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Farewell, Darkness, Selected Poems

by Stephen Morrissey

Victoria, B.C. Ekstasis Editions,

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Review by Anne Burke

The epigraph of this full-length poetry collection reads: "What is in me is dark,/ Illumine, what is low raise and support [That to the heighth of this great Argument I may assert th' Eternal Providence, And justifie the wayes of God to men.]" an excerpt from John Milton's "Paradise Lost". Morrissey has proclaimed, "All of my work is a celebration of the Divine and a journey towards the Divine". His "God" poems are composed of silence or absence; his mysticism comes from astrology, Jungian psychology, and the dream state; the young son's formative trauma of his father's death is haunting and almost consuming. With a failed first marriage, he grieves openly until passion ultimately overtakes him with a new and sustaining love.

The poet adopts an unbroken continuity for arrangement of the selected poems while acknowledging their sources in his previously published books. From an early chapbook *Poems of a Period* (Montreal: 1971), the poem "A Quebec Evening" finds the poet at nine years of age at a St. Eustache country cottage with his grandmother, aunt, and Uncle Alex. Morrissey's shadow relatives come from generations of his ancestors and he has published online a comprehensive history of his family at: www.morrisseyfamilyhistory.com.

The Trees of Unknowing (Véhicule Press, Montreal, 1978) was his first full length collection, with traditional poems, experimental concrete and sound poems, and a selection of photographs. The title poem "The Trees of Unknowing" recalls the obverse of The Biblical Tree of Knowledge; it contains the frenetic spelling of "cld" for "could", "wld" for "would", "washt" for "washed" and others; four other poems in this section are titled by using the first line of each poem. "Regard as Sacred" is a concrete or pattern poem.

The long poem from *Divisions* (Coach House Press, Toronto, 1983) was written over a three-day period as a catharsis, a purging of emotions, when Morrissey was finding his authentic poetic

voice. Thus, "the poem becomes a written thing" because— or in spite— of "endless repetition in time/of divisions". Furthermore, "entering spaces / areas of silence/this is poetry". In "The Dead in My Life" the poet ponders "the mouth to come out/as words this language/of flies & the dead". "The Poet's Progress" identifies the moment when "we were actually/proud of our/being hidden/this became the/key to our future". In "Language" "my/ mind has become/a writing machine" and this, apparently, includes "the/ contra/ dictions". "The Secret Meaning of the Alphabet" further explores how "I/want to cut/the alphabet open". Experiments in his early writing were drawn from John Cage, the Dadaists and the Surrealists; William Burroughs, and Brion Gysin's "cut-up" technique produced new texts. For more on this, see: "The Cut-up Technique" in *The Green Archetypal Field of Poetry* (Ekstasis Editions, 2022).

"Christos's Fence" was inspired by a European conceptual artist, who erected an 18-foot high, 24 mile-long nylon fence along the Californian coast. "The poem was influenced by and celebrates that fence". Another example of silent division, "that has no end &/no beginning/" as a Chinese screen or calligraphy, in the poem "out the back door" dedicated to Canadian poet George Johnston (1913 – 2004).

From *Family Album* (Caitlin Press, Vancouver 1989) the long poem "Preludes" in five distinct sections spans the season and anticipating the years, resulting in "a reliquary of/events". "The Middle of a Life" draws its title from a 1973 novel *In The Middle of a Life* by Canadian author Richard B. Wright (1937– 2017). The poem praises Christmas family reunions, reflects on an apiary on the Morrison Bridge, and, considering the past, the poet ponders: "would I have lived differently"? In "Three Poems on a Single Theme" he meditates on what death is not: "this leaving anger/in a forest of words". His mother's uncle was committed to a mental hospital. Death is "an unfolding/of flowers/smell/of bergamot/lines/in my grandfather's face". "In Mexico" for Louis Dudek (1918 – 2001) a Canadian poet who instructed at McGill University, Morrissey observes children playing/as they have/always done". "A Day in 1957" was composed on the occasion of his father's funeral, "when I was a child". In "Aunt Mable in P.E.I." he recalls that the furniture was awkward when her "death came like sleep". In "The Return of Memory" he takes inventory of "what remains of father". Recalling his grandmother and Aunt Mable he believes in: "Not grief or death/but life for life, love for love". "Early June in Malone, New York" is about a painting by Edward Hopper (1882-1967) who was the foremost realist painter of 20th-century America. His work is celebrated in this ekphrastic poem, which is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. In "July Near Huntingdon" hieroglyphics is not a place for imagination. Instead, "we become our inheritance". In "End Notes" old beliefs are gone, he holds a dead hummingbird, with intimations of "cycles of death". Instead, "new light on old walls" invigorates his spirit.

