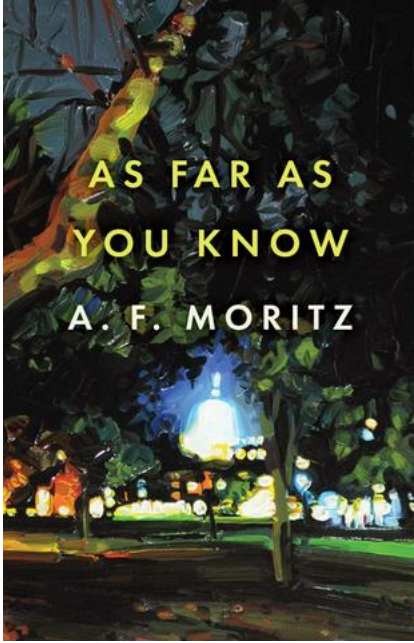


A Song of Despair or Hope?: A Review by Ross Leckie of A.F. Moritz's "As Far as You Know"

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A Song of Despair or Hope?

As Far as You Know, A. F. Moritz. Anansi, 2020

In one of his finest books to date, Moritz writes a quietly subversive challenge to the conventional structure of a book. *As Far as You Know* has two contradictory patterns of organization, one chronological and the other thematic, and they tug and pull at each other in engaging and surprising ways. This tension is intertwined with other ever-shifting dialectics of idea and theme, waves in the twining of one rope of thinking will ripple into other waves of thinking.

The expected structure of the book is its division into six sections, each of which reflects a theme, given the titles "Terrorism," "Poetry," "Childhood Friends," "Our Own Dark Hands, in the Recess of Our Love," "Art of Surgery," and "The One Who Answers the Call." The surprising part is that the poems are also in chronological order according to the time of their composition, the first dated October 2011 and the last 29-30 July 2016. Moritz provides an explanation of it in an appendix, where he announces the wish to tether the life of the mind and its eternal ideas to the life of the body and its movement through time. As he puts it: "This goes with my idea that the eternal moment is a moment with extension, including a before and after, and that the term 'moment' indicates unity, not short (perhaps infinite) duration."

This is an intensely personal and profoundly philosophical book, and, as with Wallace Stevens, for example, the personal can be also the philosophy passionate. Moritz's description of his heart surgery in an extended portion of the appendix begins with laying out 18 facts and ends with a meditation on what it is to be human. Though he needs the surgery, its scientific epistemology too easily replace the sensations, emotions and thoughts that comprise human habitation in the body. Surgery can repair, but it cannot comprehend, Moritz suggests. The book is a colloquy between body and soul, and a conversation enacting love. In Moritz's hand the pen can be the scalpel of surgical precision, but guiding the hand are both the agitation of the body and the stillness of spiritual contemplation.

Moritz is the master of an even-handed tone that can intimate the pleasure dome of contemplation and the luxury of the senses. There are poems in this book that bask in the mind's ability to examine the beauty of the imaginary objet d'art held up to the light, even as the body burgeons into the shimmer of its senses, at times nakedly in the caresses and shudders of sex. Most of the poems, though, have

an agitated propulsion through time. In unity is duration, or even evanescence, the roiling pain or the sunken hurt of memory fingering through its absent shards. Moritz cites Wordsworth's notion of "wise passivity," but, in action, Moritz's poems, as with Wordsworth's, are more than an "openness"; they are a reanimation in immediacy of terror, ecstasy, despair, joy, melancholy, comfort, and of all the experiences both frenzied and nuanced.

The extraordinary poem, "Names of Birds," opening the section, "Childhood Friends," begins:

Awake at dawn, recalling my father, crying,
unable to go to sleep again, and soon
the first bird sings. Despair: when the first bird sings
and the first light comes and you haven't slept.

