around 5 p.m., we walked over to Artie's home on Lorne Crescent in the McGill University student ghetto. Guy told me that Paul Robeson, the famous American baritone, had once lived next door to Artie's on Lorne Crescent; when the police raided Robeson's house because of his Communist sympathies, they took all the books about Communism, as well as any book that simply had a red cover. That bit of Lorne Crescent lore must have come to Guy from Artie. Arriving at Artie's, we walked up the stairs to his flat and entered a world I had never been a part of before.

Artie Gold was a young poet, only three years older than me. I was impressed with everything about Artie from the moment I met him. I was impressed by his study filled with poetry books and poetry magazines like *Beatitude* and *Yugen*, and mimeographed poetry newsletters from Cleveland, Vancouver, and Toronto; by his black spring-bound binders filled with hundreds of pages

of his poems in manuscript; by his large collection of antique bottles; by his collection of antique tin containers that once contained cocaine and opium from the days when it could be sold legally; by his Chinese porcelain collection, much of it given to him by his father and the stories of his father, who ran an import business and was visiting Peking at that moment; by his art magazines celebrating the life of American artists, including Jackson Pollack and artists who lived in Buck County; by his long play records of music by Charles Ives, Charlie Mingus, Glen Gould playing Bach, opera, and obscure music I'd never heard of; by his rock collection and information on rocks and semi-precious stones that he had studied while a student in geology in Colorado; and more!

That evening, or on one of the other occasions I visited Artie that summer, I also met Mary Brown who was the mother of Candy, his old girl friend. When Artie and Candy split up Artie stayed on living with Mary. It was originally Mary Brown's flat, she taught at St. George's, a private school, and now Mary had her daughter's ex-boyfriend sharing her home. On these visits Artie read his poems out loud, we drank coffee, and he talked and talked and talked. It was summer and hot and there was Artie, reclining on the couch in the living room, an open package of American cigarettes that he smoked despite already having breathing problems, and then the coughing would begin and he pulled his inhaler from his shirt pocket and had a couple of quick puffs before he'd light up another cigarette. Meanwhile, there was a cat sleeping on a hand-made antique quilt in Mary Brown's bedroom, a little pile of toenail clippings on the coffee table, and always Artie's monologues on the most obscure topics. These were rarely conversations, they were Artie talking, usually intelligent and well informed, that couldn't be interrupted, because how do you interrupt someone who stops talking only to light up another cigarette or get more coffee? How could I interrupt Artie when he knew so much more than I did, when he was more experienced, and when I had nothing but respect for his intelligence and commitment to poetry? It was all learning for me; I was in awe of him, and respected him as a gifted poet from the first visit. I would leave after hours of sitting and listening, often with a headache from trying to keep up with what he was saying. Still, it was meeting the real thing, a real poet. That was Artie Gold.

That evening when we first met, Artie discussed the Montreal poetry scene: He felt Louis Dudek and Irving Layton had polluted the poetry waters with their fighting and now the scene was full of conflict, and then Artie said "let's do something about it, let's make a poster," and he did, right away, in the living room, writing on a large sheet of cardboard: "Anyone interested in poetry contact, Artie, Guy, or Stephen..."

I remember, in early June, meeting Guy and going to Artie's. After Guy left Artie and I walked down to Ste. Catherine Street and had coffee at an A&W restaurant. It was around 9 p.m. There was always a lot of laughing and joking with Artie, and Artie's stories that I sometimes wondered if they were true, or if they were the product of his imagination. Artie complained that the older poets were always fighting, that we needed to start a poetry newsletter and distribute it each month, leave it in bookstores, free of charge, he would pay for it. It was around this time that I became aware of Artie's drug use, speed, and entering his study one day found a syringe and spoon on his desk. But that was Artie's habit, his choice, he never spoke of it to me, it was what he felt he needed. To me, it was just another aspect of Artie, it was neither good nor bad. That's also how he could write for four day stretches, then sleep for four days, and then begin the whole process again.

