



## The Sparrow: Selected Poems by A.F. Moritz

May 29, 2023 by [Michael Greenstein](#)

*Editor's note: while this book was published in 2018, the purpose of the review is to highlight one of Canada's finest poets.*

A.F. Moritz's *The Sparrow: Selected Poems* is a generous volume replete with meaning and meanings from 1974 to 2015, ending one century and beginning another. With the exception of the "Prelude" and "Coda" the collection proceeds chronologically, gathering decades of poems. The "Prelude" poem, "We Decided This Was All," (1986) is a fitting entry into Moritz's world of mystery and meaning, and is worthy of close attention to every detail. The first-person plural in the title and first line could refer to a broad spectrum from all of human civilization to a more limited community. To the title the first line adds "Then" – again to plunge us into a situation in medias res, or to imply some kind of historic sequence in which we decided that "this" was everything, or that something more limited is involved. The key verb, "decided," points to the process of deciding, including the indecisive ambiguities within the poem. The limited "all" is spelled out after a colon: "a birch forest on a border, / perhaps of Poland and Germany." A hallucinatory haunting overtakes the rest of the poem.

This is the "all" of Birkenau and Buchenwald – concentration camps, as well as natural setting on a border, another spectrum between nations and nature, alliterated birch border, internal rhyme of forest and border, and the hard "r" sounds of birch, forest, border, culminating in Germany. The next sentence stretches through the stanza from a negative to a lyric moment of enjambment: "and golden scraps seem caught / in a haze of twigs." Golden is undercut by scraps, just as the sun is weak and low in the south, and the twigs are in an atmospheric haze. The quality of light is itself qualified, a forest reduced to mere twigs, as these fragments recur after the second colon in the stanza: "shreds of a thin being that fled by night." The ghost-like quality of this setting befits poetry after Auschwitz, the thinness of survivors emaciated by history; for every tree, a buried body.

The second stanza peoples that setting, though barely. Through that sparseness, "A man and woman, still on the verge of childhood, go / walking there / and come upon a wire fence and the insolent grey / soldier with his gun." If the birch forest borders in space, then the "verge" constitutes a temporal phase between innocence and experience, yet the scene is timeless in the haze of history, bordered also by a wire fence. The colour scheme changes from golden to grey to yellow for this mysterious couple: "They turn back, the thought dies in them / to use the soft yellow leaves and needles for a bed." They turn back in time as well, yet the next stanza suggests a future and begins to turn away from history, but the dying thought lingers: "Tomorrow their holiday ends and the train takes them back / to some quarter of sagging tenements ringed in with mills, / to work at a shop counter." Their backward turn and train are returns to history, as well as their present workaday world. Novelty and history run

through Europe and the century: "The new ideas in their cafés / are already forgotten in Paris: freedom from God, the age of man." Progress is questionable in the twentieth-century's amnesia.

"As the century deepened, unbound from old delusions, / ... we saw those lovers were Jews, were dead." We are witnesses to the couple's destruction in a surreal dream of past and present. Once again, the colon at the end of this stanza, as in its previous iteration, opens up meaning in philosophical flowering: "And yet their lives had been / safe next to ours: malevolence was not so free in their day." The proximity between victims and witnesses, a couple and we, underscores ethical ambiguities in the decision of all. The next stanza shifts to "elsewhere" – in France, or America; and "this was all" becomes "All of madness" and "all equal." While "they" say all is madness, "we suffer too," as the equality of love is played off against suffering.

As the speaker emerges from this dream vision, the "I" takes over for the remainder of the poem: "When I came to myself under maple trees, King Arthur's book in my hand." With this entrance of the first-person singular, the second half of the poem opens up: instead of the fraught birch forest, we are now under more innocent maples, thrust back to a much earlier time frame with King Arthur's myths. A different childhood ensues: "like a child I didn't yet know what we had decided." The age of man plays out against "bloated bellies, brains ruined by hunger." On one side, "unbroken love between men and women, earthly peace"; on the other, the "coming dissolution" of all those positive values. The last stanzas subtly thread through a series of w's: women, woods, words, would world, work – all associated in a rebuilding of a small monument of the poet's life. For every hope, an element of despair: "But in fact there are none, and no human desire can secure a work, / however modest: say, a circle of six pebbles on the ground." Moritz's quiet quatrains secure lines and circles, each pebble representing a million souls, a philosophy of desire and decision, a meditative narrative that qualifies all.

