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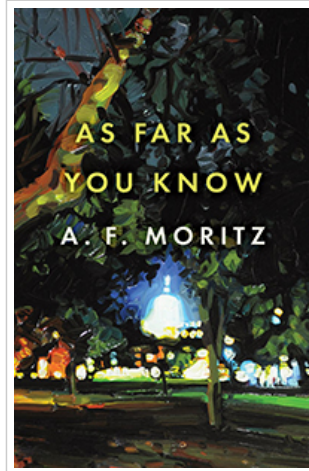


Reviews

Poetry Review by Eric Miller

A.F. Moritz, *As Far As You Know* (Toronto: Anansi, 2020). Paperbound, 129 pp., \$19.95.

A.F. Moritz, in some ways the best of the visible poets of Canada—and possibly the most intelligent—never forgets that we have genitals. Yet he is not an obscene poet. Nor is he an essentialist, at least in any queasy sociobiological understanding of the term. His bold treatment of what he often calls our “sex”—our genitals—belongs to an unwavering insistence that we are embodied. Moritz’s lifelong interest in the predicaments of incarnation becomes acute in the poems of *As Far As You Know*. He explains in an afterword how one topic on which he reflects here is the experience of undergoing a serious heart operation. Moritz’s capacity to rise to this physical crisis, artistically intact, manifests itself especially in two poems, “Naked to all interpretation” and “The art of surgery.” The first of these begins: “There is a speaking in tongues by the dead, / like the anaesthetic babble / of a patient held down in deathlikeness by his drugs: / geyser of vituperation and sentiment, names / of lost dogs and lovers—faces / melting together in a fire. And what is mixed there / the listeners, pausing with sponge, clamp, / bisturi, and laser scalpel, can’t make it out.” The second of these poems, perhaps with an allusion to Auden, compares the surgeon’s to a musician’s art: “The pianist has to bring skill / back from the desert of ability / to the ghost in the manuscript / crying with thirst / to be a city again.”



It is true that, for the most part, Moritz writes as a man. He could not state this fact and some of its implications more plainly than in “To the Soul”: “I made the mistake of wanting / the woman I love / to be as you are always.” But his literary idea of virility is one it would profit anyone to read closely, since Moritz’s transcription is honest in its embarrassments and impasses, as in “Love, Thou Art Absolute Sole Lord”: “But, love, this love / comes from me alone. / I am its only house. And only you / can say the same. Love, you and I / thought up and built what came / before us and is in everything, / everything. I loved you. So the war / that tore us into scraps, and razed down / our family, all sign and memory of us, / was nothing. And there is no nothing, / only this world ever more world / because I love you.”

Moritz orients his whole book towards recurrent motifs: the relationship of our happiness to others’ suffering; the truth or falsity of the poetic and religious promise of love and of life everlasting; the impossibility of anything escaping oblivion; the reality of the universe as a mesmerizing, irrefutable yet aphasic muse. Even at his least consolatory, Moritz performs the ancient service of solace by venturing to phrase wretchedness accurately. Take these lines from “All one limit”: “No word / desolate as your being elsewhere and the fear, / almost knowledge, that you could never / be happy with me could you / be here.” This excerpt establishes several features of Moritz’s practice. Although he is capable of old-fashioned formal



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adherences (see “The Commandment of Love”), he favours free verse. He depends therefore upon epigrammatic force, the hirundine thrills of darting intellection, and (more rarely) narrative to keep our interest. It is to his credit that, as I monitored the ongoing fight between boredom and engagement which any reader stages, there was no one poem out of fully fifty-eight comprising *As Far As You Know* that failed to harbour some intriguing elliptical or downright passage or image—whatever other flaws a given piece might display.

Let me cite defects, since it is an act of inconsiderateness to praise indiscriminately. Moritz includes too many dead lines among living lines, often of a self-reflexive kind that cannot break—but can certainly impair—his glamorous spellcasting. The lovely “Silence and Song,” with its Poussin-like landscape-painting, digresses into exalted natter about poesy better left implicit: “Divine / Silence of the poem, silence it gathers / And becomes as it comes to be known....” A commanding intelligence, even one consciously vowed to some kinds of anarchy, still is leery of slackening control and abnegating selfhood. Moritz’s peerless brilliance can cast a certain consistency over everything it treats, and thus his enormous capability becomes more positive, at times, than negative. He will speak of mystery and doubt more than he will tarry with it. Even his chaos can be too well manicured.

But let me list Moritz’s riches. I relished, in whole or in part, “The Ram,” “A Book Travels,” “How You Love,” “High Windows,” “Baltimore May 2015,” “The Unemployable,” “Philosopher and Southern Ohio,” “To the Reader,” “Sudden Little Parade Downtown,” the Pavese-like “Mural,” “The History of Grief,” “Reverie,” “The Pond in the Woods,” “Vergil, Legend,” “Gift, Distance,” “The Universe,” and “The Spot.”

Among Moritz’s blessings is his willingness to swerve, to tell a surprising tale. We live in an epoch when a hungry censoriousness would hobble the mind the minute it begins to infringe upon the margins of any dark wood. “Don’t go in there!” bellow the wardens of the norm. This impulse, occasionally miscalled “political” (“jealous,” in truth, in the sense that the God of the Old Testament is jealous), inhibits discovery—forbids humaneness, I might say, underworld travels, paradisiac sojourns—returning us, with a yank of the old contracted chain, to the commonplace, leaving captor and captive exhausted by the false prophecies of a pre-emptive moralism. Moritz retains the funky bravery of his imagination. Take “The Image of Our Life.”

This loose poem, which preserves the excitement of an improvisation, starts with a picture of a ruined house, the dresser in it with all its drawers dumped out. We cannot keep a thing. Moreover, the dull analogy of the very things we long to hold onto everyone else on earth would also save, with an equal degree of impotence. Other people do not adore our souvenirs as we do. As for us, we ignore their darling memorabilia. All memento is therefore *memento mori*. The earth will be wiped as clean as a bone of our presence. That might be enough: superb restatement of the ancient *topos* of mutability.

Yet Moritz, perhaps inspired by the procedures of Czesław Miłosz, who provides an epigraph to *As Far As You Know*, shifts his gaze to conjure a Daphnis-and-Chloe world—a Hellenistic ambience in which a shepherd plays a new song. This shepherd dares to claim that his love will live forever in his music. He invents before our eyes the immemorial vaunt of art. All the pastoral folk in the neighbourhood listen astonished ... until Moritz’s speaker deflates this narcissistic fable, admitting that the wonderful shepherd is only the immature and classicized *semblable* of himself. Here, too, the poem might have called it quits. Instead it soars into splendid, lucid self-contradiction: “It will all live. / You will live / And for you to live / Your earth will have to live / And it will live ... / I don’t know. But you will live.”

—Eric Miller



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