One day in mid-June that year I met Guy downtown and we went to Vehicule Art Gallery, located at 61 Ste. Catherine Street West, it was the first time I visited the gallery. Vehicule Art had its first exhibition on October 13, 1972; the gallery exhibited conceptual art, photography, abstract art, experimental art, it was one of the alternative art galleries in Canada that existed at the time, sponsored by the Canada Council; it was also a place for dance performances and poetry readings. What eventually became Vehicule Press was located in the back of the gallery. By the early-1980s, the art gallery had closed and the press kept the Vehicule name and found premises elsewhere.

Posters had been printed at the gallery for the poetry reading that Guy had organized and he and I went to Mansfield Book Mart, the Sportsman's Club, and other places and put up posters.

On June 24, 1973 we had what may have been the first poetry reading at Vehicule Art. The poets that read were Guy Birchard, Cam Christie (a friend of Guy's), Artie Gold, Glen Siebrasse (the publisher of Delta Press), Richard Sommer (a poet and one of my professors at SGWU, whom I had invited), Joan Thornton (who didn't show up), and myself. Artie read poems about his mother. I was the youngest poet, I was inexperienced, and it was only my second reading. Around this time, Guy Birchard began an itinerant lifestyle, he left Montreal, returned a few months later, and continued to come and go, finally living in London, San Francisco, Vancouver, and other cities.

I knew Artie Gold and saw him on an on-going basis during the 1970s. It was in the mid-1970s that a group of poets who hung out at Vehicule Art began to organize a reading series for the gallery. Artie Gold, Endre Farkas, John McAuley, Claudia Lapp, Ken Norris, Tom Konyves, and myself became known as the "Vehicule Poets." I met Endre Farkas briefly back in 1969 at Sir George Williams University when he was publishing a magazine. Later, Endre was an editor for Vehicule Press and started his own press that published poetry, The Muses' Company. I met Ken Norris around 1975, we had both been students of Louis Dudek at McGill University, where I earned my M.A. in English literature in 1976. I met Tom Konyves at Richard Sommer's house around 1973 when contributor's copies of Robert Morrison's *Anthol* were being distributed. A few years later Tom gave up his conventional approach to poetry, wrote his well-known poem "No Parking," and then got involved with something he called "videopoetry." I met Claudia Lapp at Vehicule Art Gallery and liked her poetry, and her sense of mysticism; she left Montreal in 1979 and returned to her native United States. I always liked John McAuley and he and I organized the reading series at Vehicule one year. John had an eccentric sense of humour and is a very talented poet. He once lay on the floor in Richard Sommer's living room and tried to light his farts on fire with a butane lighter. Artie was never fully comfortable with the group name. What held us together was our friendship, an inclusive approach to poetry, and the reading series at Vehicule Art Gallery. I think we all felt that Artie, although the same age as the rest of us, was the eminence gris of the group. Artie was special, he was born "Artie Gold," he did not assume this identity, he did not grow into being "Artie Gold," that persona was both his lifelong burden and blessing.

The readings we organized were held at the gallery every Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m. Some of the visiting poets I remember are Al Purdy, bpNichol, The Four Horsemen, Ann Waldman, Robert Kelly, Clayton Eshleman as well as many Montreal poets. The reading series at Vehicule Art became the most important poetry venue for English-speaking poets who lived in Montreal or poets who wanted a reading from outside the city. The poetry series at Sir George Williams had come to an end, and McGill University rarely had readings, except for exceptional poets like W.H. Auden, who I once heard read there. The reading series at Vehicule Art was always international, never only Canadian or Montreal poets. I think it was Artie who insisted on inviting poets from the United States, on a vision of poetry that was never constrained by borders or nationalism but always aimed for the best in contemporary poetry. It was an exciting time to be a young poet in Montreal.

