

## ISSUE THREE

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### THE CORTLAND REVIEW

## A.F. Moritz

A.F. Moritz's poetry has appeared in The Paris Review, The Hudson Review, The Malahat Review, The American Poetry Review and The Best American Poetry of 1991 and 1993. His books include **Mahoning** (Brick Bks, 1994), and **Song of Fear** (Brick Bks, 1992)

### INTERVIEWS

R.T. Smith

### POETRY

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#### Freedom

It's no use your saying, "I'm giving you your freedom,"  
when all you can see is one eye shining, never moving,  
in the dark of the back of the cell: one purple ring,  
a pulsation as of a thimbleful of acid in the light  
from the door you've opened. Or maybe it's just an injury,  
a shadow, on your own retina, fading in the blackness,  
never quite gone. It's no use standing by the steel door  
so long rusted shut, that you forced  
with a cry as of a murdered crow, a hoarse  
noise now flown to its freedom, but still imprisoned  
in your terrified memory's ear, slowly fading there.  
It's no use your standing aside. A gift is defined  
by being accepted, and no one wants  
to brush past you into the night, to owe you anything.

### REVIEWS

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### ESSAY

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#### Simile

As if you erased the city where the house  
where I was born was standing. As if I  
had gone away a minute, just to see what lies beyond,  
as if anything does, and you swept away my path  
with your broom and rubbed it out  
with your wheels, crisscrossing it into chaos.  
As if I found my way back anyway and you tore  
the house down in front of me, but I still saw  
you hiding there behind a brick and a weed,  
so you tore yourself into dust. As if  
over the empty spaces you installed  
a loudspeaker with a voice of uniform  
and dullard pages, blaring that I  
was never born anywhere, least here. As if  
the planet vanished then under the noise  
and I would have to find another one to live on  
if I wanted to live. As if in the whole  
universe, though, there were now no more,  
so my own gorge would have to be that planet.

## The Erotic Civilization

The infinite erotic civilization we created  
is declining now. Breast and penis wag in public  
as in primitive times, when nothing was erotic but the gods,

and they wave placards and besiege the legislature,  
demanding their right to go naked, unmolested,  
unnoticed like anyone else through the public airwaves.

There are still heroes of eroticism,  
those we call 'The Antediluvians', who appear in g-strings  
behind aquarium glass, as if anyone were watching,

and there are still those who watch them  
in the tired chrome and neon of the Erotomania Club  
or on a last streetcorner of transvestite whores.

We still sometimes enjoy the very significant old bromide  
whereby the décolletée is made to seem momentarily  
the sacred cleft of the buttocks. Yet now

it all has the shuttered umbrella-folding sad  
end-of-the-season feel that any religion will exude  
as it survives stubbornly into the new age.

And the new age: how few steps are left to take  
for the ever-developing machine of the body  
before we get there. The distances are very big

but crossable, given merely a life that could be counted out  
in simplest arithmetic, though it would have to last  
longer, they say, than the universe is going to.

And it would be--will be--a boring journey,  
like a bus trip across the Australian desert, sixty hours,  
with the two drivers taking ten-hour shifts, each sleeping

while the other jounces and rots and the passengers look out  
on the unvarying succession of pebbles, no two alike  
and no two distinguishable: as if a mite should crawl

across one of those paintings of North African stone and sand  
in which Jean Dubuffet submerges into the pure 'thingness'  
and dignity of earth's basic material. Yes,

though we bury our penises in the sand, we have to see  
the erotic age is now dead and in the world coming to be  
will be infinitely pitied by our sexless shadows.

For the time being, however, we remain: brittle  
elders, almost insensible, almost impotent, yet alive  
by the sufferance of our young, who could easily grab us

and wring our necks, if they ever should desire to.  
But they don't desire. Who can understand them? They care  
nothing at all for the mating song and dance

except that its necessary management provides some jobs.  
They say right out loud that pleasure is a patina,  
something to ease the bitter with the sweet,

and that the abyssal wealth of nature, custom,  
and personality was all illusion, a mistake.  
Nor can anything we do seduce or divert their resentment,

now that our most alluring female is only an old  
half-bursting vacuum cleaner bag, whose penis envy  
is about to vanish forever into white oblivion.

Still, we possess the last great strength of the erotic  
age: intoxicated terror. Let them do as they please,  
their advances can't help moving us to the passion

of agony and sorrow while we die... The final  
penetration, the thrust home, is coming, and they will be  
the deliverer, whatever they do or don't desire.

Around the last salons and saloons the human wave  
mounts and howls willy-nilly with an electronic chuckling,  
we can hear a click-click-click of commercial stiletto

heels: an undreamt body is stalking to be sold naked,  
to be chained by the wrists to a white pillar  
in the flap-snap-flop of the laundry of the future

strung out the windows of tropical highrise slums.