

This review was originally published in the Reviews section of the League of Canadian Poets website, summer 2024; visit <https://poets.ca/farewell-darkness-review/>.

Farewell, Darkness, Selected Poems

ISBN 978-1-77171-520-1

Poetry 205 Pages 6 x 9

\$24.95 Ekstasis Editions 2023

Review by Cynthia Coristine

I found my voice in poetry when I was able to turn the darkness of my life experiences into poems; I affirmed what I had seen and I said, “thank you, darkness” and “farewell, darkness”; and that is the birth of the poet.

—Stephen Morrissey

In *Farewell, Darkness*, Montreal poet Stephen Morrissey presents a selection of some eighty of his poems written between 1971 and 2021. These poems have been selected from his nine earlier published books of poetry, and from six of his eight chapbooks.

Morrissey’s poems have, as he writes in the preface to the book, consistently focussed on the themes which have been central to his life, namely “the transience of life, family, grief at losing close family members, and romantic love”. Having been written in the shadow of a mountain, (Mount Royal), his poems resonate with Morrissey’s sense of himself as a *Montreal* poet.

Stephen Morrissey’s personal experience with the transience, and fragility, of life began early: in November, 1956, when Morrissey was six years old, his 44-year-old father died following heart surgery in a Boston hospital.

As he was later to write, “My father died, and the light went out”. Compounding the darkness of the loss, was the fact that his father was never spoken about in the immediate family again, and his unmarked grave (at Montreal's Notre Dame des Neiges Cemetery), never visited. This failure to address what had happened in any meaningful way set the stage for the lack of resolution and the unexpressed grief which affected Morrissey as child, and which followed him into later life. He felt “damaged” in some indefinable way which was beyond his ability to express: “I was all alone / just a bone without flesh / or face, just / a hollow sound / a ball bearing / rattling in an empty can.” (From “When Father Died”).

Morrissey realized that the remnants his father's life which had been left behind, were a poor substitute for what he could now, never, come to know about him.

The Return of Memory

returning to the basement in mother's house
my father's business papers once stored
in my cupboard as a child
are still wrapped in brown file folders
it seems no time has intervened
that it is still possible for him to return
and return to these papers ...
what remains of father
expense accounts, business letters to strangers
in daily life we show no more
than these letters reveal...

Determined to preserve, at least, the events of his own life, beginning at the age of 14, Morrissey began to keep a daily diary. He also meticulously chronicled the lives of his extended family members, including those of (unmarried) great aunts and uncles, to ensure that their lives would not be "lost". He would also go on to capture something of their lives in his poetry.

Three Poems on a Single Theme

...my mother's uncle
who lived his last forty years
in a mental hospital
for the poor
left there by his brothers
after their mother died
he took with him
what he owned
breath gone memories
dispersed
seagulls over the grey sky...

Home

I return to Grandmother's
flat although she's dead
almost thirty years,
walk up the grey front stairs
feel the door knob turn
in my hand and smell the

dusty stairwell leading to
the flat's entrance: a large
lace-covered table, a sideboard
and gramophone player broken
many years. I sit with her in silence,
childhood's timeless years,
hours spent staring out a window
at passing streetcars, or playing
with toy cars on a glass-topped
tea wagon.

...off the kitchen is where
her aged father slept; later
it became a junk room, a red
cardboard carton of Cokes
always by a bureau for visitors,
and Auntie Mable returning home
with lemon squares from Woolworth's
downtown. Or Saturday night hockey
on black and white television.

Morrissey found that writing poems was a way – in fact, the only way – in which he was able to find his “voice”.

"Scribble down your nakedness" Allen Ginsburg had advised in a 1967 interview read by the seventeen-year-old Morrissey. "Be prepared to stand naked because most often it is this nakedness of the soul that the reader finds most interesting." After reading Ginsburg's words, Morrissey's course as a poet was set: rather than censor what he wrote, his poems would instead cut to the emotional core of life as he experienced it. This is a path from which Morrissey has never deviated, and one which gives his poems their emotional resonance: to a greater or lesser degree, *we have all been there*.

The Things She Left

The things she left are not many,
furniture divided, years of photographs
sorted through, freezer and piano
rolled into the back of a truck.
A coincidence: the movers were the same men
who moved us here, ten years older,
they are fat and nervous.
Days unwind, a tapestry with threads
cut from a tangled mass of colour

and pulled across a year of leaving.
A thread breaks and the whole
tapestry unravels, becomes a new image:
my wife and son, dog in the back seat,
drive away – her final kiss, but for what?
That I made it easy for her to leave, didn't argue?
Behind me a half-empty house,
no diversions possible in the echoes
of a summer afternoon...

Morrissey's poems are also an affirmation of life, and of the things which sustain it. The sentiments expressed in *The Divining Rod* and in *Reincarnation* are recognizable to anyone who has ever survived a bad marriage, and then been “reborn” into a good one. Rescued by it.

The Divining Rod

...With her I left behind
my old life, with her
I left a dark place
of sleep and endurance,
with her I stopped being
a monk to a dying religion,
my prayers whispered
as I slept as though dead,
vapour, mist, a body
animated by silence and sorrow...

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

The pared down simplicity of the exquisite *Her Red Duffle Coat* are emblematic of Morrissey's work.

Her Red Duffle Coat

Her red duffle coat
lies on a hall bench;
the coat is a pile of cloth
without the presence
of her body in the coat.
Her red duffle coat is cold
without her animating
spirit. It is a limp
rag, less each
day without her
wearing the coat
to give it
reason to exist,
to give the coat
a life force
which is love.
The coat's sleeve
hang by its side,
no embrace
from this red coat;
without her wearing it
it's an empty shell.
The coat
is a prisoner
of her love, when
she wears the coat
it is not
any coat.
but hers.

Morrissey's poems pair the elegiac with the life-affirming, two of the elements which constitute his "signature" as a poet. This is reflected in *Everything Must Have an End*, which is also the last poem in the book.

Everything Must have an End

What is not possible is greater than what is possible
that's what you know about life when you're older
than sixty or seventy years; the limits of existence...

And in the end, what is it you remember?
Thirty-five years teaching? Adult children
gone off to make their own lives? Investments
and the mortgage paid off? Great art and poetry?
Books you've read? Friends you've had?
Or the one you loved, the one who breathed life
into your once young body and soul, that person
you still love in the land and geography of old age.

"Poetry is nothing if not passionate", as Morrissey writes in the preface to *Farewell, Darkness*. "Passion, not the intellect, not fashion, not popularity, not what other people are doing defines poetry." Morrissey's own refusal to tailor his writing to "fashion" is what gives his poems their resonance and their emotional accessibility: by affirming a shared human experience, they can be read again and again, with the unabated pleasure of a first reading.

—Cynthia Coristine

January 8th, 2024

About the reviewer: A native of Montreal, Cynthia Coristine is the co-author, with Ian Brownness, of *From Griffintown to the Square Mile: The Life of James Coristine*