

BIRD SHADOWS

A NOVEL



Jennie Morrow

BIRD SHADOWS

Copyright © 2021 Jennie Morrow

Except for the use of short passages for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced, in part or in whole, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically or mechanically, including photocopying, recording, or any information or storage retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher or a licence from the Canadian Copyright Collective Agency (Access Copyright).



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for our publishing program. We also acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

Bird Shadows is a work of fiction. All the characters portrayed in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Cover design: Val Fullard

Cover art: Jennie Morrow

eBook: tikaebooks.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Bird shadows : a novel / Jennie Morrow.

Names: Morrow, Jennie, author.

Series: Inanna poetry & fiction series.

Description: Series statement: Inanna poetry & fiction series

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210185791 | Canadiana (ebook)

2021018583X | ISBN 9781771338011

(softcover) | ISBN 9781771338035 (PDF) | ISBN 9781771338028 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8626.O772 B57 2021 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

Printed and Bound in Canada.

Published in Canada by

Inanna Publications and Education Inc.

210 Founders College, York University

4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3

Telephone: (416) 736-5356 Fax: (416) 736-5765

Email: inanna.publications@inanna.ca Website: www.inanna.ca

BIRD SHADOWS

A NOVEL

Jennie Morrow



inanna poetry & fiction series

INANNA PUBLICATIONS AND EDUCATION INC.
TORONTO, CANADA

*Bird shadows, disconnected, abandoned on the ground;
millions of shadows from thousands of species, their shape
changed by each tip of the wing, each flutter, each swoop.
Made large and small by each rise and fall. Black manna
from the sky.*

Collect them up, shuffle, and the game begins.

*Would you say this smudge resembles, in any way, a dove or
perhaps a vulture? Could this be the shadow of a sparrow or an
eagle soaring at a hundred feet? Can we ever know for sure?*

*Spirit shadows. Cast in human flesh. Spirits of all species,
as dissimilar as a hawk from a chicken, but so alike to the eye.
And so, the game begins.*

*Would you say this body is that of a kind and giving person
or a con artist flying very high?*

*Let's pretend we are so good it doesn't matter. Let's put
the hawk in the chicken coop and teach the chickens that:
if they are nice they will pretend not to notice,
if they are fair they will make room for it on their perch,
if they are righteous they will believe that God has changed the hawk
into a chicken
...if they are smart they will fly the coop!*

—Jennie Morrow

Mother's Day, 1995

In a field at the edge of the ocean, fourteen white wooden crosses cast lengthy shadows in the early morning light. Two women, dressed in jeans and loose-fitting shirts, unload large square paintings from the back of a silver Dodge Caravan. Two men quickly screw an extra eyelet into the back of each stretcher so the canvases can be secured to the crosses at their bottoms as well as their tops. From time to time, a slight breeze from the direction of the water infects the large areas of canvas with a kite's dream of flying. By ten o'clock the four workers have created a spectacle. The fourteen paintings on fourteen crosses have been spaced ten feet apart. Paths have been mown through the long grass from one site to the next, creating stations. Stations of the Cross.

This is an account of one year in Brood Bay, of how it is remembered in the conscious minds of a few people—memories, fallible memories. Ahhh, but the dreams of those few people construct fantasies that are closer to the truth. Like when I dreamed of my brother-in-law, Warren. He was wearing his dark suit and was hanging from an angle beam on the wharf, caught by a gaff hook in his shirt collar. On his face was a look of bewildered horror—as if he had just realized that he'd gambled on something huge and lost.

Who am I? I'm an artist. Some would say a bit of a misfit. I'm guided by my own scheme of logic. It doesn't happen to coincide with the prevailing current of thought in the place where I live. That doesn't mean that I'm crazy, just displaced. There are many spots in the world where I could live and be thought normal—or so I tell myself. It might be true.

I'm motivated by beauty. I live here in Brood Bay because it has lots of that—beauty, that is. The people around me don't care so much about the beauty. I'd say they're motivated by something else, but I'm not sure what. If I start to guess I will come off seeming unkind, and it's a little early in my story for me to give you a bad impression. I'm too stubborn to fake it to fit in. I have tried. A little bit. For the sake of my sister, Helen. She tells me I make things worse.

I'm an observer. Gotta observe to be an artist. I try to not to be judgmental, but sometimes my observations solidify into opinions based on what I've seen. Is that a bad thing? I suppose that's what happens to all of us, and then we get caught thinking we know things that we don't. And that, in a nutshell, is what my story is about.

