

Jacobus Philippus (Kobus) Moolman (1964–)

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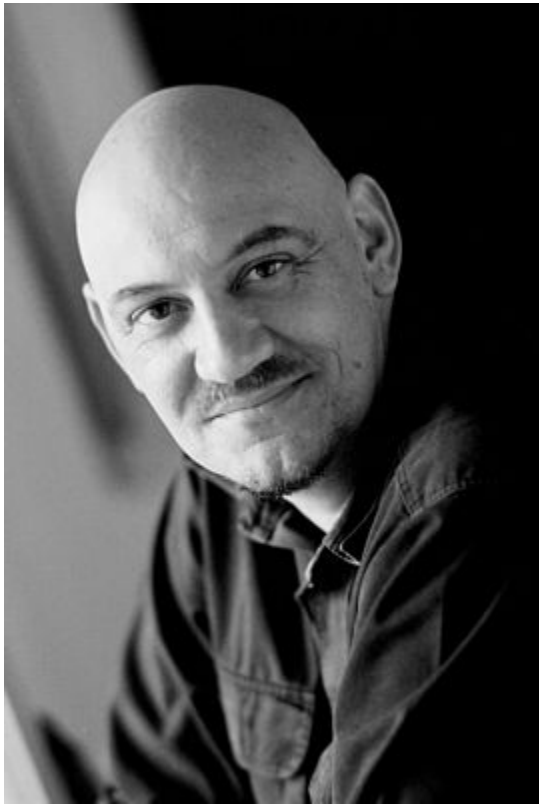
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Biographical Essay



Kobus Moolman in Durban, South Africa, 2010 Courtesy of Kobus Moolman This image may be used for personal, non-commercial purposes only.

Kobus Moolman is one of South Africa's most formally inventive and prolific poets. He has published twelve collections of poetry, two collections of plays, a collection of short stories, and he has edited several books and journals. He is a disability activist and influential teacher of creative writing. He has won numerous awards including the Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry (2016), the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award (2013), the South African Literary Award for Poetry (2010), a 2009 Pushcart nomination, and the Ingrid Jonker Prize for a debut collection of poetry (2002). His plays have also won South African and international awards and have been

staged locally and abroad.

Moolman's poetry spans a range of forms including the lyric, the dramatic, the long narrative poem, the confessional, the prose poem, diary entries, and fragments. He is dedicated to breaching the limitations of poetic style and pushing against the boundaries of form and language. His elliptical language claims a territory that is both internal and external, personal and social at the same time. Image is central to Moolman's poetry, and his writing insists upon an openness and fluidity of meaning that owes significant debts to the influence of Russian and European modernists including Paul Celan, Marina Tsvetaeva, Tomas Tranströmer, and Johannes Bobrowski, as well as contemporary poetic iconoclasts such as Anne Carson, Ariana Reines, and Hiromi Ito.

Childhood and Education

Jacobus Philippus Moolman, known as Kobus, was born on 29 March 1964 in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. Moolman was born to an Afrikaans father (Jacobus Phillipus Moolman) and an English mother (Mary Joey Moolman, née Gradidge) in the old Greys' Hospital on the banks of the Msunduzi River. With its high rainfall and lush subtropical vegetation, much of the landscape in Pietermaritzburg is different from the rest of South Africa. Place and context are important to Moolman, and his work is integrally embedded within the South African landscape. But despite his KwaZulu-Natal upbringing, Moolman's imagery hankers after the dry interior, and he constructs a stark world at odds with the lush surroundings of his childhood.

Moolman was born with spina bifida: a malformation of the lower vertebral column and spinal cord that causes variable degrees of paralysis of the lower limbs. His journey into describing the body transects his poetry, although it is only in his later work that he fully confronts his own body as a site of difference and signification. In Kelwyn Sole's review of *Left Over* in *New Coin*, he quoted Moolman: "Much of my recent poetry 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." Sole continued his analysis of Moolman's poetry: "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."

Moolman grew up at 82 Greyling Street, a lower-middle-class area in the center of town, a short walk from the Nestlé chocolate factory where his father worked as storeman. The smell of cocoa permeated that part of the city. Moolman is the middle child between an elder sister (Juanita) and a younger brother (Robert). His English mother was a homemaker and caregiver. He had an ambivalent and complicated relationship with his Afrikaans father. Moolman is an English-speaking poet, and as a young man he rejected his Afrikaner roots. In a Zoom interview with Tamantha Hammerschlag, he said that although he could read and write Afrikaans fluently and understood the language he stuttered when he spoke his father's native tongue. Moolman's father was a staunch Afrikaner nationalist who embraced ideas of racial separation and superiority, and Moolman and his father clashed politically. He felt alienated from his father, and it was only later in life that their relationship softened, and Moolman was able to appreciate his own Afrikaner roots. This conflicted parental bond surfaces at numerous stages in Moolman's poetry, but it is in his collection of short stories, *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories* (2017), that an oppressive and politically ambivalent paternal relationship is explicitly explored.

