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OPINION

## Toronto's new poet laureate A.F. Moritz gets what life is like here

By **Edward Keenan** Star Columnist  
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Forget April. March is the cruelest month.

Or February. Often I think it's February, whose short days seem to stretch on for an icy, dark eternity of wind chill and dirt-crusting snowbanks.



A.F. Moritz, Toronto's new poet laureate, has among other things written about the frustration of waiting for the bus in a storm. (DAVID RIDER / TORONTO STAR)

But then comes March, holding the promise of spring but only delivering more of the cold — alongside, this year at least, large doses of political news intended to harden the heart with cynicism. Somehow, watching the calendar turn and the thermometer drop only makes the bloom of flowers seem further away. The harshness, just when the suggestion of springtime seems like it should be here, feels especially cruel.

At least in Toronto. If the T.S. Eliot had been writing here, it really should be March that is singled out. Of course, if he'd written a poem called "The Waste Land" in Toronto, it probably would have been about our plans for waterfront development.

Yeats! Now there's a poet whose work travels well to today's Hogtown. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold..." That's us, baby. "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/ the blood-tide is loosed ..." Why, he's reading our minds during Toronto rush-hour traffic. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." It is hard to read those words and believe the man had never attended a Toronto city council meeting.

It seems especially resonant now, as the cruelty of March brings with it Toronto city council's budget meeting Thursday. It's that time when, as things fall apart, mere mediocrity is loosed upon us.

We could use a little more poetry at a time like this. I used to say that the city's government needed more poets and fewer accountants and lawyers and planners involved in deciding how we're governed. Enough nights spent at poetry readings made me reconsider that opinion somewhat. But it remains true that we'd benefit from more often having people see the city through the eyes of a poet, rather than simply through spreadsheets and reports and standards manuals.

Because it is the business of the poet to capture the mood of life, the fine details and precise emotions and to see the beautiful or the crushing — the remarkable — in the mundane. It's the stuff of life. The stuff we make all the plans and laws and budgets in order to serve.

It's nice, while debating the decimal points of the parks department maintenance budget, to remember what comes out the other side — the moment of grace when you're sitting in a park in early summer in the sunshine as the children's voices carry from the playground and you're contemplating the blooms on a flower. You want a poet to capture that.

"There is no city that does not dream from its foundations," Toronto's outgoing poet laureate Anne Michaels wrote in a 1999 poem about the city. As we discuss the maintenance of those foundations and the building of tomorrow's, it's helpful to be reminded of the dreams that flow from them.

So it was a nice break from the Marchness of it all to see [A.F. Moritz appointed as the city's new poet laureate](#) on Wednesday, replacing Michaels in the post and following predecessors George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco and Dennis Lee. A reminder that the city is aware enough of the value of poetry to appoint a person to that post, to honour them and be honoured by their serving as an advocate for literature and the arts.

Sometimes they write verse. "In darkness, love cries out," [Michaels wrote](#) after the Yonge St. van attack last year. "... we hold them close/ we will form a circle of millions around them /our dead, our wounded, our witnesses, our families/ we will not surrender how we love/ we will not surrender those we love."

It isn't a high-paying gig (poets laureate receive \$10,000 a year for their service), and it isn't the most high-profile. But it's something.

"I really feel as if Toronto is an outstanding little city state, kind of like ancient Athens within ancient Greece, it's a country within a country," Moritz told the Star after his appointment.

I can't pretend to be an expert in his work, though a little searching around shows he's highly regarded and multiply awarded for his decades of poems.

Many of his poems are available online. Many show me he sees the city life I experience, like "[Better Days](#)." "What returns are those moments in the diner/ night after night with each night's one cup of coffee,/ watching an old man. Who always at the same hour/ came in and smiled, ordered his tea and opened/ his drawing pad. What did he fill it with?/ And where's he gone?"

Or how about this: "It's hard to improve on the poetry of a bus," begins "[Busman's Honeymoon](#)," which goes on to depict an empty city bus in a storm flashing an Not in Service sign. He lives in my Toronto, all right. Until it can reach the station, "and help to ease the overflow of us/ waiting in anger. Then we all barge in/ and improbably improve the poetry of the bus."

Yeah, this guy gets it. Some reading for a cruel March budget meeting, maybe as the TTC is discussed.

### **Simile by A.F. Moritz**

As if you'd erased the city where the house/ where I was born was standing. As if I/ had gone away a minute, just to see what lies beyond,

as if anything does, and you swept away my path/ with your broom and rubbed it out/ with your wheels, crisscrossing it into chaos.

As if I found my way back anyway and you tore/ the house down in front of me, but I still saw/  
you hiding there behind a brick and a weed,

so you tore yourself into dust. As if/ over the empty spaces you installed/ a loudspeaker with a  
voice of uniform

and blank-eyed pages, blaring that I/ was never born anywhere, least here. As if/ the planet  
vanished then, under the noise,

and I would have to find another one to live on/ if I wanted to live. As if in the whole/  
universe, though, there were now no more,

so my own gorge would have to be that planet.

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