

From *Confessions of a True Believer*

1979 THE VEHICULE POETS

There are only two times I remember all seven of the Vehicule Poets being in the same place at the same time. All of the other times we were available in a representative sampling. Often there were four or five of us. And the combinations changed.

Affinities attracted us to one another and attached us to one another. The group was a swirling constellation. A quadrant of the universe. But there were no membership cards and we did not hold regular meetings. Accident played as much a part in our activities as a group as intention did.

Sometime in late 1978 or early 1979 we had an afternoon meeting of all of the Vehicule Poets at Artie's house. We were there to discuss whether or not we were really a group, and whether we wanted to go out to the world self-identified as a group in an anthology.

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Who were the seven people who gathered at Artie's house in late 1978 or early 1979?

Claudia Lapp was 32 years old, American born. She was teaching in the CEGEPS out at John Abbott College. She had written two books, *Honey* and *Dakini*.

Artie Gold was 31 at the time, born in Brockville, raised in Montreal. His books included *cityflowers*, *Even yr photograph looks afraid of me* (Talon), and *some of the cat poems*.

Tom Konyves had been born in Budapest and raised in Montreal. He was 31 years old. His published books were *Love Poems* and *No Parking*.

John McAuley was a native Montrealer, having been born and raised in Pointe Claire. He was thirty years old. His books included *nothing ever happens in pointe claire*, *Mattress Testing* and *Hazardous Renaissance*.

Endre Farkas was 30 years old. He'd been born in Hungary, and emigrated with his family to Canada when he was 8 years old in 1956. He had published two books, *Szerbusz* and *Murders In The Welcome Café*.

Stephen Morrissey was a native Montrealer. He was 28 years old. His book *The Trees Of Unknowing* had recently been published by Véhicule Press.

Ken Norris was born and raised in New York City. At the time of the meeting he was 27 years old. His publications included *Vegetables*, *Under The Skin* and *The Perfect Accident*.

We all settled into the couch and chairs in Artie's comfortable living room and began to discuss the matter of whether we were or weren't the Vehicule Poets.

There was a lot more discussion than I thought there needed to be. Some people needed more process than others. It all went on for several hours. Eighth Vehicule poets were proposed and dismissed. Why it was seven poets, and *these* seven poets, was discussed at length.

Eventually, Artie and I went into the kitchen to cut a deal. He would stop raising objections to a group anthology called *The Vehicule Poets* if he and Claudia edited it, and if he wrote the Introduction. I was fine with both asks. Deal.

We then went back into the living room and I kept my mouth shut until he could close the deal with the others. That took another hour.

Then the deal was done. We'd all kick in some bucks, and the anthology would come out with John's Maker Press in the Fall. We were starting our migration *away* from Vehicule Press.

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By 1979, the Editorial Board at Vehicule was coming in for a lot of criticism as to who we were publishing. Now that Véhicule Press was operational other people wanted in. As far as they were concerned, we were just publishing our friends. The press would be a lot more valuable to the literary community of Montreal if it was publishing *them*.

I am pretty sure that Simon and Guy heard this a lot. Because by 1979 there was talk of expanding the editorial board. By the end of the year there was talk of adding three editors. By 1980 we'd be receiving letters telling us our services were no longer required.

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On a sunny day in late April or early May the Vehicule Poets, all of them, showed up late in the morning at Chris Knudsen's studio on Drolet Street. We were there to have our picture taken.

We'd asked Chris to design the cover for *The Vehicule Poets*, and he'd decided that the way to go would be a group portrait.

As the Group of Seven knew: seven is a lot of people.

There was no harmonious consistency in the Vehicule Poets. We'd just decided that, for one another, we would dull our sharp elbows.

Chris had us sit up against one of the walls in his studio. I sort of remember there being artwork (his artwork) hanging up above our heads. But it was taken out of the photograph. The picture of us that was used for the cover is just the seven of us, leaning back against a white wall, sitting on varathaned hardwood floorboards.

All the way at the right, Stephen looks the most proper. All the way at the left, Endre looks the most improper, and is mugging for the photographer. In-between, Tom and John and I are looking at the camera, and Claudia and Artie are joking around. We're all together but we're all different.