Moolman studied English and drama at the then-University of Natal, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1984, followed by an honors degree in drama in 1985 and a second honors degree in English in 1986. His first job was in 1987 as a teacher at a rural school in the Midlands where he

taught English and Afrikaans, as well as biblical studies. It was a farm school under the apartheid system, with all the grades squashed together in one classroom, and although Moolman later discovered his gift for teaching, he relinquished that job after five months. He then joined *The Natal Witness* newspaper in Pietermaritzburg as a night subeditor. During that time he had some of his early poetry published in the “Poet’s Corner” of the newspaper’s “Echo” supplement. He also began to publish his poetry through *Staffrider Magazine*, the influential progressive literary and arts magazine that championed culture as protest against apartheid. Moolman’s early poems were deeply political and critical of the Nationalist Apartheid Government. Although his later work steered away from the rhetoric of agitprop, he remained always critically engaged with social context. For Moolman, “all writing is historically based and there is a relationship between society and art.” He asserted that “sometimes this is very direct and transparent and sometimes it is indirect. But to claim otherwise is naïve” (Zoom interview with Hammerschlag).

Early Work

In 1989 Moolman returned briefly to teaching at St Gregory’s College, but in 1991 he joined the staff of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, where he worked as an educational officer until 2003. Although not a visual artist, Moolman has a deep appreciation of visual culture, manifest in the extraordinary attention to detail and the ordinary that is apparent in his poetry. The back blurb to his debut collection, *Time like Stone*, which won the Ingrid Jonker Prize, explained: “His close observations of what is immediate—and often imperfect—inspire poems that show us how to look at the everyday with new eyes.” The image of immutable stone permeates this collection, with the inanimate given interiority and personified emotion. Many of these poems are based on time he spent in the Drakensberg Mountains with his first wife, Meridy Pfothenhauer, but the collection is also a map of the break-up of this fifteen-year marriage. In the poem “Strangers,” a man and a woman, who have gone away to a beach cottage, find themselves disconnected. He notices that her toothbrush is wet, she that the pages of his notebook are empty. They fall asleep in the same house yet wake “at opposite ends of their lives.” Disability is fleetingly cited in this book. In “Apologia” a man apologizes to his wife for ruining a new pair of trousers she bought him: “I’m sorry. It seems I can’t look after anything:/ lost the proper use of my legs / before I was even born / and my hair, well the bulk of it / didn’t even stick around till twenty.” The sardonic tone hones in on the petty carping of a disintegrating relationship, and the transitory allusion to disability is as lightly touched as the diffidence of baldness.

In 1995 he founded the poetry journal *Fidelities* with Richard Walne. When Walne left two years later, Moolman continued to edit the journal until it closed in 2007. The journal was a valuable entry point for numerous developing poets, allowing established and new voices to share the same published space.

Moolman’s second collection, *Feet of the Sky* (2003), is dedicated to his second wife, Julia Buss, an award-winning potter who worked with Moolman at the Tatham Art Gallery, where she did community outreach. Poems like “Morning Song” and “In the Garden” are tender evocations of new love. But Moolman also experiments with sequence poems for the first time here, a conscious focus on form rather than subject, which becomes an abiding poetic concern of his.

In 2004, Moolman left the gallery and joined the English Studies Department of the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Durban campus as junior lecturer. In *Separating the Seas* (2007), his attention to landscape and detail reemerges in poems that reflect scenes from the ninety kilometers he travelled regularly along the N3 freeway from his home to the university campus overlooking the Indian ocean and the Durban harbor. In this book, which won the South African Literary Award for Poetry, Moolman pushes harder against the boundaries of the lyric, attempting to liberate the poem

from its traditional generic confines. The book contains two prose poems, another deep interest of his that he pursued in subsequent collections, while a poem like “Cost of Living” is quite literally only a list of basic food items and their prices. But here for the first time, too, he employs extracts from his writer’s notebooks: “he writes in a state of exhaustion; his arm on fire, his neck as stiff as an old rusted wind pump. he writes as if he were already asleep, or rushing to get somewhere before he found out where he was going” (“untitled”). These notebooks are a vital window into the poet’s internal world. Moolman has eighty such notebooks. They are (with a few early exceptions) cheap A5 school exercise books, with a black hard cover and a red cloth spine. In his interview with Hammerschlag he explained that he began the first one in his undergraduate year in 1982. The notebooks are housed in the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown).