Bookending this "Prelude" is a "Coda" – "The Last Thing." The poem's title hints at apocalypse, even while it exposes its opposite in things that last. "Thing" is a tether to reality, but also a springboard to metaphysical flights of surrealism. The oneiric opening is an Escher etching of strange loops: "This dream is of doors open on streets / that twist away: canals / filled with silver backs / of dolphins calling to be ridden." Moritz's colour opens up to elaborate new directions of thought: the misshapen cityscape proceeds from visuals to a calling of canals and "ways drawn out of one another / through the intricate texture / of a jungle of glass and steel." These intricate

ways and architecture involve a combination of all the senses, "of fitted stones that change their colour / with the angles of sunlight, windows / looking on vegetable interiors." The mixed list of interior decoration goes on until the end of this first long sentence: "and mixed scents carving a shape / in the mind." The synaesthesia of mixed senses shapes and distorts the mind, just as angles of sunlight refract surroundings.

The next sentence concludes the initial thought and stanza: "And the whole city / shifts steadily, as it has brought / me here to you, or you to me." This steady shifting, the chiasmus of pronominal characters, and rhyme of city with steadily ends with a union and a severing of these people, "as this fable plays at playing out / all its proliferating hopes." What is drawn out and casts outward eventually plays out in manifold meanings and fables of plurality.

The second stanza further fuses the separate pronouns in the plural: "Here we can love even those tales / in which a vague foreboding / takes a body of coincidental death." This self-reflexive, meta-poetic fable or myth of motionlessness is embodied in "a man and woman lying side by side / helplessly, as a mirror / explains death." This forces a question: "What difference / does such a thing make" – a question that needs to be qualified and examined because "thing" springs from the mundane to the metaphysical. It is lifted by dashes and a simile: " – like a dry oak that seems / to dominate a plain full of scattered groves – ". To find the singular that stands out in the midst of proliferation is to highlight strange strands "to whatever is condensing in this twilight / to pour itself over us / from the pitcher of the morning." This question ends in the twilight of mourning in death's mirror and a lasting lamentation.

An answer follows this question: after an awakening "we" depart together or separately, "a shadow / bearing a letter from the rim of the hills." This enigmatic shadow hovers between rumour and rim, bearing an invisible letter. The last thing turns to no thing: "Nothing is forgotten, and this shape / darkens as it approaches us." The carved mental shape from the first stanza is remembered and incorporated in the second, as strange loops of disembodiment are incarnated. We carry on, lightening and darkening, "in a secure and world drama that once / in another life was reserved for the sky." Moritz's horizon dramatizes antinomies, brings the sky down to earth, rims the colloquial towards transcendence, and amalgamates thing, think, and thinking.

"Death of a Sparrow" sits in the comfort and discomfort of Moritz's lyrical horizon. Winged and wounded, the bird epitomizes all creatures: "The twisting dance of the sparrow, delicate / agony, as it tried to bite its wounded shoulder." Just as streets

twist away, so the sparrow's twist and pain are captured in the elegiac sounds and rhythms of the opening lines. Sibilance, oxymoron, assonance, and consonance parade to the colon of exposition: "circular flurries, brief trembling flights / and fallen landings – then the wait, panting." The poet tracks its flight and fate precisely, each phrase imitating the repeated falling and failing. After the first sentence the poet approaches the bird: "a fury of terror possessed the sparrow" – the long o's

accentuating the pain. Understanding the futility of this situation, the poet leaves, but sees another sparrow fly down, "and the two bob a while as sparrows do / in the high unmown grass and dandelions, / companions." If the rhyme of dandelions and companions unites the two within their natural setting and community, then the sound of "unmown" suggests a mournful tone in contrast to more hopeful, active monosyllables.