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When Artie was working on *Romantic Words*, Joe Rosenblatt asked him for poems for *Jewish Dialog*. Artie sent him a bunch of stuff (as he was prone to do) and Joe selected the poems he wanted. When the issue came out there were all of these R.W. poems with numbers. I am *guessing* that was Artie's idea, but it might have been Joe's.

Artie gave me a copy (he had spares) and I started flipping through it, saw all of the numbered R.W.s. "Ah, I get it," I said, "R.W.--Romantic Words."

"It's also Ruby Wounds," Artie said.

"Ruby Wounds?" I asked.

Artie then started telling me about O'Hara's poem "Ode To Willem De Kooning." I looked puzzled, as I often was when Artie was philosophizing about poetry. "Just read it when you get home," he said, and moved along to another life topic, probably involving food.

When I got home I opened up my copy of *The Collected Poems Of Frank O'Hara* and found the poem. It's one of those wandering odes of O'Hara's where he is trying to show that he can do Abstract Expressionism in words. The payoff for "ruby wounds" comes at the end of the poem:

A bus crashes into a milk truck
and the girl goes skating up the avenue
with streaming hair
roaring through fluttering newspapers
and their Athenian contradictions
for democracy is joined
with stunning collapsible savages, all natural and relaxed and free

as the day zooms into space and only darkness lights our lives,
with few flags flaming, imperishable courage and the gentle will
which is the individual dawn of genius rising from its bed

"maybe they're wounds, but maybe they are rubies"

each painful as a sun

1957

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For me, the most significant book we published in the years we were editors at Véhicule Press was Artie Gold's *before Romantic Words*. If you have a copy of this book in your library, I consider you to actually understand what's going on. If not, well. . .

When we published it, I felt like I was a member of the team when City Lights published Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*. That's how momentous this book was *for me*. And I don't understand people who don't own a copy of it and don't think it is one of the fifty greatest poetry books *ever*.

With *cityflowers* Gold demonstrated his skill as a poet. In *Even yr photograph looks afraid of me* he established his credentials as (what Bowering calls him in one of his many introductions to Gold) a "tabloid cantor." *some of the cat poems* makes a case for both his humour and his sensitivity. *before Romantic Words* just delivers the goods poem after poem after poem.

Not surprisingly, it opens with his "Sonnet" that was passed from hand to hand back in 1976. It would be a mistake to think that Artie was never in on the aesthetic wars that roiled through Montreal in pretty much every generation.

The poems of his that are in *The Oxford Book Of Canadian Verse in English* are from *before Romantic Words*. As are a lot of the other poems of his that have been anthologized. It's the book in which he is the most revealingly himself. It is one of the great books in our literature. You should read it.

What we didn't know at the time was that he wouldn't publish another book after it for thirteen years. And that book would only come into existence because I insisted that he really needed to have a Selected Poems available. After *before Romantic Words*, poetry corporal Gold went MIA for a long time.

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The Vehicule Poets was published at the end of the summer of 1979. It was printed and bound at the Vehicule print shop. Maybe it raised a few eyebrows in-house.

The selections of each of the poets were fairly representative. Artie wrote an interesting introduction that the folks in the book are still discussing forty years on.

When Artie died in 2007, the headline of his obituary in the *Globe & Mail* referred to him as "Vehicule poet Artie Gold." That might not have entirely pleased him.

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Louis Dudek's review of *The Vehicule Poets* didn't appear in *The Montreal Gazette* until February 16, 1980.

That Louis took the time to review the book is interesting to begin with. He could have easily passed. But he went out of his way to draw attention to it.

His review was "mixed." He said that it contained "terrific and terrible poetry." Nevertheless, he supported the "aesthetic revolution" we were promoting.

His concluding paragraph is worth quoting, for all sorts of reasons.

Put them all together and you have The Vehicule Poets, a branch of Montreal poetry to puzzle the monophones of Canada. As Edwin Arlington Robinson said when he heard Walt Whitman read aloud, "If that's not poetry, it is something greater than poetry."

Yes. It is life.

To me, that is an interesting conclusion for a High Modernist to come to.