

REVIEW BY KELWYN SOLE

Left Over: Poems
by Kobus Moolman

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*When the mind swings by a grass-blade
an ant's forefoot shall save jou.*

– Ezra Pound (Canto 83)

*O wye en droewe land, alleen
onder the groot suidersterre.
Sal nooit 'n hoë blydschap kom
deur jou stil droefenis?*

– N. P. Van Wyk Louw

Left Over is Kobus Moolman's fifth collection of poetry. His voice is now well-known inside and outside of South Africa, as the growing collection of prizes and favourable comments attest. One of the reasons for this is that his work shows a consistent and powerful inclination to explore new ground, in both form and content. In a recent interview on the website *SLiPnet*, he speaks of his writing process as requiring "attentiveness. Attending to, being alert to, several, many things at the same time. ... the world around me. The observable world. The world of nouns. ... also being alert to the inner what? Not inner world. ... But something that suggests activity, action, happening, movement. The inner movements." (Chantelle Gray van Heerden: 'Where a poem can live – an interview with Kobus Moolman' *SLiPnet*, posted 6 November 2013). His poems, he adds, exist on a 'quantum' level, with several different levels at play simultaneously.

In this collection, Moolman rehearses and extends some of his earlier thematic predilections and usages of form. The foundational influences of Inger Christensen and Paul Celan are still occasionally apparent, and here and there is a brief Lorcaesque coruscation, in lines

like "The wind is twenty fingers folding soft flesh. / The wind is four eyes echoing an eclipse of the moon." ('A warm wind brings up the smell of wet hair ...'). He makes use of a variety of techniques, some of which have over time become associated with him. He characteristically manipulates short descriptive lines and sentences, which are diverted from the merely factual by incisions of metaphoric language, and can act as a powerful tool of estrangement. This is conjoined with an elliptical, laconic style which favours short, repetitive observations gradually inching forward towards conclusions which, even though given as succinct statement and in a flat tone, can startle. The repetitions he creates are noteworthy: in one poem, the effect achieved is reminiscent of the Cubist desire to view an object from all angles at once ('He stares at the table ...'). Moreover, in one or two poems, as before in previous volumes, the poet employs lists: but these shift in focus and detail, and may eventually occasion strange and novel associations.

The poet is a master of the lyric, but a lyric in which human subjects interact with, and at times seem overwhelmed by, the landscapes, objects and natural world with which they are surrounded. Despite the cinematic nature of the descriptions and the disembodied, neutral tone employed, inanimate objects reveal unexpected and threatening sides, and are inscribed with a compelling but vagrant emotional power:

He looks in the mirror.
One eye looks back at him,
while the other watches
something happening off in the wings.

He looks out the window.
Against the screen of night
he sees his left hand pulling at something
beneath a pile of papers.

And suddenly he thinks
how easy it would be
for the chair behind the desk
to plunge a sharpened slat in his back.

('He looks in the mirror' ...)

Again and again the subject is not far from being overwhelmed by the world outside; attempts to exclude, control or understand what surrounds the self are always tenuous and conditional. For example, in the poem 'In the heat of the day ...' a man asleep in a room dreams "thousands of red ants converge upon his house. And the ants slowly begin to carry away the foundation of his house, one grain of sand at a time, one sliver of wood at a time." To know objects, one poem suggests, it may be necessary to lick them "like a dog" ('In the Bathroom'). Order can never be achieved. Efforts to control and 'box' external things, or impulses and reflections within oneself, are stillborn; and the panic they serve to induce may not easily be stilled:

Even so late in the day
 so far from where he started
 so far along the road
 with so much distance behind him
 so many rooms swept clean
 so many boxes sealed and labelled
 something still is eating its way through his brain
 something still is gnawing away
 at the thoughts behind his eyes
 something that will not let go of him
 something that is hell-bent on ruining him
 from the inside out.

(‘Even so late in the day ...’)

At times the forces creeping through the poems, impinging on and disrupting any sense of completeness or comprehension, come across as primal, autochthonous or geologic; and are certainly unresponsive to human will or shaping.

