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A Moral Voice in Uncertain Times

Review by James Deahl

As Far As You Know
A.F. Moritz
House of Anansi

A new poetry collection from A.F. Moritz is a gift to receive with gratitude and joy. *As Far As You Know* follows his wondrous selected poems, *The Sparrow*, by a mere two years, and shows a poet forging ahead, developing and deepening his themes and concerns. Moritz, like most serious people, seeks the moral bedrock in an era when nothing seems absolute, when everything is questioned.

The poems in this collection are arranged by date of composition. *As Far As You Know* starts with "Terrorism" which serves as an introduction. "Terrorism" is dated October 2012 and at nine pages is the longest piece in the book. The collection closes with "An Image of Our Life" dated July 29-30, 2016. This is also a longish poem at four and a half pages. Between these two "bookends" Moritz's poems flow like chapters in a book as themes develop and expand. While this volume could be read as separate poems, it is even more rewarding when read as a single extended poem or poem sequence.

I find it useful to think of this book as a musical composition — a symphony, perhaps. It is a work in several movements, each with its own tempo. And within each movement are brief passages, which repeat certain motifs that become central to the overall musical concept. In this book, poems strike fire from each other, their placement within the work being so precise, and while each piece or segment might be strong and attractive on its own, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Readers who have followed Moritz's poetry over the decades will find many of his expected topics within these pages. In a sense, *As Far As You Know* follows closely on his Griffin Prizewinning *The Sentinel* (Anansi, 2008), but there is a tighter focus here. I like to view this book as an argument against simplicity. Terrorists, for example, subscribe to a world-view reduced to black-and-white solutions. While their acts of violence and self-sacrifice may call for courage, they do not require much thought. This is binary thinking: Yes/No; Good/Bad. Moritz understands that much more is necessary if we are to live authentic and moral lives. Over a hundred and fifty years ago, Henry David Thoreau thought our human lives should not be a duty or a burden, nor should life be merely a means to an end. Rather, our life should be a self-justifying esthetic joy. That is why we were created. Even at his most somber, Moritz seeks joy. Indeed, the poem "Terrorism" ends with the poet's happiness and "An Image of Our Life" closes with an affirmation of life. The poet closes his book with "But you will live." Between "happiness" and "life" come the fifty-six poems that form the core of *As Far As You Know*. None of these poems are easy; several are difficult. But modern life with all its ambiguities is difficult terrain, too. And we, like A.F. Moritz, are compelled to cross it.

Now, to the poems. It is not my goal to completely outline the "plot" of *As Far As You Know*, although it does have one. (In 1984 and 1987 Robert Duncan published *Ground Work: Before the War* and *Ground Work II: In the Dark*. They have a plot, and Moritz has constructed his new book along similar lines.) My intent, rather, is to encourage you to read his book. I can say without reservation that Moritz has given us the most important volume of poetry since his *The Sparrow* appeared two years ago. No other poet is writing at this level, and that makes this book essential. But I will talk about a few of the pieces.

"Terrorism" starts with grackles and starlings enjoying a fountain in a park on a lovely day. Moritz's observation of these birds is exact and vivid. The poet is so deeply into the moment he notes in fine detail the drops and streams of water — that is, the action of the fountain. He then sees the trees near the fountain, and again is specific: an Austrian pine, a red oak, a green ash, a northern catalpa. He soon moves on to a jetliner he spots flying high above the park in the beautiful autumn sky. This leads him to thoughts of Pearl Harbor and death from the sky. This attack, which drew the United States into World War II, happened a half dozen years prior to the poet's birth, but it comes to him in a park in the 21st Century. The poem then cuts from December 7, 1941 to September 11, 2001 and the attacks on the World Trade Center. Once again, death from the sky, sudden and without warning. Never losing sight of the birds, the poet travels back to April 6 and 7, 1862 and the slaughter at Shiloh. And we return to the catalpa, the birds, the water, and the poet's happiness. There is a balance between thoughts of violence, war, and death and a sunny day in an urban park watching birds at play in a fountain.

From this opening, which establishes the tone for the entire collection, we move immediately into the story of Abraham, his son Isaac, and the ram. During the 1950s when I was young and attending Sunday School, children were given this Biblical story as an example of Abraham's righteousness. We were all to admire this Godliness and grow up to become like Abraham. But

what father would agree to slay his own son as a sacrifice? While most poets who take up this story and its theological meaning focus on Abraham and his struggles with God's request, "The Ram" deals directly with the ram, who far from being a bystander to this drama, is the actual sacrifice, and therefore the real point of the tale. Having read only these initial two poems, the reader now understands that this is an exceedingly serious book.

Moritz questions the role, and efficacy, of poetry. Can poetry assist the writer when it comes to dealing with real life? Can poetry do the same for its reader? What is the value of a poem or a book? And, perhaps the most crucial question: What is the relationship between silence and song? If these questions cannot be answered, writing a book becomes mere self-indulgence. In the section called "Poetry" Moritz is forced to justify the act of poetry, which he does beautifully. Behind all of the many different movements of this book stands divinity, elusive but real.

