

# Obituaries

ARTIE GOLD, 60 // POET

## He knew the rules and when to break them

Talented but impatient Montrealer made his name as a member of the Véhicule Poets

BY M. J. STONE MONTREAL

Cut from the same ilk as the consumptive poet John Keats, Artie Gold lived his life like a man who had nothing to lose. A talented writer with an irritable streak as big as his heart, he was a loyal friend to some and a bitter enemy to others.

As edgy as his verse, Mr. Gold was drawn toward extremes. In the introduction to *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz* (1992), a compilation of his poetry, George Bowering praised his former student.

"One hears that Artie Gold does not conduct a particularly safe life ... but I wouldn't know for sure. I know that his lines are not something, I, for instance would dare to walk across Niagara on. He takes chances. So while he can somehow invest an accurate and homely image with great sadness, 'the tumbler lying on its side on the darkened rug,' he can also take risks that fling a kind of pleaded reality at you: 'in the soft plaid mesquite/she extends her arms to me.'"

The urgency Mr. Bowering described is especially evident in Mr. Gold's 1978 book *Some of the Cat Poems*. Playful and individualistic, his writing is equal parts gusto and caricature:

Shut in by this rain pedalling incessant as a bicyclist  
glued to the thought of summer  
because it is August  
and not fully wanting to survive  
this holocaust

I shove aside all the mail I  
had been waiting weeks for  
like a hungry man who'd  
pounded the table, his plate,  
and play with my typewriter,  
my knife and fork

In this life there is always villainy  
of upset. I know it  
with the time of my life un-  
read, my friends kicked  
aside is where my kingdom  
my habits are

poor company, mildewy intentions  
I am not one to get involved  
with, backstage I am at your door,  
a bouquet of poison sumac,  
pounding!

Mr. Gold was raised in Montreal. Bothered by bronchial problems since childhood, he sought solace from his health problems in the contemplative world of poetry. Reared in an affluent family that was rife with sibling discord, poetry was both escape and salvation.

But before he could follow the road less travelled and declare himself a bard, he enrolled at the Colorado School of Mines, an engineering university specializing in geosciences. He dropped out after year and wandered the continent for several months before returning to Montreal to attend Sir George Williams University. He dropped out again a year and a half later and began pursuing his dream of writing poetry in earnest.

Mr. Gold quickly made a name for himself as a member of the Véhicule Poets. Along with Andre Farkas, Tom Koryves, Claudia Lapp, John McAuley, Stephen Morrissey and Ken Norris, the group contributed to a Montreal cultural renaissance in the early 1970s.

Emerging out of Véhicule Art (Inc.), a Sainte Catherine Street art gallery that opened in 1972, the venue provided a forum for experimental artists denied access to more commercial galleries. Equipped with a printing press in the back, poets and painters converged with a common commitment to revolutionize the Montreal cultural scene. They survived as a group until 1981.

Mr. Gold acknowledged American poet Frank O'Hara, a founding member of the New York School, as one of his influences. Mr. Gold's poetry has a similar immediacy and lyricism. In Ken Norris and Marianne Stenbeck-Lafon's *Canadian Poetry I* handbook, the authors wrote that Mr. Gold had a distinctly individualistic and humorous world view: "His personal poems are not lyrics as much as metaphorical dramatizations. Equally at home in the elegiac and pornographic modes, Gold is a poet who knows all the rules of poetry and when to break them."

Although Mr. Gold may have delighted in breaking poetry's rules, he was a demanding perfectionist and a thorn in



Artie Gold, second from right, used poetry to seek solace from family and health problems.

the side of editors who dared to correct his work - a desire for artistic control that held him back from the prominence he deserved. On the brink of publishing a book of verse with Coach House Press, Mr. Gold's uncompromising position didn't sit well with editor David McFadden and the book was never published.

Another setback took place in the early 1980s, when his bronchitis developed into chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a respiratory illness for which there is no cure. Under a shortness of breath that made the most mundane of tasks physically exhausting, he was forced to reorganize his life. He became obsessed with removing dust, dander and other breathing irritants from his environment, quitting smoking and giving up his cats. But Mr. Gold, who was a profound collector of books and art objects, was unable to relinquish a major dust culprit: his beloved library. Instead of removing his books, he enclosed the entire collection in sandwich bags.

At his lowest point, he wound up on welfare, barely able to support himself. Alienated from his family, he was unaware that his father, who had always suspected that his son's health would eventually catch up with him, had established a trust fund in his name. The discovery went a long way toward maintaining Mr. Gold's quality of life.

Although much has been made about Mr. Gold's uncanny knack for rubbing some people the wrong way, poet Carolyn Zonailo described a man whose courage and lust for life were inspirational. Ms. Zonailo, the wife of Véhicule poet Stephen Morrissey, was also diagnosed with COPD, and said Mr. Gold was a pillar of strength.

"He was blessed with a strong life force and he fought to maintain his independence. People don't realize it, but when you have COPD, a simple walk across the room can leave you gasping for breath. It's amazing how Artie managed so well on his own," she said.

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GEORGE BOWERING

Ms. Zonailo went on to say that if Mr. Gold was sometimes perceived as impatient, it was with good reason. "When you could can hardly breathe, irritation is inevitable."

Although Mr. Gold may have craved independence and fought to the end to maintain it, he was highly dependent upon friends to help him with mundane tasks. A complicated man, his enigmatic personality is perhaps best summed up in a poem by Ken Norris, titled *Artie*:

Artie returns with the arrival of summer,  
bringing with him a crescent moon  
which he plants in the dark blue night sky.  
He returns with stories of the West  
& a black notebook full of poems  
composed on a thousand typewriters. He gives us poems which we take & turn in our hands,  
they are like stars shining in the warm space  
all cynics call the void. He coughs for us  
& we begin to relax, he curses a few enemies  
& our hearts unfold like flowers that have been a long time closed. A bit of that foreign shore  
is brought to us in the lines of his face.

### ARTIE GOLD

Artie Gold was born in Brockville, Ont., on Jan. 15, 1947. He died from pulmonary disease in Montreal on Feb. 14, 2007. He was 60.

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