

# ★ Sequence

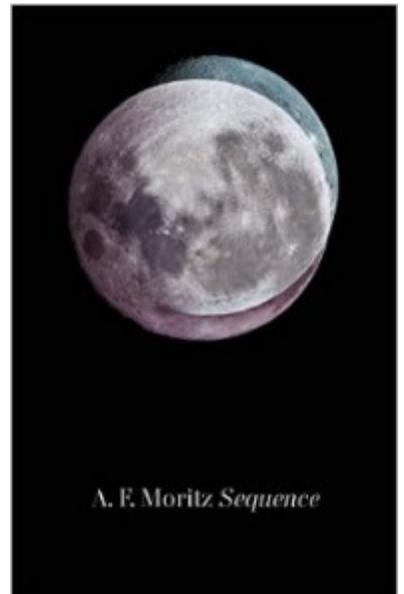
by A.F. Moritz

## The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out

by Karen Solie

In his 2013 Anne Szumigalski Memorial Lecture, A.F. Moritz said, “Poetry is the form of critical desire, desire always examining itself to find if the joy it comprehends is real, and if all are invited to the education, the construction of desire. Poetry as critical desire is the essential form of knowledge.” *Sequence*, Moritz’s latest in a long list of books (including the Griffin Poetry Prize winner *The Sentinel*), demonstrates this perspective.

*Sequence* is a long poem in 10 parts. In his notes at the back of the book, Moritz says that the “sequential poem [is] often seen as the characteristic long poem of our times.” The contemporary long poem as conceived by Moritz includes several aspects: epic, lyric, collage, montage, narrative, and meditation. The title suggests movement, and the poem is all about movement, both physical and emotional, although the overall movement is philosophical. The poem seeks nothing less than to understand existence, an understanding that seems to come from a constant progression into new terrains of the mind.



Each of the 10 parts develops another strand of the overarching quest. Many contain imagery of deserts, sand, stars, and walking: inevitably, I thought of the Magi on their journey to see the baby Jesus. However, Moritz’s poem is not religious in the conventional sense, though it remains difficult, even impossible, to include as many allusions to western poetry as Moritz does without some religious sensibility bleeding through.

The tone, for the most part, is reflective. Joy is subdued and temporary, but it exists. The individual poems are written in untitled free verse, and are short – less than a page apiece. Moritz’s exquisite control of line length, among other techniques, creates unique

forms, and the poems themselves move smoothly between modes. For example, in Part III, Moritz shifts dramatically from the mainly lyric perspectives of the earlier sections to a narrative delineating the abduction of a boy and his mother by the boy's uncles. Moritz sees the connections wrought by time, and throughout these poems people always wander. And wonder.

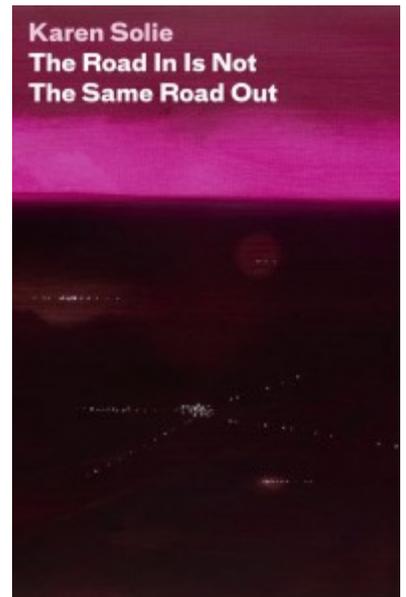
The first word that comes to my mind when reading *Sequence* is “erudition.” Especially concerning western poetry, Moritz has a vast knowledge, and that can be intimidating. It's also inspiring, and Moritz includes helpful endnotes that explain his use of Tennyson's “In Memoriam,” Whitman's “Song of Myself,” and numerous other poems. The notes could have the effect of leading readers to seek out other works, but I confess I gained much pleasure in simply letting Moritz's words wash over me unmediated.

Karen Solie's fourth collection, *The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out* (her first since winning the Griffin for *Pigeon*), is a distinct change of pace, but no less serious in its examination of life.

Solie's main focus is the deleterious effect of so-called progress. In the remarkable “Bitumen,” the longest poem in the collection, Solie delivers a frightening verdict: “We are all downstream now.” The poem invokes paintings – Turner's *A Disaster at Sea* and Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* – and photographs taken during iceberg season to create a powerful indictment of the wholesale plunder of the Earth in the cause of non-renewable fuel.

The poems frequently pose questions – Solie expresses her curiosity more directly than Moritz. In “Museum of the Thing,” the speaker ponders how the same object has different meanings for different subjectivities, and asks, “Dear being, how might I / responsibly interpret your incomprehensible / behaviour?” This question lies at the centre of the collection.

Solie concentrates on the contemporary: references to popular culture and technology



abound, including YouTube, Google, GPS, and cellphones. These are frequently placed in conflict with the natural world. In “Via,” the speaker reports the view from a moving train: “Only through the train window is the idle backhoe / figurative, do electrical transformers astride / the fine and dwindling farmland pause / spellbound in their march toward the lakeshore.”

There are glimmers of hope in these poems – although they remain only glimmers. In “Mole,” the titular animal seems dominant: “The new flagstones need undermining, / the concrete sundial could use a tilt and while he’s at it / he’ll make a disaster of the borders. His order / is not our order.” But given the outlook of other poems, how long can the mole prevail?

Moritz and Solie are quite different in form and style, yet their attentiveness to what matters is similar. And each grapples with concepts that require concentration. The benefit for readers is that no choice needs to be made. We can read both.

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