

BOOKS

Water fountains, books, heart surgery, the unexpected feature in Al Moritz's new poetry

By **Barb Carey** Special to the Star

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When he was appointed Toronto's sixth poet laureate last year, A. F. Moritz gave a speech in which he spoke of the poet as someone who "creates by means of humankind's most intimate, complex tool, the word, a tool that is one with the human body and soul."

Throughout his long and distinguished career — Moritz published his first book of poems in 1975 and "As Far As You Know" is his 20th collection — he has wielded the tool of language with grace, subtlety and impressive range. He has won numerous awards and honours, including the Griffin Poetry Prize for his 2008 collection "The Sentinel" and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

This latest collection opens with the wonderful poem "Terrorism," a meditation on the paradox that the post-9/11 world is unchanged in some ways and yet also utterly changed. The speaker in the poem sits in a park, observing his peaceful surroundings — the sparkling play of water in a fountain, the birds darting among the trees — while noting "Dread now /lives and pollutes/in the birds' oblivious world." The sight of a plane overhead is an uneasy reminder of a "remote catastrophe." Moritz brings together the near and far, the physical and metaphysical, through his deft use of image and metaphor. The spray of water in the fountain has "no thread except direction"; later in the poem, he writes of the passing plane carrying the "invisible threads" of its passengers' lives. In this profound poem, Moritz connects individual life, society and even the cosmic (as he imagines "the erasure of the human").

Elsewhere, "A Book Travels" is a great example of the suppleness of his figurative language and the way his metaphors multiply and expand in meaning. The book, he writes, is "a closed coffer: a box of jewels,/or a tiny casket in which someone carries in her lap/the body, the ash, of the best beloved./If it opens, the sun rises,/a paper star springing from the pages/of a child's pop-up book."

A recurring theme is the passage of time and evanescence, even amid "the buzzing maze/of every day." One section of the book, "Art of Surgery," comes out of an experience of undergoing heart surgery and the "twilight world" between life and death. In "The History of Grief," Moritz imagines a loved one mourning his death, and the stages of recovering from that grief. An awareness of mortality also tinges poems that look back on childhood as a time of potential, with the future still tantalizingly ahead. But the poet's concern with what lasts and what fades away extends beyond the individual, to civilization and the body politic. He reaches back to antiquity, to the Byzantine Empire, the Mayans and Greek mythology, connecting our present day with the ancient past.

Beauty is also an enduring theme. Thus Moritz celebrates the "never-to-be-exhausted/fascination of sunset," symbolic of the cycle of day and night — which in turn is linked to the cyclical nature of life itself. (The image of the water in the fountain in "Terrorism," which is "a ceaseless/while it lasts/coming/going/and coming," is another metaphor for that cycle.) But he also finds beauty in "waste lands" of ruin, overgrown with weeds, which become a playground for children.

In one poem, Moritz writes of "space for the turning/of a corner into the unexpected/world." That's exactly what this gifted poet offers readers in this sublime collection.

Barbara Carey is a Toronto-based poetry writer and a freelance contributor to the Star.