Helen's people are churchgoers. I know that they're basically good people, but, as I've said, they're ill-equipped to understand me. They try to be nice, but I can't shake the feeling that they're tolerating me, even though I'm all wrong in my beliefs, on the off chance that the Lord might decide to work through one of them and fix me up. Make me right. Make me worthy. In their presence I feel a strong urge to explain myself. Perhaps defend would be a better word. It's like needing to pee so bad that you have to cross your legs and clench your teeth. I'm sure it makes me act funny.

I go to church with Helen's family now and then when one of her kids is doing something that requires a familial audience. I try to be a good aunt. But the artist in me comes first, aunt second. It makes sense alphabetically.

After attending church with Helen's family at Christmas, I wrote in my journal: *Went to church with Hel—had hoped it would make her happy, but it didn't seem to. I looked for Jesus there. I really did, but I didn't find him.*

It may sound like I was looking to be saved. To "find the lord." But keep in mind that I'm an observer. I was referring to my search for features appropriate for Jesus: a refined nose, without the pudginess of self-indulgence, without the tip of snobbery; warm eyes, eyes capable of seeing souls—understanding, twinkling eyes. I was looking for ears tuned to the sound of other people's voices. And a gentle mouth. A mouth closed as often as open. A mouth used for kind smiles. A mouth that spoke truth. And temples. I wanted my Jesus to have temples fit for God.

I studied a group of children as they sang, making a game of trying to match child to parent. Some were easy. One red-haired child, one red-haired adult. Others were a challenge. I craned my neck around in search of a pair of enlarged nostrils. Helen frowned viciously and shook her head.

I turned back to the front and refocused my attention on the children, fascinated by the eyelids of a particular child. She noticed me staring. I think I frightened her, what with the intensity of my expression. My reputation didn't help, I'm sure. But I couldn't help myself. Her eyelids appeared to be stretched over balls; she had a Lucas Cranach, Botticelli kind of look, like Edith Piaf. I decided that I might give my Jesus eyes like those. That settled, I moved on to mouths. I definitely wouldn't give him a sharp jaw or wide mouth. I had no use for the big-toothed, predatory mouths that are so popular among movie stars and preachers.

Preachers. I turned my attention to Pastor Wallace. He was not a bad-looking man. For some reason God seldom "calls" homely men to become pastors. Have you ever noticed that? God usually "calls" men with a nice hairline and good teeth. God says, *Slick back thy hair and polish thy face, and if thou should choose to have a moustache, keep it well trimmed.*

Pastor Wallace possesses a well-trimmed mustache. He has a habit of keeping his upper lip pushed up slightly on one side while talking so that at least some of his lovely white teeth are on display. I also noticed that Pastor Wallace gestures a great deal while preaching. It's as if his hands are confirming what his mouth is saying, giving a second opinion. His movements distract me, like a magician's. I often catch myself following his eyes as he raises them heavenward, his hands as they take turns sweeping outwards or coming together, his knees dipping, and his head tipping, and then I suddenly realize I've been so distracted that I haven't heard anything he's said for quite some time. As I think I mentioned, I'm a visual person. That's my problem. Or one of them, anyway.

I have to admit though, that Pastor Wallace is a master of his craft. He's careful not to cause discomfort in the congregation by making eye contact. People are able to enjoy staring at him without the fear of being challenged by his eyes. He seems to be looking at the upturned faces he's addressing, but his gaze actually stops at the spaces between heads. Everyone assumes it is the person behind who's receiving his attention. In this way, he can maintain perfect concentration throughout his performance, completely unaffected by the expressions on the faces of his flock. He's a piece of work, that Pastor Wallace. He sparkles with the brilliance of cubic zirconia.

My name is Rube Smith. A pitiful name for an artist—the Smith part, that is. I would give just about anything: an ear, an eyebrow, or several toes off either foot for a last name like Boissonnault or Rodenhizer—that last one would go well with Rube—but I'm stuck with Smith. It sounds like a generic brand of human being. My married name was better—Finch. It was more memorable; however, I had worried when saying it to someone for the first time that it sounded a bit too much like “rude pinch.” It doesn't matter now. I gave the name back to my husband when we divorced along with a few other names that I threw in for nothing.

I'm thirty-seven, and I'm childless. As I said, I had a husband, but, as he so often pointed out to me, I didn't measure up. We used to live in Halifax, and he stayed there when I moved back home to Brood Bay. Most women my age have at least one husband in their past. It's like riding a bicycle: most people try it at some point. Some wobble uncontrollably and wind up in a tangle in the ditch, and some ride off to glory. It's largely about setting out with confidence and a willingness to make minute adjustments along the way. Of course, it also depends on the bicycle.

