

***He Said // She Said* by Kobus Moolman**

(Dye Hard Press, 2024)

Review by Marike Beyers

He Said // She Said is Kobus Moolman's 10th collection of poetry. Although he presents the poems in varying forms, from prose poem to conversation format to lists, the style is characteristically sparse. What is presented is what is essential of an object, a scene, a movement, without extraneous explanations. It is beautifully complemented by the artwork of Katherine Glenday, both on the cover and in two images inside the book. The outlined figures and domestic objects in textured earthy colours echo the feeling of the collection's blurring between internal and external landscapes, an essential loneliness that bleeds into time and place.

In using the third person and its evocation of desolation and inner darkness with moments of memory and connection, *He said // She Said* is reminiscent of Moolman's collection *Left Over* (Dye Hard Press, 2013). Both collections present individual poems in varying formats but can also be read as an extended longer work. Moolman notes that the collection is a substantially reworked version of a text composed as part of his PhD in English Studies, which he obtained in 2011. This places the writing of these texts closer in time to each other than their publication dates suggest.

As suggested by the title *He Said // She Said*, another character is introduced into the thread. It also offers a new form, namely a conversation, into the collection. For example, 'STAGE DIRECTIONS' presents a series of statements about the two characters in a way that looks like instructions for actors, but in focusing on description and simple action (never reaching words spoken between the characters) a sense of interiority is created.

HE

Sits staring for a long time through his study window at nothing at all.

SHE

Folds and re-folds and folds again a map of the world until it is

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- I) Reading it from top to bottom, where one is likely to notice an awkward exchange about someone staying or leaving with the contradictory feelings around a break-up.
- II) Reading 'his story' in every second line starting with 'him' smelling cooking and burnt milk and concluding with night thoughts—"There are always the preserved voices in my head of everyone I ever talked to." This casts 'him' in a position of reaching out and yearning. His story is enfolded by hers (her lines being the first and last of the poem).
- III) Reading the alternate lines for 'her' as thoughts on looking at a dry and dusty field and memories of his return, concluding with: "And all the time she thought to herself: Yes, yes, yes. This is where. This is where I want my bones. This is where I want my bones to be buried one day. When it all finally stops." This affirmation (yes, yes, yes) feels like a reversal of the despair in the "No, no, no, no" line in each version. The 'yes' is strengthened by the thought about the place (This is where) also being repeated three times, each time extending the sentence. However, there is a reconsideration in the affirmation referring to death. The final stop being that of the poem, the relationship, her life, life.

Returning to the first, most natural order, one's reading shifts. Although much of the experience conveyed relates to alienation and separation and many of the poems present either his or her interiority, the continued shift between them creates a feeling of in-betweenness. The third-person voice helps to maintain this and makes the discomfort of this juncture more bearable to read.

Moolman presents various kinds of lists in the collection. 'IN BED WITH' becomes a counting poem that runs into compulsion—"With space for everything else running out"—and ending on an emotional after-effect—"Then counting backwards all the way from zero to numbness." The collection creates a narrative by bringing in unexpected items into the lists. Each line of 'WHEN' starts with a conditional yet side-steps the grammatically expected 'then'. In 'WEIGHED AND WANTING', her sense of displacement is presented "*In four standard*

sizes", with each section of the poem headed by a category of clothes sizes. Listing presents a form that attempts to take control, delimit what is presented, categorise reality, yet these poems communicate a sense of what cannot be listed, categorised, controlled. It is not that specifics are left out but that an existential incompleteness echoes within. 'FIFTEEN THINGS HE CARRIED IN A SMALL TIN TIED UP WITH A RUBBER BAND INSIDE HIS TOP POCKET' include very particular things ("A very small safety pin"), but also explanations ("For keeping his eyes in place") and an abstraction ("Never enough time").

Close observation of landscapes and objects has been important in much of Moolman's work. Yet his descriptions, even of specific places, are impressionistically evocative.

In *He Said // She Said* the reader is drawn into an inner landscape through the description of objects and places and the characters' interactions with them. As such we are presented with everyday things—"a kite made out of cardboard and plastic hazard tape", shoes, washing lines, vacuum cleaners, bedroom lights, curtains and such. In a few instances, the poet uses images related to walking as metaphors for the past: "he looked down and he saw that the past was leaking out of his shoes" ('WHAT HE WISHED FOR') and "His bare feet / dragging across the thin carpet of the past" ('LIST OF SOUND EFFECTS'). For the most part, however, there is not a direct one-to-one correlation between an object and a value or meaning. Places and things are not so much metaphors or symbols of a particular form of meaning or concept, as a kind of totality that evokes and brings into being the experience of reading *He Said // She Said*. 'LIST OF SOUND EFFECTS' demonstrates this in finding a setting for bare feet, the moon, a grass broom, a rusted spring, yellowed pages, the sun, a small animal and a grave into a small narrative about silence.

From the beginning, Moolman is concerned with bringing outer and inner realities together. In effect, with the act of writing, of making art. 'WHAT HE WISHED FOR', the first poem in the collection, starts by way of a stage setting: "*Standing in a spotlight of black & white time.*" This situates writing as directed towards an audience, with the association of choices and judgement and immediacy. The poem closes on 'wishes' relating to the workings of art:

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To smash something wide open. So that everything on the inside would be transformed instantly into the outside.

A cold afternoon. Late. And getting later:

Until there was nothing left underneath and behind and inside of him. And he was inside-out.

Unobserved and shameless for the first time.

He Said // She Said enacts this bringing the inside outside and the outside inside. It is an inside-out work that steps away from personal revelation as a key to understanding its own light and darkness. It leaves an open stage for readers (and reader-writers) to find ways (perhaps using some of these techniques) to explore and express inside-outness.