This is sudden grief, that catches you and then sets you adrift in the night. It can only result in sleepless tears because it has a motive, to clasp you by the throat and tell you that you failed your father and so failed yourself. "The many-noted melody / is its signature but I can't read its name." Despair is displaced into the scientist his father was, and how he knew all the names of birds, of the bushes and trees they inhabited, as well as the bugs and worms they ate. This knowledge is a teaching Moritz wishes for too late. It is pang that most of us know. Why did we ask for our parents' wisdom when we had the chance?

It becomes a conceit of the poem that his father doesn't just know the nomenclatures; he knows the names of each individual bird. And in a reversal of the mythos of the poet desiring to know the call of an ever-receding bird, it is the bird that hears his father's call, responds and waits for a further response.

a strange sort of word that exists only an instant
when the bird answers a man who whistles to it
and then goes silent, hoping to hear him again.

Of course, recalling the cry of his father, the poem whistles back, and awaits a response.

"Names of Birds" complicates the real and the imagined in the call and response, and the response and call of nature. There is an impulse to view every Moritz book as a corpus, as the whole of the work and the whole of the body, so symphonic is the shape of the book. Moritz, as we will see, thinks through the nature of the body in the section, "Art of Surgery"; however, many of the poems the words and their metaphors show glimpses of what scatters to the wind.

If you doubt that the philosophical Moritz will lead you into dread, the first section of the book is a long poem called "Terrorism." The poem is not political in the normal sense; it does not present terrorism in an analysis of its motivation, the extent of its atrocity, and its relation to imperialism or anti-imperialism. It is not an indictment, for example, of the American drone program. It is rather a meditation on the complacency of North American life, and the way terrorism is utterly remote, perhaps unimaginable in the pedestrian sense of this word, as in "what they went through in the twin towers is unimaginable," but also unimaginable in poetry, which is to say, beyond figuration.

The first section of the poem is an idyll, a scene of birds at a bath and their rising and falling from the surrounding trees. Then in the second section he sees between the trees a single airliner, which, "yet poor," as he describes himself, he expects to see it fall in the flash of its explosion. It is a paucity of imagination, an ease of picturing an event that doesn't happen, and it did, the ashes and fragments of human bodies would be "the remote / catastrophe / to me only a sudden / wink of change." The languor of the poet seems to be leading to a collapse into quietude, but, if I might call on Stevens again, "the absence of the imagination had / itself to be imagined."

So, in the next section, the imagination registers dread as if it were a serpent entering the garden: "Dread now / lives and pollutes / in the birds' oblivious world / my dread." In one sense, dread is personal, as if terrorism is not confined to those remote countries that those of us who are comfortable North Americans can think of as endless hells unrelated to us. The poem wonders if we are all little terrorists carrying bombs for what we imagine might be the appropriate moment, much like Conrad's The Professor in *The Secret Agent*.

The dread is, however, also apocalyptic. The dread extends to the entirety of time and the way humans can leave no mark on it.

Always there
is
in the sky
the erasure of the human
and the sky's regathered
silence
identical
with the silence before the human
the one same
absence
now and always
there in the sky

The jetliner has passed on its way to landing, with no contrail, its only trace the sky itself. So, the absence of the human can in this minimal way be figured, as empty sky, but nonetheless sky. But what is that to the human mind wishing to leave its mark? Moritz notes that "We were all given the heart then / of some great / ignored / disappointed / poet who can project / life in nonentity." The poet is identified earlier in the poem as Robinson Jeffers, whose lines Moritz explains, mean that the putative eyes of darkness and silence cannot see God.

The fifth section of the poem concludes with a clever turn to the quotidian. Now another jetliner is coming overhead on its flight path toward landing. Gone is the imaginary explosion and the imagination of it. This ordinary plane, obviously one of many, carries its passengers safely above the birds and the waters, and now in a joining of regained innocence, "my happiness." It is of course, too late. The poem's grand discourse cannot be forgotten, and dread has been encrypted into happiness.