"Much of my recent poetry," he has said, "is driven by a personal engagement with the concept of embodiment, and particularly two aspects ... firstly, a concern with the interface between the inside and the outside, and secondly a concern with the non-normative body" (Moolman, personal communication). The materiality of the body – which is a body often in the process of being dismembered, or dismembering itself – segues into the natural world, other objects, or the social world and history: "The corrugated creak of iron / in the wind / and rust in the stare of her eyes. / Not enough skin / to cover the sky." ('His head is full of blasphemy ...'). This may also happen

in reverse. Thus, Moolman's poetry is a poetry of interconnections; but – to reiterate – these are crafted as incongruous, mainly initiated by forces outside human control, and impervious to human fashioning. The general motion is centripetal; and, when and where the fragments employed interlock, they do so in what appear, initially, to be surprising ways.

"The tension in my work," Moolman notes, "is to avoid the two pitfalls of reductionism and inscrutable subjectivity" (Moolman, personal communication). Often the process of movement within poems does not so much resolve meaning as reveal scars of memory and belief. The poems' narrators strive to decipher what is made manifest for hidden meanings, usually in vain. This enacts for the reader the need to survive and endure in a world where everything hides its meaning. No emotion or object is co-ordinated except, jaggedly, through the poet's suturing. It is impossible to resolve and separate the boundaries in any dimension of this poetic universe: attempts at expression are mitigated by "Two silences: / one outside the entrance to the past, / the other deep within" ('Broken jars of sleep ...'). Thus, the positive nature of many of these poems lies in the exposing of these boundaries as a series of entanglements, complex enough to dislodge any reader's complacencies.

There is little desire to escape into an inner or subjective world, given the poet's knowledge of the limitations of such a world. In 'In the Bathroom', as an example, the protagonist is always made to remember that "that there was not just a front and a back to himself, but, more importantly, an outside. That he was standing up inside a sack of skin that went with him wherever he went, and this was what the rest of the house saw." Other poems exhibit an even more wounded dissociation of effect:

He can no longer click his fingers.
 He can no longer put his hand
 flat onto the table.
 He can no longer feel
 when he cuts or bruises or burns himself.
 It is only the sight of blood
 on his clothes or blood on the bedspread
 that alerts him to an injury.
 He wonders how much longer

he will still be able to hold himself upright
against the sky.

(‘There is something about his right hand too ...’)

This dissociation is, at times, complete and unremitting, as in following prose poem:

He travels out to the airport. And spends all day sitting on the leather seats outside the security check-in. Watching people say goodbye to their loved ones. Watching them hug and kiss and cry and wave and blow their noses. It makes him feel that he has some feelings after all.

(‘He travels out to the airport ...’)

The malign anthropomorphic potential in objects is matched by an inscrutability of human beings. In a succession of portraits of a poem’s third person protagonist, we are told: “It is hard to gauge anything about his expression from the scant evidence provided. The eyes, it seems, are not a window to the soul. Or to anything else. They are in fact opaque.” (‘Hold Just Like That iii’). Although muted in this collection in comparison to some of Moolman’s previous output, what is demonstrated is the difficulty involved in social and personal interactions; mitigated (to a greater degree in this collection) by an insistence on memory as a conduit for subjective exploration, even if endeavours in this direction are tottering and tentative.

The juxtapositions taking place in the poems also move between past and present, where temporal positioning blurs and memory emerges as a desperate, unreliable urge. There are efforts to use memory to reconstruct a sense of self, or understand more closely what has caused the present dissociation of response, such as in the poem ‘Fourteen Things That Are No Longer There’. Again, though, any positive conclusion is deferred: in the prose poem ‘Here Now’, we find the protagonist “... moves slowly through these memories like a man in quick-sand. Like a man sinking into something that rises all around him.”

Moolman is one of a handful of recent South African poets who has attempted to use the prose poem. Prose poetry is, if anything, given more weight in *Left Over* than in his previous collections. As a genre, prose poetry generally occupies a space on a continuum

between elliptical, metaphorical and fabulist expression at its one pole, and a more narrative, expository style at its other (where it becomes flash fiction). His prose poems in the main inhabit a space closer to the latter pole, without entirely losing the element of metaphor and fable. In earlier work, he has made use of a number of devices in this form in particular: concatenations of headlines, lists, spam messages, monologues and dialogues. In this collection’s poems, there is a very strong focalisation through (usually) a third person protagonist; and they often appear to verge on the autobiographical, despite his devices of narrative distancing.

Throughout, there is a marked ambiguity in the denouement: one cannot tell whether the subjects and protagonists of the poems will become uncomfortably resigned to the forces that surround them, whether they will begin to struggle free, or whether they will be suffocated. It is hard to decide whether these poems are gesturing at a state of transcendence, or a state of ineluctable loss: because “There is something missing from the sky. Something / his eyes should have seen. But did not have a name for.” (‘There is blood and piss in his bath’). My own impression is that that, even at the bleakest of moments, there are scads of relief and hope flickering through; as well as a desire for what I can only term ‘grace’.