Enough about me. Let me tell you about Brood Bay. It's a lovely looking little fishing village on the Nova Scotia side of the Bay of Fundy. Notice that I said *lovely looking*. That's important. Every small village has its invisible peculiarities. Brood Bay is no exception. However, within a fifteen-minute walk from my house there are fish shanties that have been salt cured, sand blasted, and wind blown until they look more like a product of nature than man. There are fishing boats of every colour tarted up with hot pink balloon buoys and viridian green ropes. There's an impressive stretch of beach, so heavily influenced by the sky and tides that it displays a hundred variations of gorgeous within the span of one day. Saleable subjects for an artist, just there for the taking.

So, the village of Brood Bay.... It consists of an elementary school, a corner store, a post office, a church, a library, a seniors' home, a garage, a fire hall, a wharf, a lighthouse, and a four-kilometre-long sandy beach. Not much gossip is ever swapped at the lighthouse. That leaves, however, a complex system of contacts, spread throughout the rest of the village, as intricately woven as a new fishing net. In Brood Bay stories that begin as innocent exchanges are soon transformed into titillating tidbits. A generous person could claim that the inaccuracies result from interruptions: the recess buzzer at school, a boat engine starting up at the wharf, a church bell ringing, or the fog horn groaning. "She apparently told him to get out of her way or he'd be wearing his supper" could be

transformed into “She ’pparently told him to get out the other day and he was only wearing his uppers.” An exchange of the same piece of gossip might, on the first telling, be preceded by “I don’t know whether this is true or not,” on the second telling by “I heard something from so and so, and she should know,” and finally by “I need to add someone to our prayer list because....”

Misunderstandings happen all the time for a lot of different reasons. To keep peace, most people avoid addressing injustices, but we pay a price for our polite silence. I’m reaching out, through my story, to anyone who has been damaged by anger and frustration inspired by a self-described righteous person. I may or may not be a generous person. You can be the judge of that. I’m setting down in words what seems to me to be a reasonable explanation of the events that led up to Mother’s Day, 1995. That’s all I can do.



The Gospel According to Pastor Wallace Mother’s Day Eve, 1995

Pastor Wallace averted his eyes from the spectacle of Pastor Obie settling into his chair like a cat wiggling its behind into a litter box. “Appreciate you coming, Obe.”

“Don’t mention it,” grunted Pastor Obie. “It’s an interesting idea, holding a special service for orphans in Africa on Mother’s Day.”

“Thank you.” Pastor Wallace dipped his head briefly in humble acknowledgement. “Having it in the evening lets the mothers have a much deserved lie-in with breakfast in bed and without worrying about getting everyone out the door to church. The mothers deserve it, God knows.” He raised his hands in playful submission. “Where would we be without mothers?”

“We wouldn’t be alive for starters,” chuckled Pastor Obie.

“Too right. There would be no ‘we’ without mothers.”

The muffled clatter and clink of a table being set suggested a short wait for dinner. Pastor Obie allowed his eyes to wander around the office, taking in the mustard walls, the weary filing cabinet, the long-suffering desk. He scanned the titles in a bookcase, finding nothing of particular interest, and turned back to Pastor Wallace.

“I worry that I’ll be intruding tomorrow. Even though your children are away, I’m sure you had Mother’s Day plans for Rebecca.”

“Well, actually, to tell you the truth, I had a reason for inviting you to come early. There’s something else going on tomorrow, and I’d hoped you’d attend with me. Then we can take Rebecca out. I’ve made reservations.”

Pastor Obie raised his eyebrows in interest.

“There’s going to be an art show that could prove to be somewhat,” Pastor Wallace paused and worked his lips for a few seconds, as if crafting a word designed specifically for this occasion, “controversial. Out in a field if you can believe it. Just for one day. Just for the afternoon.”

“You’re interested in art?”

“Not particularly. But this art is something I’d really like to see. I’ve heard about it, and I expect some of the people in the church might check it out, so I thought I should see it for myself.”

“What kind of art?”

“Well,” Pastor Wallace nodded as if Pastor Obie had just hit the nail on the head, “that’s the thing. I’ve heard it’s about religion and churches, and that it might be offensive to some.” The word offensive was coupled with a direct gaze; clearly it was meant to be the selling point. “I’m also interested because of a connection between the artist and some members of my church. The artist, Rube, is the sister-in-law of Warren Pritchard, one of our deacons. You’ll meet Warren tomorrow.