Moolman was awarded his master’s degree in 2004; his thesis is titled: *Inside the Cavity of Shame: A Critical Presentation of the New Prison Poetry Project (1998), and the Spaces of Expression and Alterity Constructed in the Writing of the Participants*. While at the art gallery Moolman had conducted regular creative workshops for inmates of the New Prison in Pietermaritzburg, and there he met three young men (two brothers and a cousin) who had been activist soldiers in the civil war that ravaged the Black townships of KwaZulu-Natal in the late nineties during the transition to democracy. The men had written a collaborative collection of poems while serving extended sentences.

Anatomy

Moolman’s interest in synergies between the visual image and the word is evident in his next collection, *Anatomy* (2008), a limited edition, hand-stitched chapbook. Moolman had attended an artists and writers’ retreat at Caversham Press in early 2008 and collaborated with printmaker Witty Nonhlanhla Nyide. In this delicate chapbook each poem is accompanied by an original black-and-white lithography print. Here, Moolman wholeheartedly embraces his own body as a means of communicating concerns that are both personal and nonpersonal, subjective and objective. In this refusal of symbolism, he is able to powerfully confront ideas of loss, brokenness, and physical difference. In the interview with Hammerschlag, he described himself as seeking “the language of the body” and “searching for the different ways in which to hear how the body speaks and what the body is saying.” He allows this exploration of the body to transcend literal description, rather than to entangle the image of embodiment with metaphor and memory. For Moolman it is more important that the reader experience his work viscerally and emotionally than latch on to a concrete meaning.

Anatomy functions essentially as one extended poem, although broken into seven parts directly addressed to the speaker’s body: the hand, the foot, the foot (the other one), the shoulder, the foot revisited, and the wrist. In these brutally naked poems, Moolman dissects each body part with the same detail he had previously paid to the natural world and the quotidian. He describes the wrist of the right arm he uses to write and to grip his wooden walking stick: “My wrist, the right one, / is a wrench. // My wrist, not the left, is rust. // It is red metal amongst stone. / It is brittle tin. It is clanking iron. // My wrist is unsettled. / It does not join or turn or fold or meet. // It grinds, stone against stone, / mid-day sunlight against old iron.” Here again he returns to the image of stones, the timelessness of geology, the unfeelingness or perhaps the unknown inner life of a stone.

In his 2018 essay, “‘Whose Body Is It, and What Is It Doing on My Page?’ The Intersections between the Non-normative Body and Alternative Textual Practices,” Moolman describes the unease felt by society in portrayals of the disabled body. In exploring his own reticence, he writes:

What was I concealing from myself, which was preventing my work from reaching past

what I already knew and finding another form and other voice?

The answer of course had been staring me in the face for the past forty-odd years. It was not the capitalised Self, the stable individual ego as I had been expressing it for so long. It was in fact the body—what Seamus Heaney, in his translation of *Beowulf* dubbed ‘a bone-house.’ And it was my body specifically. My knees, my ankles, my back, my shoulder, my wrist, my neck, my bladder and kidneys. It was my body defined in medical terminology as having a congenital spina bifida present from birth from L5 down to S5. And this shift in thinking about my body from margin to centre is critical to the emergent field of Disability poetics.

Since *Anatomy* had a very small print run (only fifty copies) Moolman used the long poem as a section within his next collection *Light and After* (2010), although it was published without Nyide’s artwork. The collection does, however, include a poem, “Boy,” inspired by American artist Fahamu Pecou whom he had met earlier at Caversham Press and with whom he had collaborated. Apart from the poems from *Anatomy*, Moolman directly represents his disability in poems like “Three Views of an Orthopaedic Boot” and “Before Dawn” which ends: “Return to bed. Same old / stories to fall asleep to: / stick without foot, / twisted spine of night.”