The title poem "Farewell, Darkness" from *Family Album* has an apostrophe in this ode which contains a double entendre: the past is evoked with simulated dividing lines; there is a full moon so that shadows are cast; there are "last" indications (repeatedly) related to "who I used to be". A title poem from a chapbook *The Divining Rod* (Greensleeve Editions Edmonton, 1993) deals

with the underground river "in a land of darkness" through a series of personifications associated with divination by "a magic wand,/a unicorn's horn, a wizard's staff"; to reveal his unearthed woman who frees him from his darkness of sorrow. This resurrection theme continues in "Asleep in Her Arms" a poem from a chapbook *The Beauty of Love* (The Poem Factory (Vancouver, 1994) in which a refrain describes his love for her many manifestations in the natural sphere. Three briefer works from *The Carolyn Poems* (The Poem Factory, Vancouver, 1995) are: "I know when a woman..."; "As much grief..."; and "Dig here...." The first mentioned poem emphasizes a man's sense of emptiness by appropriate metaphors; the second poem a symbol for his passionate and grieving heart; and the last, his dreams buried in a darkened sky.

Morrissey's "The Shadow Trilogy" is composed of *The Compass* (Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1993); *The Yoni Rocks* (Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1995); and *The Mystic Beast* (Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1997). "The Compass" alludes to the body as a needle describing the new direction of passion. The apple is red and delicious (symbolizing lust). "Two Tales" is divided into "The Well" which he climbs to reach his beloved and "The Amphora", a two-handled storage jar; they were sometimes used as grave markers, as containers for funeral offerings, or human remains. Lovers "transform themselves/ into God and Goddess". In "Some Days" the poet empathizes with zoo animals when he considers how his family has become invisible. "The Clothes of the Dead" are those he received grudgingly and they are now rendered to ashes. "Bitter Fruit" is about his unhappy first marriage; "You are attracted to darkness, she said". The apple core signifies a "millennia of birth and death". In "The Things She Left" a tapestry unravels and walls collapse; so that we exist alone on Planet Earth. "The Edge" is where the poet experiences emptiness, when "not believing in either God/or His Help". The epitaph is from an American poet Howard Nemerov (1921 – 1991) whose *Collected Poems* won the National Book Award for Poetry, Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and Bollingen Prize. "The Dummy" advises that, although his second child was never born, the poet's half-life has been replaced with a renewed desire for living.

"The Yoni Rocks" are said to increase libido, ease cramps, and balance hormones. A hymn to a woman, the goddess, and all are intended to avoid "dissolution into nothingness", with an allusion to "Winter Evening", a poem by Canadian poet Archibald Lampman (1861 – 1899) but Morrissey seeks "this presence ending grief". In "Fiddling For Love" the music brings him back to childhood, until "we return to the routine/of daily living". He listens to Irish music on the radio or "Elegy" by the French composer Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924).

"Home" is tempered by the past, with a refrain of "going back", from "this/planet third from the sun", where he feels exiled. The poet takes inventory of his Grandmother's house and her belongings, but "the night is dark"; he is moved by a man's love for his son. "In The River" is a metaphor for this mystical and magical transportation from grief through memory, as in a dream, for his Father and son. "Reincarnation" moves into infinity, to gods and goddesses, "Bardic voices, Druid's potion", when "shadows fall". In "Ghosts" he returns to his former home with black-and-white photographs. He contemplates being separated "as though/the other never