The final sentence describes the next day when the bird has died: "the winged shape in death more winged still / after pain accomplished slowly, unobserved, / in a long laborious night, once all had flown." Two-winged, doubly still, meticulously (un)observed, the sparrow remains in the poem once the "all" of "this was all" has flown. It abides on the page, yet another lament and memento mori among the aviaries of centuries. The cover image, *Flying Sparrow*, from the seventeenth century, attests to the endurance of this common creature, its song spoken in the scores of this volume's selected poems. Moritz's conversations with the self and the world open horizons to an all-encompassing understanding of particulars; explorers of traditions, his surreal verses are full of implication, their metaphors memories of the original. Their residue and vestiges of meaning leave the reader longing for more on the journey between obscurity and clarity in the effulgence of experience and richness of range.

Like the rest and flight of sparrows, "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" engages the dynamics of stillness and motion in an ekphrastic poem that contemplates Bernard van Orley's early sixteenth-century painting, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. Just as van Orley bases his canvas on the Holy Family, so Moritz studies a miniature reproduction of the Flemish rendering of the infant Jesus protected by Mary and Joseph. The opening stanza frames the scene of the speaker who roams through the centuries, inventing and allegorizing along the way: "I'm sitting here as if studying the dust / but it's a postcard reproduction in my palm." This initial stasis of sitting and studying contrasts with the narrative range and far "trudging" in the final stanza. Just as fiction uses unreliable narrators, so poetic licence creates its own forms of unreliability: there is no postcard miniature of the original painting, but Moritz's supreme fiction allows him to

invent in his own reproduction of van Orley. The first line's simile introduces a compromised comparison: dust forms part of the historic atmosphere which settles over the stanzas. The study is an "as if" – a falsification to arrive at another truth. The middle line of the quintain spells out the artist and his painting, which is then compared to Blake's poem: "which is the great painting in that same order / where ' 'Twas on a Holy Thursday' is the great song." Moritz balances Blake and van Orley. From dust to great song, the stanza and poem navigate between the lowly and the sublime, between rest and flight, and between sounds that reproduce the painting. These sounds are predominantly in the "st" mode and arrest the moving verse: sitting, studying, dust, postcard, and rest. Just as the reader rests on certain consonants and beats, so is he meant to consider what the "same order" might imply in a temporal or qualitative sequence in the poet's palm.

The second stanza elaborates that magnitude and paints details. Those tapping "t"s carry into this stanza to pick up rest, flight, and Egypt: "Earth's perfected beauty, the city that could be, / tall mountains, blue distance." Van Orley's colours mix with allegorical thought: "and feminine river / signalling that God will let us stay here a long time." As the long "e" in beauty, city, and be yields to the short "i" in mountains, distance, feminine, river, and signalling, so the earlier hard "t"s dissolve to the liquid "l"s in signalling, let, long, place, and loved. The first-person plural belongs to civilization after the more focussed Holy Family: "all this / is open in my hand." The open-handed speaker paints, interprets, and feigns: "All this is in the picture / because of the mother and sleeping child, / who need a world to be in." Van Orley's sleeping child appears to be climbing and clinging to his mother's breast, however; and this vertical positioning in the foreground contrasts with other horizontal elements, including an open book, which seems to reflect the scene in the manner of Moritz's invented miniature postcard. The feminine river flows to mother and child for a long time of resting and staying before leaving. In contrast to them is the father: "And so there is Joseph, / the grizzled calm old guardian who sees clearly / how helpless he'd be to defend them." And so the river swerves to Blake's guardians, while "first sight" turns to "sees clearly." Also included in the family portrait is the lowly means of transportation: "So too / the donkey with bright carnelian saddle cloth." Yet that colour belongs not to the saddle, but to Mary's elaborate dress draped over the landscape. This colour evokes incarnation, not the flesh of beast and burden, but of a higher calling.