I thought when I began laying out this review that I would have world enough and time to consider all six sections of the book in leisure. That failing to be the case, I will turn to the section "Art of Surgery." Finding small consolation in the first four sections of the book, I turned to "Art of Surgery" with my own dread, expecting now to be confronted with the grim finality of the dark. Instead, I turned the page to some of the most astonishing love poems I have ever read.

The first, "The Fount of All Names," calls out for the comfort of Orpheus and Eurydice, knowing that this governing myth is one of irrevocable loss, but what if . . . what if I could trade this small life by placing it in the shadow of the other? Moritz, both the poet and the man facing heart surgery, asks to slip by unnoticed.

If I recall you and call you
Eurydice, if I keep your name silent
and call you by hers, the ancient bride of song,
the first lost beloved in the brief
millennia of our memory, endless road of losses . . .

Can I substitute the myth for the real? The ellipsis provides the answer: always present is the silent name at the end of a road of losses. But an ellipsis can be three skips in the heartbeat, pause before beating out again.

In the second stanza the poet asks if the imagination can create a new Eurydice, one who is "you." Can I hold you then? Yes, perhaps, but only as idea, "so far as my mind can approach your voice and nakedness," when "my hands / can't move across your body / ever again . . ." Here we see the ellipsis reappear, and across it we might expect the heartrending, the heart torn apart as if by the Thracian women, but in the inadequacies of the literal and figurative heart, we find instead the simple acquiescence and request for forgiveness. The poet asks for forgiveness for the very attempt to imagine a name for "you."

The fount of every name of the title of the poem, in Christian mythology, would be the baptismal fount, the surety of eternal life. The myth recalled, though, is of Eurydice. With this the poem concludes with a fourth stanza, which I will quote in its entirety.

Even though you are the fount of every name,
your name we won't know. We scarcely know
the beauty of our names
pointing to yours where it sits among them silent
as though lost. With you it went down to the past
and now with you it lies
no longer behind but underneath
to be searched for in the earth.

Is this a song of despair or of hope? We won't know your name for it is silent, beyond singing, beyond the enchantment of Orpheus. We scarcely know the beauty of our names, but our names do have beauty and they do point to the silent name. The you is the poet's lover, a wife, but also a mythology, perhaps even the mythology of mythologies; it is the song to be searched for in the earth, the song that has no name.

From here one love poem follows another, each as gorgeous as the next. What makes these poems so extraordinary are the ways in which they are profoundly personal, quotidian, philosophical, and metaphysical at the same time. I can think of many poets who present the personal and then meditate upon it; I cannot think of anyone who can make it seem that the metaphysical is so immediate, both deeply personal and inherent in the everyday. George Herbert comes to mind as binding the personal and the metaphysical in so close a way, but it is because Herbert has devoted his personhood to God. Or I might use John Donne as a humorous reference point, as if Moritz, in contemporary terms with our language and our attitudes, were writing "The Flea" and "Batter my heart, three-personed God" as one and the same poem.

As Far as You Know concludes with "An Image of Our Life," a four-and-a-half-page pastoral poem; it is fitting, for the pastoral offers a vision of Arcadia, a kind of garden paradise in which forget who we have been in our imperfect selves, our worldly identities, and inhabit a place where the singing poet/ shepherd is in perfect tune with the song of nature. It is a place where we can live, perhaps eternally, in our bodies, a place where the mechanics of the body have been left behind for the bodies we inhabit with our human selves. Is it a real place? Can singing make it so?

You will not die. I'll never lose you.
So sang the shepherd boy,
too young almost to have memories,
to her, and in her to all
his memories, slow scattering sheep

grazing in the twilight,
some out of view, some
maybe lost, who knows yet?

Indeed, who knows, but what is poetry if it cannot make bold assertions in the face of doubt, or as Moritz puts it in his last line: "I don't know. But you will live."

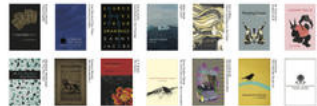
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