His wife, Helen, left him last year, and I attribute a lot of the blame for that to Rube. She's a bad influence, that one." He frowned at the pen in his hand and turned it absently over and over as he spoke. "He's having a hard time right now, Warren is. If your church would say some prayers for him, I'm sure he'd appreciate it. You couldn't ask for a finer man, but that's often the way."

"Amen to that."

Pastor Wallace smoothed his dark hair and straightened his tie. "His wife left him last September, just out of the blue. They were a good Christian couple with two lovely children. I feel for those children. I also feel for Warren, but it's the children that you hate to see hurt. And there's no need for it." Pastor Wallace swung his head up and tossed the pen on his desk. "Absolutely no need!"

"Well, maybe she'll go back to him," said Pastor Obie consolingly. "It might be she was just going through something. It happens. Good people suddenly act like idiots. You shake your head and watch them make fools of themselves, but all you can do is pray and let the Lord take care of it. Pray and wait. And hope."

Pastor Obie crossed his bulky legs and tried to shift in the chair. It gave little room for maneuvering. The irritation seemed to catch in his throat, and a few coughs were required to clear it. "Is there another man involved?"

"Well, not out in the open," admitted Pastor Wallace grudgingly. "They say there is, but no one knows yet who it is. Helen, Warren's wife, has gotten herself an apartment, but Warren says he knew there was somebody else before she left. She started acting different, you know, not like herself."

Pastor Obie shook his head. "Well, we'll pray for the both of them. And for the kids."

"And for the kids," echoed Pastor Wallace. His lips curled. "Helen's sister, Rube—now there's a piece a work. A real wingnut. She lives in a shack out beyond the bridge, in the

woods. Moved back here about four years ago. Warren and Helen tried to interest her in church, but it wasn't long before it was clear that it wasn't going to take. Do you know what she said to me the first time we were introduced? This'll give you an idea of what kind of woman I'm talking about." He chewed on the edge of his lip then slid his gaze in Obie's direction and sniffed in disgust. "It was at one of our church suppers. Well, I went over to where Helen and her sister were standing, and I smiled and said hello and leaned over to read her name tag." Pastor Wallace levelled his eyes on Pastor Obie and paused. "And she said 'Rube—rhymes with boob.'"

Pastor Obie made a sucking sound in the roof of his mouth. He shook his head, and after a few minutes of sober contemplation he asked, "What time did you say this show was?"

"The ad in the paper said ten o'clock. It said everyone was welcome."



This story really begins about a year after I moved into my house, when my niece, Harriet, who was nine at the time, showed up at my door with her friend, Melissa. I was glad of the unexpected company, so I quickly set out a snack of cucumber slices, cookies, and tropical juice. As we ate, Harriet pointed out to Melissa the "special" circumstances of my lifestyle. She explained my propane fridge, my solar panels, and my wood stove and outdoor toilet without so much as a hint in her tone of anything other than pride. I was touched. I thought she deserved a little more to work with, so I led the girls upstairs to my studio so that Harriet could show Melissa my recent work. Harriet visited often, but this was a new experience for Melissa. She had never been in a "real" artist's studio before. Harriet proudly adopted the persona of tour guide, and Melissa followed her around, touching, with shy

reverence, the edges of paintings and the tubes of paint lying on my work counter. Melissa left that day dreaming of art lessons. After that I agreed, with her parents' permission, to devote one evening a week to teaching both girls. However, as I learned later, her parents would only agree to allow art lessons if they were taught by a Christian teacher. I guess they were afraid I would permit the use of impure colours. Maybe even black.

This flavour of thinking was not new to me. I shrugged the whole thing off as if it wasn't important. As if it didn't hurt. I said to myself, *Ah, well, you're either in or you're out, and I'm out.* But for days the unvoiced anger nipped at the edges of my sense of peace like a dog barking when you're trying to take a nap. It's not surprising that, as I slept, my subconscious processed the incident and generated a dream that not only captured the emotion but also inspired the first of what would become my *Stations of the Cross* paintings.

In the dream, I stepped through a doorway to the outside in response to the sound of a prayer gong. Many people milled about, choosing places in which to pray, their left hands raised in the air. I raised my left hand, but after noticing all the heads turned toward me, faces staring, rigid with outrage, I lowered it back down. It was clear from their hostility that my place was not with them. I noticed a tree in the distance beside a stream and went to it, hoping for a place to pray. The ground beneath the tree was muddy, so I sat, then laid in the mud, thinking, *If the only place for me is in the mud, I will wallow in it.* I turned my head back and forth, feeling sludge squish in my hair.