In an appendix to *As Far As You Know* called "Author's Note on "Art of Surgery"" Moritz reveals his debt to poet William Blake and French moral philosopher/theologian Jacques Ellul. Ellul influenced the thought of political philosopher George Grant who, in turn, influenced Milton Acorn and other Canadian poets (including the present author). Thus, some of Ellul's ideas entered Canadian literature indirectly through Grant. But, of course, Moritz went directly to the source. The principle issue here is the essential need we all have for human relations to remain human, and the threat technology offers in this modern world of digital magic. But other concerns are also at play in this book; many of these concerns highlighted by Moritz are those both Grant and Ellul wrestled with. And like them, he meets with some failure as well as a measure of success.

Perhaps the most challenging poem in the book, and clearly one of the most important, is "Love Poem" because love is central to the overall scope of *As Far As You Know*. "Love Poem" is found in a section called "Childhood Friends", which also offers a brilliant poem sparked by the murder of Freddie Gray in the back of a police van in Baltimore five years ago. As one example of the complex manner Moritz employs to address and penetrate complex issues, both "Love Poem" and the Freddie Gray poem are in the same section, while most readers would expect "Love Poem" to be included in the following section: "Our Own Dark Hands, in the Recess of Our Love". This placement permits the investigation of the relationship between love and anger, between the police killing of a Black man and the natural beauty of a gold and blue Baltimore oriole singing from a silver maple with flowering crab-apples and forsythia present and correct. Both "Love Poem" and "Baltimore May 2015" focus on major themes, not just for Moritz, but for all of us.

"Love Poem" deals with the relationship of two lovers. It concerns their emotional and sexual connections and disconnections. It also deals with desire, rejection, anger, and emptiness. This is to say that "Love Poem" is much more than the erotic/romantic side of life, although that is covered, too. Much like the celebrated spiritual poems of Robert Lowell, Moritz ends his poem in mystery, which is no less real and concrete by being mysterious: "where anger is mildness./ the blank openness of all the possible./ the beneficence of making, letting/ me go, go and find, such anger is love." Because "Baltimore May 2015" comes before "Love Poem", the implied connection is clearly sensed.

Readers familiar with Moritz's prior books will recognize the last-man and ruined-future images to be found in the fourth section, "Our Own Dark Hands, in the Recess of Our Love". Here we are told of the "misery of the world" which poetry and love can hold at bay. Poetry and love are no more than a temporary refuge, unfortunately, for the misery lives on. In the poem "Escape to the Sea", the high point of this section, there is really no escape except death. Part two of "Escape to the Sea" is a homage to Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prizewinning dystopian novel, *The Road*. In the Moritz poem, the father dies having reached the edge of the sea, now "disease filled" and ruined. But at least he is released by death from his struggles and his suffering. His young son, however, will survive to face everlasting "terror and pain" because he will live. This is a picture perhaps even bleaker than the McCarthy novel.

Having identified death as, perhaps, the final solution to life's pain, the fifth section, "Art of Surgery", deals directly with dying, death, and what might follow the termination of the physical body. These poems were sparked by Moritz being hospitalized in 2014 for open-heart surgery. Given the poet's serious cardiac condition, these thoughts might be expected. But "Art of Surgery" also investigates life because one cannot consider the meaning of death without also thinking of life. Moritz discovers that death, like sleep, can both annihilate and restore. Death, in fact, is both beginning and end. (In this, the poet was anticipated by St. Augustine, who also discovered the unity of beginning and end.) The question becomes: After the death of the body what is conserved?

As with the dystopian realm explored in "Our Own Dark Hands, in the Recess of Our Love", here, too, it is the human-to-human personal relationships that grant reprieve. In part four, it is the relationship of the father who will die and the son who will live. This is the moral core of life, of human life, and that becomes clearer in "Art of Surgery" when the poet, lying seriously ill, investigates the full meaning of his personal relationships. In Christian life, God and God's rules form the basis of morality. But for many of us, these are not Christian times. What is the moral bedrock of our post-Christian world?

If we can take "Escape to the Sea" as the climax/crisis point in Moritz's story, with the young son left standing by his dead father and facing the brutal chaos of a world in collapse, then the final section, "The One Who Answers the Call", proffers a measure of redemption. We may live in a "world of grief" but it is a grief that can be "tinged with happiness". This brings the reader back to the opening poem, "Terrorism", when, having considered the horror of the September eleventh attacks, Pearl Harbor, and Shiloh, the poet, watching birds in a fountain, finds happiness. Moritz affirms that human connections, be they friendship or love or the relationship between medical staff and their patients, and despite our glaring failures and flaws, can shield us from the thoughtless brutality of the world. This, then, is the source of a morality, a human morality, that can support us as we move forward day by day. As the poet says with resolve and clarity, "But you will live."

Had Moritz written nothing more after his stunning *tour de force* of *The Sparrow*, he would have established himself in the first rank of English-language poets. Remarkably, he has exceeded that achievement with *As Far As You Know*. In this work, he has developed his long-standing concerns

into a brighter, tighter focus. Throughout *As Far As You Know* I kept thinking of the late W.S. Merwin's poetry. A broad scope, keen intelligence, human kindness and compassion, and an outstanding facility with language are common hallmarks of both Merwin and Moritz. By celebrating joy and affirming life, even in our time of increased rancour, fear, violence, and despair, of unclear moral values and spiritual confusion, and of political and social upheaval, Moritz's new book helps keep us grounded as we traverse the seasons of our lives.

James Deahl is the author or editor of forty books, including *Tamaracks: Canadian poetry for the 21st century*, the first major anthology of Canadian poetry published in the U.S. in three decades.

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