existed." "On Woden's Return" alludes to Norse mythology in which the god Odin rides across the sky on a mighty eight-legged horse named "Sleipnir". Although the god "lies across the earth", the dead do not rise from their grief. from *The Mystic Beast*, "Under the Shadows Flee" is about the poet's imposing "a gothic silence" before visiting his father's grave. "When Father Died" takes a more direct approach and the tone is agonized grieving, the more so, because the child must be alone, and the death was "never spoken of again,/no comfort offered". In "Skin" the metaphor of intact flesh is shed and this missing layer functions as a double (or shadow). Ghosts haunt aboveground while the dead are in underground chambers, catacombs. A Shroud of Turin," on which the image of the Crucified Christ was preserved, and a choreography of death" pervade. "Green Eyes" are variable and removable, "as though from another/planet". "The House of Minimal" means a sense of shame and a refrain of "surrender". "World Gone Wrong" is a place of loss for the prisoner. "Lines From Magritte" offers an excerpt "The Forbidden Universe (or Olympia)" on The Forbidden Universe to extol "Every woman/is a Goddess"; in particular, she was the goddess of women and childbirth, marriage, and family.

Morrissey acknowledged his dreams, individual family members, and his grandmother's flat at 2226 Girouard Avenue as his first home. This place figures so much in "my imaginal and creative life" because it was a place of the soul, "it was my beginning, it was my psychic centre." Sample poems from *Girouard Avenue* (Coracle Press, Montreal, 2009) contain excerpts from three longer poems. "Girouard Ave Flat" is dedicated to Canadian poet, memoirist, and novelist John Glassco (1909 – 1981). While Morrissey believes that the City of Montreal was that author's spiritual place and evokes the lost innocence he possessed as a boy, this assessment may be made of Morrissey himself. Glassco's *Selected Poems* won the Governor General's Award in 1971. Morrissey's poem was, in part, also inspired by the book title of *The Dance is One* from F.R. Scott's poem "Dancing". This epitaph is also the inscription on Scott's (and his wife Marion Dale Scott's) headstone in Mount Royal Cemetery. A photo of Morrissey's wife Carolyn Zonailo posing with it was posted by him in his online blog. <https://stephenmorrisseyblog.blogspot.com/2017/08/fr-scott-dance-is-one.html>. Morrissey adopts the mantle of a voice for the souls of the dead. Both Glassco and F.R. Scott were members of The McGill group during the nineteen-twenties, and Morrissey opines, "None of the Montreal Group of poets wrote large bodies of work except for A.M. Klein".

Morrissey praises his Irish working class roots, "We have come far, we descendents of Irish immigrants to this country; we have come far and achieved much." His poem "Hoolahan's Flat, Oxford Avenue" has an epitaph from "Eighth Elegy, Children's Elegy" by American poet and activist Muriel Rukeyser (1913 – 1980) whose *Elegies* was first published by New Directions in 1949. There is a Hawks Nest Workers Memorial and Grave Site. Rukeyser wrote a group of poems *The Book of the Dead* (1938), documenting the details of the industrial disaster when hundreds of miners died of silicosis. Morrissey's poem links with coal mining and cinders, since it is a historical fact that coal was fed "to fifty furnaces". Harvard and Oxford are streets in Montreal where Morrissey grew up. The poem refers to his father's death with an ode to

commemorate him, based on archived papers and diaries. As a function of the poet, "I became an archivist of memory,/an archeologist of the soul". Morrissey posted online photographs, email from an extant neighbour Audrey Keyes, and a link to this poem about Oxford Avenue flats.

There are excerpts from the third long poem "November" with an epigraph from *Moby Dick*, a novel by American author Herman Melville (1819 – 1891). This month is when the poet feels "closest to the unconscious mind, to dreams, to the ancestors, and to Spirit". He wants to remind the reader there is epiphany, spirituality, and dignity in all people. "An Evening in Old Montreal" is set outside the Centaur Theatre at Sainte Francois-Xavier; and, while walking up to Rue Notre Dame, he recalls a mythological centaur. Chiron, in Greek mythology, was the wisest of all the centaurs and known as the "wounded healer" because of his knowledge of medicine. "An Evening in 1957" takes place after a father's death, when the poet and his brother watched boxcars pass by. In the same manner, these years have left him "dark and cold at night". "The Summing-Up", with an epitaph from Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale", happens in November, when the poet feels his burdens, this love of God is similar to the faith he once had as a child. Beginning with dreary November days, "The Rock, Or A Short History of The Irish in Montreal" is about the migration from that Island's potato famine to Montreal; ancestors whose burial remains are in mass graves, in darkness, near an abattoir, now closed. There are emblems in "The Colours Of The Irish Flag" which are Green (field, cold dawn), White (sheet of paper, snow and sky) and Orange (orange sunset, darkness). For Morrissey, "it is also a poem about perseverance, not being defeated, and of inner strength".