I awoke unsettled. After breakfast, I walked along the beach with my head down and my hands shoved deep into my jacket pockets. As I processed the symbols, gradually grinding the dream into small pieces, masticating the emotions with the bile of my anger, an image began to take shape, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity. I embraced it, glad of

the chance to shift my energy from the negative brooding of the hard done by to the positive current of the creative. The result was a painting: four feet high, three and a half feet wide. It was unwieldy, impractical, but large enough to accommodate life-size figures so that the faces, particularly the eyes, engaged the viewer. Many subtleties were needed to refine the expressions: eyelids lowered ever so slightly; nostrils made visible by the tilt of the head; chins protruding; lips pursed or curled; eyes flat, cold, dark. I painted them with their left hands raised. They seemed to be saying, *How dare you assume to have the right to pray if you are not one of us?* I stood in front of them, in front of the painting, and stared them down.

Long, curving, snakelike strands of hair wrapped around the figures in the foreground before leading back to the head of a figure lying at the base of a tree beside a stream. Lines from a poem by William Blake came to mind:

*Earth raised up her head,
From the darkness dread and drear.
Her light fled: Stony dread!
And her locks covered with grey despair.*

The painting was unlike any of my other work. I was stunned and a little humbled. I showed it to my friends, Janet and Gordon. They both agreed it was *real* art. They hurried on to assure me that my other paintings were also art but of a different category. I knew what they meant. They were right. After they left I hauled out my dream books in search of more material to work from. I unearthed another thirteen dreams. They all circled the topic of religion; several took place in a church. They also had, in common, a strength of emotion—either sadness, joy, peace, anger, or love. Hardly saleable. My only hope was to paint feverishly in an attempt to purge my psyche and return to my “paying work.”

*The Yellow-Bellied Sap-Sucking Power Tripper
gravitates towards an environment in which
it will be surrounded by smaller, weaker birds.
Their habitat of choice is one that ensures
any reports of their salacious or hostile behaviour
will be met with denial.*

Helen lived with a familiar low-grade sadness that she suspected was depression, plus a muddle of sympathy for people on the street who looked less fortunate or lonely. She told herself that, by comparison, she had every reason to be happy and she should be thankful. Her fear was that, due to some shortcoming of her own, she was letting down all the less fortunate people who would trade places with her in a heartbeat.

This sadness existed within her like an extra organ. Occasionally it became inflamed and sent out pains that upset the functioning of her other organs. Mostly it lay dormant, providing an extra weight to counteract any unexpected impulse towards joy. It was not the fact that she missed, needed, or desired joy that bothered her the most. She missed peace. She had, on so many occasions, just gotten snuggled down into peace when Warren upset the whole business. She was plagued by the question of why he would

not allow her to just quietly be. One of the saddest things about her melancholic state was that she felt elbowed out of her relationship with God, like a third party on a date. She suffered guilt over the sadness and sadness over the guilt, unable to rally her spirits for so much as a sincere hallelujah. Warren had come between her and God, and she lived in his shadow.

The rules of their relationship were not the ones recommended by marriage counsellors. Helen was well aware of those rules. In recent years Warren had become a counsellor himself. The rules of Warren's house went like this:

Rule number one: nothing Warren did was ever discussed at the time it was happening. This resulted in things being left unresolved, and it enabled Warren to avoid facing the unfairness of situations.

Rule number two: nothing Warren did was ever discussed after it had happened—a week later, a month later, a year later. According to Warren, the past is past, and only a small-minded person digs up things from the past. If Helen persisted in trying to force a discussion, Warren resorted to lines like, *Oh yes, and you think you're so perfect. It must be nice. Perfect Helen, the saint.* He was prepared to keep up this undermining of her argument until she broke down and burst into tears of outrage and frustration. Then he would move on to the next stage, implying that she was mentally unstable: *I worry about you. I'm afraid that someday you're going to go right over the edge.* He would then show tenderness, comforting her and treating her like a sick relative. His real affection seemed to have been misplaced, like a pencil put behind his ear and forgotten.

Helen also worried that someday she would go “over the edge.” She indulged herself in a secret fantasy life as an attempt to stabilize her sanity, reassuring herself that no one would be harmed by it. It was better than any alternative that she could think of. It allowed her to maintain her image