Just a block from Artie's home on Lorne Crescent is The Word Bookstore, co-owned by Adrian King-Edwards and poet Lucille King-Edwards. I remember the first time I went to The Word, it was then still in the living room of Luci and Adrian's flat on Milton, later they moved the bookstore to its present location in a storefront next door. The store is filled, floor to ceiling, with an excellent selection of second-hand and antiquarian books. Artie had his own chair in the middle of the store, and made this one of the places he visited on an almost daily basis. I remember being at the bookstore when Joe Rosenblatt was in Montreal; Artie was present, as he always seemed to be present whenever poets were visiting Montreal or anything significant in poetry was happening in his neighbourhood. The Word was an important meeting place for both local and visiting poets; I

guess we all gave readings at one time or another at The Word, where we were always made to feel welcome and where poets, writers and literature were valued.

Around 1977, Artie Gold, Ken Norris, and Endre Farkas became the first poetry editors of Vehicule Press. They donated their expertise to the press, published books by George Bowering, Cathy Ford, David McFadden, as well as local poets, including my first book *The Trees of Unknowing* (1978), and established a national reputation for Vehicule Press. I remember one evening going to Artie's home and sitting in his kitchen while he and Ken decided which poems would be in my book. A few months later, when that year's books were launched, including my own, many of us attended the book launch at Powerhouse Art Gallery on St. Dominique, one street east of St. Laurent. I remember talking with Artie that afternoon and meeting John Glassco, the well-known author of *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, and other writers.

In 1978, during the League of Canadian Poet's AGM in Montreal, the young west coast poets Carolyn Zonailo and Cathy Ford visited Artie's Lorne Crescent flat. As well, over their days in Montreal, they met most of the other Vehicule Poets. Carolyn Zonailo was the founding editor of Caitlin Press and Cathy Ford had joined her in this endeavour. At the time, Vehicule Press was publishing a book of poems for Cathy Ford. Where was I during their visit? I don't know. It was not until 1991 that I would meet CZ, when she would visit Montreal for another AGM, and we have been together ever since. Artie's home was always "Fort Poetry," a place where poets visiting Montreal would meet, where the excitement of poetry was always present, and Artie's home away from home was The Word Bookstore on Milton.

By the mid-1980s I saw less of Artie—in 1979 I moved to a house in the country, sixty miles outside of Montreal, where I lived for the next eighteen years—but Artie and I always kept in touch. One day I was talking with Artie and he told me this story: He had seen a balloon blowing along the street towards him and had picked it up, and on the balloon were several cat hairs. I didn't really know what to make of this story at the time, a story that he seemed to find significant. Now I see that it was an ironic story for Artie because he loved cats, called one of his chapbooks *some of the cat poems* (1978), and he had developed an allergy to cat dander, and then, gradually, to just about everything in his environment. "Cats have ruined my life/ It's as simple as that," he writes in one of his poems; this might seem like hyperbole until placed in the context of his life. Probably some of Artie's friends and acquaintances doubted the reality of his allergies. Perhaps they thought the extreme care he took regarding what he experienced as allergy triggers were symptomatic of psychological rather than physical problems. Artie was allergic to an environment that many of us live in with no trouble at all, and this devastated his life.

In 1997, CZ and I moved to western Nôtre Dame de Grace not far from the street where I grew up. We were now living a few blocks from Artie. As time went on, we became a part of Artie's "support" team of friends. When Artie's landlord decided to install new windows in his building, Artie phoned, desperate for help. The workers were making a mess, they were making him sick. I went to the building and the air was filled with plaster dust, old windows leaned against walls, and dirt and garbage lay on the hallway floors. Eighty-year old plaster dust, coming from the inside the walls, was entering Artie's apartment as they removed the old windows, and his breathing was at risk. CZ spoke with a lawyer and then with his landlord; on behalf of Artie an agreement was negotiated: Artie would pay someone to install the windows in his apartment; they would do the job without raising dust. Artie was saved! He would not have to move!