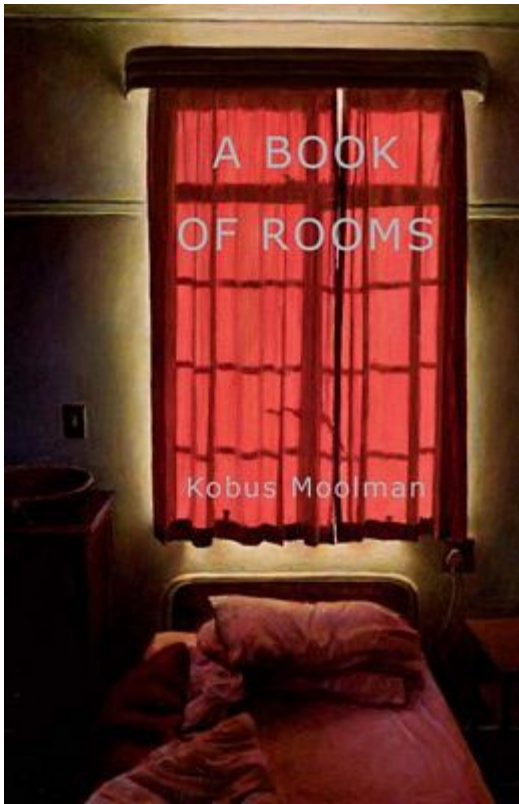
Works, 2010–2020

In 2010 Moolman was a guest writer for three months of the Creative Writing Research Group at the University of Calgary, researching the important tradition of the long poem in contemporary Canadian poetry as part of his doctorate. He was awarded his PhD in English studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2011, with a dissertation titled *Autobiography of Bone: An Original Cycle of Dramatic Poems Researching the Problematics of a Reconceptualisation of the Formal Boundaries between the Genres of Poetry and Drama*.

His next collection, *Left Over* (2013), is dominated by the third person in a manner that swaps objectivity for interiority, reminiscent of free indirect discourse. Moolman also makes extensive use of the prose poem, as well the poetic fragment. He had used the third person before as a substitute for himself, but here now there is a clear portrait of a man who physically resembles Moolman, yet is distorted even monstrous:

In a corner of the room is a creature with enormous arms, long and exceedingly strong. And thick broad shoulders, Like a doorway. It has a huge head, with no hair whatsoever, and red-hot eyes like traffic lights. The creature has a low and deep voice ... It lurches awkwardly when it moves. Its legs are small and shriveled.

In negotiating this tension between autobiography and fiction, his poems recall the work of J. M. Coetzee, but it is important to emphasize that Moolman is an experienced dramatist and thus comfortable with the dramatic technique of character and the classical concept of the personae (mask).



Cover art for Moolman's collection *A Book of Rooms* (2014)

Deep South This image may be used for personal, non-commercial purposes only.

His next collection, *A Book of Rooms* (2014), was originally written as a substantial part of his PhD dissertation, from which Moolman has published extracted sections over the years as autonomous works. His latest chapbook, *He Said/ /She Said* (2024), is one other such section. *A Book of Rooms* is a book-length narrative poem that analyzes the speaker's life (an unnamed "he") from childhood to adulthood through meticulous attention to the details of the different rooms he has lived in, rooms that are as much psychic as they are physical. In its obsessive attention to detail it recalls the work of Georges Perec. Grammatically it is inventive. In *A Book of Rooms* Moolman eschewed all periods, only indicating new ideas and sentences with spaces and capital letters. Essentially, it is a book of tumbling rhythmic memory, Sebaldian in its evocation of the past and also in its unreliability and incapacity to commit to a factual truth. Jim Ferris in his review for *wordgathering* (March 2015) wrote that "one of the real strengths of *A Book of Rooms* is how deeply it explores a life contextualized by congenital impairments." The collection was awarded the 2016 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry.

In 2016 Moolman left the city of Pietermaritzburg where he had lived for most of his life, and he and his wife Julia relocated to the small farming village of Riebeek West in the Western Cape, ninety kilometers outside Cape Town. He was offered the position of associate professor of creative writing and English literature in the department of English studies at the University of the Western Cape.

His chapbook *All and Everything* (2019) is based on journal notes that he had made on his mother-in-law's sheep farm in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. The speaker sits at a distance and observes the brown winter landscape. It is a beloved, tender, and transient work, because the farm was sold and Moolman has moved away from that province. The collection is illustrated with pen drawings by Durban novelist Shubnum Khan, who had been a former master's student of Moolman.

The Mountain behind the House (2020), a collection rooted for the first time in Moolman's oeuvre in

a different cultural and natural space, extends his long-standing engagement with landscape and place to evoke the otherworldly, certainly unfamiliar, perhaps even threatening, like the dark mountains, but forcing the reader into unacknowledged understandings. What does it mean then to have left home, Moolman asks. What is home? And how to make a new home? “Morning finds him / on his hands and knees again // he scrabbles in the dirt / like a chicken // for his lost fingerprints” (“Morning finds him”). In her review of the collection in *New Coin* (June 2021), Joan Metelerkamp wrote: “These poems are so delicate and also straightforward: each image chosen as if it were given, each one accumulating meaning and pathos—the skill and adroitness of these images speak of a poet who thinks/feels, who perceives, with his whole being.” Moolman was awarded the University of the Western Cape Creative Arts Research award in 2021 for this collection. The following year, in recognition of his enduring creative practice and his commitment to teaching and mentorship, he was made full professor.