The stanza concludes with more coloured interpretation: "Van Orley has shown things / as they are: no hidden interiors / that need a key or principle lost with the Chaldeans /

to open, but daylight / on white water, golden cinq-foil, spectral paints." Since the speaker's hand is open (to interpretation) there is no need for a Chaldean key to hidden interiors or spectral paints. Foliage and foreground are composed allegorically to imply displacement, and Moritz's own coloured displacement suits his subject matter. The unique colour scheme breaks to the third stanza's opening platitude – the irony of history: "Life is better now than ever before." To van Orley's visual perspective, the speaker adds a temporal purview: "Short decades ago / neither this postcard nor any colour reproduction / could have been printed." A reproduction of a reproduction, the poem is both a rest and a flight. "And to have a small replica / of the dead man's painting makes nonsense of the old days." The pronoun shift to "you" matches the layering of history when halcyon days and golden ages become confused. "You used to be left either to fail in your own / imagining or to glory in its power."

This choice between a failure of the imagination or the glory of its power is also manifested in a Wordsworthian spot of peace "between the draining memories of green Egypt and the frothing Holy Land" – two faux and fertile utopias. The choice is also between being alone or being in company with van Orley's reproduction, "as you sit in the weedy scrub, moved to blankness / by the grandeur of antique fragments." As guardian, the poet arrests and advances the scrub and sublime, minuscule fragments and grandeur, blankness and plenitude. Fragments are sounded in long vowels and hard consonants: "the breached / beehive kilns and walls of the dead firebrick works." These fragments are further shored up by the "Better" parallelism at the beginning of each sentence that structures the existential situation of the reflecting, displacing speaker: "Better not to be isolated" yields to "Better to have with you this copy of van Orley's work." Yet this visionary company is somewhat undercut by the huge company that prepares the miniature: "prepared by a huge press that properly / register every colour, to be faithful, perfectly." All of those "p"s and "r"s register the illusion of perfection.

The next stanza focusses on houses without doors and a questionable "better life." "In the doorless doorways the doors are the black / coffin-shapes of darkness within." Earlier blankness turns to black darkness. "Life's better now" is exemplified by surgery, which now uses anaesthetics, yet a sardonic note qualifies this truism in another sentence that begins with "And": "And if some doctor's anaesthetic / conversation spoils it a little." The line break lowers the conversation, which is still "a truer worship / than the praying of lice-ridden crowds that scourged themselves / to halt a plague." Indeed, prose sentences beginning with "And," "Yet," or "But" work in tandem with a lyrical impulse to create a tension between the mundane and the meditative. "New

technologies" reveal progress as well as pollution, plenitude, and deprivation. This story "copied from an older story" ends in electromagnetic waves.

The final stanza traces the distance the speaker has travelled: "far, / and all in the wrong direction." The details in this distance include the radiance of sun on a clay jug, a leather saddle strap, and a ladybug, "while the understanding mocks every contentment." The final sentence accepts this self-mockery: "Yet all things here / are marvels: a little farther on / is a knoll where the white sun's setting disk overflows / through feathery olive trees, arresting / vision, since they do not grow in this land." This knoll stretches in its long line and vowels of overflows. The poem is an arresting vision in the growth of a poet's mind. Allusive, elusive, and illusive, Moritz's poems locate and displace the rest and syntax of sparrows in his arc of consciousness.

 Enjoyed this post? Please leave a tip!

---

**A. F. MORITZ** is widely considered one of the defining and most beloved lyric poets of his generation. His many honours include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Griffin Poetry Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, and an Ingram Merrill Fellowship. He currently serves as the sixth poet laureate of the City of Toronto.

- **Publisher** : House of Anansi Press (April 3 2018)
- **Language** : English
- **Paperback** : 352 pages
- **ISBN-10** : 1487003021
- **ISBN-13** : 978-1487003029

---

 [About the Reviewer/Contributor](#)

 [Related Posts](#)

[MICHAEL GREENSTEIN](#)

POETRY EDITOR