The air quality in Montreal can be very bad during the summer, and this is especially difficult for people with breathing problems. In June 2006 CZ, who has asthma, was very ill and a month

later had to be admitted to the Montreal Chest Institute. Artie was very helpful that summer in preparing us for what to expect at the MCI, he had been an outpatient there for many years. Later that summer Artie was also admitted to the same hospital as he was having severe breathing problems. This was a turning point for Artie as he was offered to move into the hospital, to take up residence there, due to the severity of his illness. His choice was a courageous one, it was to live as independently as possible for whatever time he had left in his life, rather than to stay in the hospital and wait to die. He chose to live in his own apartment, to continue working on his poetry, and be surrounded by the things he had collected over his lifetime.

CZ and I met Artie for coffee on January 1, 2007 to celebrate their upcoming 60th birthdays. It had been a mild winter so far and a new Second Cup coffee shop had opened directly across the street from Artie's building. I went up to his apartment to get Artie who came out with his knapsack on his back containing an oxygen tank and plastic tubing to his nose to help him breathe. In the lobby we stopped for Artie to rest and he pointed out the fossils in the granite walls. Crossing the street he commented that he hadn't gotten laid in twenty years. Then we entered the Second Cup where they knew him and welcomed him. CZ asked Artie something about opera and then the "Artie Show" began, his monologue about opera and what operas he liked, that the name "Verdi" is an acronym. We gave him two notebooks in which to draw. He gave us one of his drawings that he had done and a photocopy of one of his other drawings, in an old legal document folder, and stuck at the bottom of the folder was a yellow post-it that Artie had written on, in pencil, "There is a dog on my floor (apt @ end of hall) July '03. Mongrel/ german shepherd. (grrr!)." Later, I walked Artie to his apartment, he was exhausted. We entered the lobby of his building. I wanted to help him, but he declined, he walked up the stairs, resting at each one.

After that meeting, CZ spoke with Artie, about opera, on the phone. I visited him several times, bringing him white T-shirts from Zeller's, cans of chick peas, croissants, tomatoes, and other groceries he lived on, heard about the new tenant next door who had two dogs and how the dander was entering his apartment. He was unhappy living alone, his finger tips were cracked and he was having trouble using his old can opener. He returned to me the two notebooks we had given to him, he was allergic to them. However, his last phone call to us was upbeat, he told a joke he had heard on television and suggested we meet for coffee. But that was never to happen.

On Valentine's Day Endre Farkas left a message saying that he had tried to contact Artie but there was no answer. He was concerned. Had I spoken with Artie? I went to Artie's apartment building, I stood outside his door and listened for any sounds. I could hear the tenants upstairs arguing or talking loudly. I spoke with the janitor who said Artie had been admitted to Hôtel Dieu Hospital. Just before midnight on Valentine's Day, Endre phoned. He had gone to Artie's apartment. He called the police who forced the door open. They found Artie's body in his bed.

A week after Artie died, the police allowed representatives for Artie's family to enter his apartment. As a friend of Artie's, I asked that I could also be present. An hour later, Endre Farkas and Adrian King-Edwards joined us. Before they arrived, I took photographs of Artie's apartment as he had left it. I wanted a visual record of Artie's presence—the apartment was an extension of Artie's being—and few people had entered the apartment while he lived there. Soon, boxes of papers were being moved, garbage discarded, and old clothes put in large plastic garbage bags for the Salvation Army.

In his sixty years Artie Gold had to contend with his bad health; he lost his mother at an early age and there were many family difficulties; he had a long-time drug habit that may also have been, for Artie, the only relief from his tormented life. His bad health kept him isolated. Very few

people were allowed into Artie's apartment since he was allergic to the dander on their clothes. For someone as outgoing as Artie, who loved to meet with friends and have coffee, talk, tell jokes, read poems, and discuss poetry, living for long periods of time isolated must have made a lonely life for him. However, the apartment was not an unhappy or depressed place. Artie's psyche, as reflected in his apartment, was not unpleasant, angry, or negative. It was a place of poetry, art and creativity, it was full of books, music, his literary papers, correspondence, drawings he did, his collections of antique bottles, rocks, and memorabilia. His home did not seem to reflect a place of sickness, except for the presence of several oxygen tanks that he relied on to breathe. As well, Artie had a dialogue with himself which could be seen in the many notes, reminders, lists of things to do, phone numbers, aphorisms and poems he wrote that were posted on the walls. This was not a man who had given up on life, but someone who was as involved with life and people as he could be; it was the apartment of a creative man who had tremendous vitality of spirit and will if not of body.