From *A Private Mythology* (Ekstasis Editions, Victoria, 2014) "The Poet's Coat" is composed of shadows. "Her Red Duffle Coat" denotes cold, empty, and loneliness without "her". "The Shaman's Coat" is borrowed and has a life of its own. Shamanism is central to Morrissey's journey of the soul; it helped him to understand important life experiences and his concerns in poetry. "The Coat of My Inner Self", although worn since birth. is now wet and old. "The Pillow Coat" portrays a heart beating "as though the earth were a living being". "An Inventory of Coats and Garments" on Chabanel Street" describes a wholesale market in textile, garments, carpet and leather products. Outside that sphere, you may be "wearing last year's dated, worn, and shabby winter coat".

Morrissey believes deeply Poetry Must be Authentic to Psyche ("Visits from Psyche"); she was the goddess of the soul in ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Born a mortal woman, her beauty rivaled that of Aphrodite (Venus) and inspired the love of Aphrodite's son, Eros, god of desire. She visited the poet in "water the depth of dream and memory"; in a second dream, then the third. "Standing Outside The Cedars" is where he lived under the Perseids meteor showers. Given that the first wife was unimaginable, he wrote poems alone. "The Journey Is Complete" provides alternate routes his father may have taken to ask for help from heart specialists at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, in 1956, when he was close to dying. This occasion is the 47th anniversary of his Father's death. "Waking My Love" occurs in an almost completely darkened room. In "The Room of Love", there is playing some Radio Classique from Ile Ste. Helene

where God is silent. "Something Happened" at their not so sweet parting, in an underground parking lot. "That Moment that destroys/everything we have lived for." Cars can be repaired ("A Blue 1954 Chevy") unlike people who are broken and defeated. "A Saturday Afternoon" details the geography of Morgan's Department Store, Philip's Square, downtown Montreal; Woolworth's basement, Ste. Catherine's Street, then Eaton's and Simpson's.

"A Drive in the Country, 1960" describes the Oka Road, the moon, the Francoeur girl near the Trappist monastery; that memorable drive into the darkness, a farmer's market. These fragments are about being contained in the car "with my family, my father dead, [and] what was left of us". "Visiting Girouard Avenue" involves his Grandmother's flat, being in a parked car; Christmas Eve, the poet as a man and as a child. In "Christmas 1970" the poet confesses that he was never a young Icarus, who, in Greek mythology, flew too close to the sun; or as in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" a painting by Pieter Breughel the Elder (1525 – 1569). The poet asks himself, "Did I know then/ that I was on my soul's journey?/ Sitting writing poems,/ did I know this was the source /of my redemption, my vision?" In "Waking at 4 a.m." he is in darkness, silence, waiting for morning. It is the architecture of darkness, "this is when the poem/of morning is created;/ we are workers in the darkness,/early risers, busy with/the enterprise of light." The poem "Hanging by a Thread" pertains to how the family hangs on, attached to memory and duty, so that into darkness we fall. The poem pulses with an apostrophe to "Oh thread, oh broken strings".

From *Everything Must Have an End* (Coracle Press, Montreal, 2021) the poem with this title has an epitaph from Glassco's "The Death of Don Quixote". The poet confesses, "I was born on an island", the soul's great journey is on the rivers of the world. It is about memory and salvation, like the author of the Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the Puritan preacher John Bunyan (1628 – 1688). As a poet, "I collected the minutiae of daily life...." His neighbourhood resembles the "Edward Hopper House"; singing of "Me and My Shadow"; expressing the futile attachment to things. Though Hopper also worked in etching and watercolor, he is best known for his oil paintings, which often convey a sense of melancholy or isolation. As in an earlier poem "Late June in Malone, New York", the poet has apparently stepped into an Edward Hopper painting, since the dated decor has been unchanged since 1955.

To conclude, what ultimately matters most is "The Great Reconfiguration" when his existence underwent a radical reorganization due to a single event, that being the premature death of his father. For Morrissey, he found the single myth to define his life for years. Instead of "The Trees Unknowing", the Biblical story of the Garden myth was the fall from innocence into William Blakean experience. "It was the birth of my soul as a poet; it was the beginning of my journey as a poet".

—Anne Burke