He sits in the garden
beneath the shade of the camphor tree.
There are voices behind him.
In the distance birds call and insects hum.
He takes off his hat
and puts it on the low stone wall beside him.
... There are small black ants at his feet.
The leaves of the camphor tree lap at the green light,
lap until it is all emptied out.
Until only the sound of birds remains.
(‘He sits in the garden ...’)

In the above poem, the ambiguity I have drawn attention to is exemplified: the words “emptied out”, and perhaps the symbolic connotation of “ants”, denies the reader any facile conclusion that this is a poem of epiphany, even as much of the poem inclines one in that direction. This hovering uncertainty is again the case in ‘Still the

sunlight ... ', to my mind one of the most beautiful poems in the collection:

Still the sunlight when the wind drops and the bushes hold
their breath.

Silent the stones and the dry earth too.

The tangle of thorn-trees a brittle lattice of light and shade.

And some ancient lizard suspicious and slow, white forked
tongue testing,
testing.

(‘Still the sunlight ... ’)

This state of grace is always fragile, and comes from unlikely and unexpected directions, for “Only the thin scent of a blue flower can push back the dark” (‘They come again, the dark birds of clamour’).

Related to this is a noteworthy tincture of religious discourse and sensibility in some of these poems. For instance, in the poem ‘In the Bathroom’, even when alone the protagonist senses that something “was always there with him, watching and listening, through the keyholes of his skin. And reporting on him to God.”; while in another poem, “He steps into the sun / and strips off all his clothes. / Now God can see exactly / what kind of thing He’s dealing with.” (‘An open vice ... ’). Elsewhere, faced with “a woman in a short black dress / and loud music / and the smell of cigarette smoke in her hair”, the protagonist is “... afraid of what he will do, / of what will become of him / once he has done it.” (‘His head is full of blasphemy ... ’). What strikes one here is a possibility that some of the poems are *inter alia* escaping the residue of an implacable and life-denying discourse associated with an institutionalised religious legacy. On a few occasions, subjects of these poems seem to be wrestling out of the tentacles of a world-forsaking fear: a sensibility that has left nothing worth preserving, leaving “A tightness where his faith should be” (‘The sheep move off ... ’). What follows in the poetry is an assumption that, agonizing as the processes of apperception may be, they are necessary: one needs to look clearly at such manifestations of religious residue in order to move beyond, into a form of faith

significantly different to that based on the notion of a forbidding and punishing God. This is why the numinous does reveal itself, fleetingly but consistently, and through unexpected quarters and substances. Faith and trust are not absent; they are always painfully sought, and never completely found. If hope is to be gleaned from this, it is in a clear-sighted understanding of this fact.

Moolman’s project is an ambitious one, and insists on a vigilant, sensitive and exploratory stance both from its creator and its readers. As the third person subject of one of the poems notes, “... he is trying to match the words that he knows with all the things that are around him. There are many things around him that he cannot find words for. Because they happen so quickly” (‘Here Now’). The poet works like some elemental creature, moving through the landscapes of his poems, his “tongue testing, testing”

In a country where the fragility of human existence is daily all too obvious, where the bitter legacy of Calvinism still rules too many minds, where fear and uncertainty are burgeoning and an immoral self-seeking prevails, poetry such as this resonates. Working through a Moolman volume is both a rewarding and exhausting experience. It is hard to read through this entire collection in one sitting; and the careful reader will no doubt be canny enough to instead pay each poem the full attention it demands. The importance and worth of Moolman’s poetry is undoubted. This is the case even if, in the occasional poem, he seems to me to be striving too hard and too self-consciously for effect (as in the poem ‘They come again, the dark birds of clamour ... ’); or is too cryptic (see ‘Broken jars of sleep ... ’); or relaxes into a surrealist patina which sits uneasily with the vector of his poetic voice elsewhere (‘An aeroplane takes off ... ’). However, in a country where poems are too often simply sound-bytes for fleeting perceptions and states of mind, and where the search for self-identity through poetry has often become wearily predictable in both discourse and result – where if anything, this kind of poetry has become self-justification – Moolman moves into a different space entirely, and has taken a much more difficult and honest path. The reader will emerge from this poetry chastened but delighted. They are works of acumen, depth and extraordinary pressure.