Most of Artie Gold's published work is from his early years, before health and other circumstances overwhelmed him. If there is a body of later work, the publication of this will be a literary event to which we can all look forward. Artie was charismatic, and he was also a loveable character for many of us. No one was indifferent to Artie Gold, he elicited strong reactions in people. To some people he could be abrasive, dismissive, and argumentative. He could be demanding. I know he could be all of these things, but that was not my experience of Artie Gold. He apologized to me when he felt he had said something hurtful. He was generous and kind to me. I loved him for himself, for his spirit, for his immense talent. I loved him because he was Artie Gold and people like Artie are rare in this life. I was grief stricken when Artie died. It seemed that a piece of my own life had ended.

We can all honour Artie Gold by reading his poems—his poetry is compassionate, intelligent, and filled with wit and humour—it is the work he completed, the fulfillment of his mission in life. The body of work of poetry and drawings and aphorisms are the continued incarnation of Artie Gold after his death, it is his corner of immortality and grace, as a poet who dedicated his life to his work.

In memoriam, Artie Gold: January 15, 1947 – February 14, 2007

Bibliography:

Books by Artie Gold:

cityflowers, Delta Press, Montreal, QC, 1974

Even Yr Photograph Looks Afraid of Me, Talon Books, Vancouver, BC, 1975

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Books by or about the Vehicule Poets:

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A Real Good Goosin', Talking Poetics, Louis Dudek and The Vehicule Poets, Maker Press, Montreal, QC, 1981

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The "Vehicule Chronology," part of the Vehicule Art Gallery archives housed at Concordia University in Montreal, was a source for some information in this essay.



Postscript: Fifteen photographs of A. Gold's apartment ...



By Stephen Morrissey

Introduction and photographs © Stephen Morrissey 2007

Right: The last photograph I took of Artie Gold, returning to his apartment located across the street, after an April 2004 meeting with fellow Vehicule Poets (Claudia Lapp, Ken Norris, Tom Konyves, Endre Farkas, and myself; John McAuley was absent) to celebrate the publication of **The Vehicule Poets_Now** (ed. Konyves & Morrissey).

Introduction:

A week after Artie Gold died, the police allowed representatives for Artie's family to enter his apartment. The police had padlocked the apartment until Artie's next of kin could be notified of his death. As an old friend of Artie's, I asked that I could also be present when the apartment was opened.

In the hour between being allowed to enter the apartment by the police and the beginning of the disbursement of Artie's belongings, I took many photographs of Artie's apartment, as he left it before he died. I wanted a visual record of Artie's presence for posterity. Artie was highly allergic to animal and human dander and because of this very few people were allowed to enter his home, otherwise the one place where he was safe from allergen triggers would be contaminated.

Artie Gold was, as Endre Farkas writes, "One of Canada's finest poets." His entire life was dedicated to poetry. Here, then, is a photographic record of Artie Gold's last home, as he left it, before he departed this "veil of tears."

Stephen Morrissey
Montreal, May 2007





Stephen Morrissey was born in Montreal, of several generations of Irish descent. He has published seven books of poetry, as well as chapbooks. During the 1970s he participated in poetry events with the Vehicule Poets. He has edited two literary magazines, "what is" and "The Montreal Journal of Poetics." **Mapping the Soul, Selected Poems 1978-1998** was published by The Muses' Company, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Stephen Morrissey and Carolyn Zonailo co-founded Coracle Press in 2000. Stephen Morrissey teaches English Literature at Champlain College, Montreal. Visit the poet at www.stephenmorrissey.ca.