

## BOOKS

# Poetry of a pandemic: Toronto's poet laureate explains how he approached writing about COVID-19 crisis

By **Deborah Dundas** Books Editor

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As poet laureate of Toronto, Al Moritz is used to being called upon to commemorate things in verse. When the Star first approached him last week to write about the [COVID-19](#) crisis we're all in, he knew he was going to write a poem, that the city wanted him to, but wasn't sure how to get at it.

Here's the crux: As someone who's expected to write on demand, how do you create something that doesn't feel as if it's a writing assignment?

"This crisis is something that afflicts everybody," he said. "We're all going through this and we all have our own individual thoughts and experiences."

And the process of writing a poem like this is different from writing other types of poems. "Sometimes when you get an inspiration for a poem you're filled with your own bright idea," he said. "You think you have some revelation to the world."

But in a case like this, there's heroism and tragedy. There's opportunity. And there are so many personal stories.

So how do you choose a stance? "You have to sort of share something as opposed to telling something, and it's not always easy to do that," Moritz said.

And so the poet got personal in a way, and shared of himself — how he feels about things, about what's important to him.

"You'll notice that the poem has the kind of dialogue back and forth between being on the road, a wanderer, and being at home, a householder, and how, in a way, strangely, they can almost be the same thing or two sides of the same coin. That's something that's always been very important to me," he said.

Then there's the idea of progress, another important idea for him. "Time ... isn't just circular. Things don't just repeat themselves over and over again. We're not trapped in some tragic fate," he said. "... Real progress takes places in the moment within each human being. Real progress is love."

It gets at the idea that "we're in it together."

The poem moves toward the final word "care," a word that has many different meanings and resonances. It brings all of the other ideas that came before to a place of seemingly natural conclusion.

“Care means many things. It means taking care of people in the sense of changing the bandages and cleaning the bedpan. But it also means love in the greatest, greatest sense, and it’s close to the word charity. And you think of those things.”

And what better way to start National Poetry Month, which begins April 1, than with a poem that brings us together even in our individual isolation.

Moritz’s 20th volume of poetry, “As Far As You Know” (House of Anansi), is out this month.

### **Thoughts in Time of Plague**

*When we set out, we knew  
many would die on the way.  
And yet, the journey was joyous.  
When we made our home we knew  
many would die there. And yet we loved  
that house. All the views from its windows  
we named “beauty”.  
When we went down the road,  
the light was different every mile.  
What could be behind those mute windows  
with sometimes a peering eye, what pleasure  
in those almost empty gardens, what unknown work  
in the factories, birds in the dense wood?  
When dawn came in our bedroom  
or we woke too late in the old  
shattered kitchen amid food scraps, empty bottles,  
didn’t our memory burn deeper? – the same  
old scar, flaming anew, shifting, unmoved.  
And when we were trembling by the sick  
that we loved and feared – so many – was it different?  
Whether on the road with nowhere  
to lay them down, or in the room with nowhere  
else to take them... When we had to watch  
the threatened breathing or leave it  
to go to work. When we had to hear they had died  
without us – was it different? No. No different.  
Except that we saw something we always knew  
in the dark. Failure was not  
and success had never been  
the end. The end was care.*

– A. F. Moritz, Poet Laureate of Toronto



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