Moolman has faced multiple health challenges, including surgery to his neck and right shoulder and arm, and at the beginning of 2024 he was diagnosed with cancer. Undaunted he continues to write and teach. *He Said/ /She Said* revisits his divorce. And at the end of the year he published *Fall Risk*, a stark direct confrontation with the aging, mortal body in poems stripped of all titles.

Kobus Moolman is a passionate teacher of creative writing who has inspired many of the new generation of young writers, not just in the classroom, but also in his quiet and steadfast commitment to the relentless practice of ruthless risk-taking through art. For Moolman “the image is everything” (Zoom interview with Hammerschlag). One could even say that the word is everything. So it is important to experience his poems the same way one experiences an abstract painting or a piece of music, where the narrative event or thematic remains just beyond the grasp of language, flickering on the border. Moolman’s power as poet is rooted in the specific, in the known, in the body. But his poems speak, too, of the deep mysteries that lie on the other side of the known.

Works by the Author

Books

- *Time like Stone* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2000);
- *5 Poetry* by Moolman, Clinton Du Plessis, Mphutlane wa Bofelo, Lionel Murcott, and Gillian Schutte (Johannesburg: Botsotso Publishing, 2001);
- *Feet of the Sky* (Howick: Brevitas Press, 2003);
- *Separating the Seas* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007);
- *Blind Voices: A Collection of Radio Plays* (Johannesburg: Botsotso Publishers, 2007);
- *Full Circle* (Johannesburg: Dye Hard Press, 2007);
- *Anatomy* (Lidjetton: Caversham Press, 2008);
- *Light and After* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2010);
- *Left Over* (Johannesburg: Dye Hard Press, 2013);
- *A Book of Rooms* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2014);
- *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2017);
- *All and Everything* (Cape Town: uHlanga Press, 2019);
- *The Mountain behind the House* (Cape Town: Dryad Press, 2020);
- *He Said/ /She Said* (Johannesburg: Dye Hard Press, 2024);
- *Fall Risk* (Cape Town: uHlanga Press, 2024).

Other

- *Tilling the Hard Soil: Poetry, Prose and Art by South African Writers with Disabilities*, edited by Moolman (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010);
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- *Cutting Carrots the Wrong Way: Poetry and Prose about Food from the University of the Western Cape Creative Writing Programme*, edited by Moolman (Cape Town: uHlanga Press, 2017);
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- "Re-Imagining the Writing Workshop: The Creation of Multilingual, Collaborative Poetry," *Multilingual Margins: A Journal of Multilingualism from the Periphery*, 6, no. 1 (2019);
- "All and Everything," *Five Points*, Special Issue on *Writing from South Africa's Creative Writing Programs*, 19, no. 1 (2020), edited by Moolman and Renee Schatteman;
- "'Spots of Time': Michael Wessels and the Imaginative Reinterpretation of Identity," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 33, no. 2 (2021): 92–100;
- *Notes from the Body: Health, Illness, Trauma*, edited by Moolman, Duncan Brown, and Nkosinathi Sithole (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2023);
- *Alone in the House: Posthumous Poems of Michael Wessels*, edited by Moolman (Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2023);
- "Inside the Outside: How a Poem Grows in the Glare of the Writing Workshop" in *The Creative Arts: On Practice, Making & Meaning*, edited by Sally-Ann Murray and Michele Betty (Cape Town: Dryad Press, 2024).

Selected Periodical Publications

- "These Words," in *25/25: Twenty-Five Years of English South African Poetry*, edited by David Bunyan (Grahamstown: Institute for the Study of English in Africa, 1989), p. 27;
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- "8 Critical Questions" and "His Explanation," in *The Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology 2011*, edited by Liesl Jobson (Sunnyside: Jacana Media, 2011), pp. 71–72;
- "What He Did," in *The Ground's Ear: Contemporary Verse from Southern Africa*, edited by Frederick De Jager (Cape Town: Quickfox Publishing, 2011), p. 35;
- "He Knew He Should Not," in *The Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology 2013*, edited by Liesl Jobson (Sunnyside: Jacana Media, 2013), p. 155;
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Further Readings About the Author

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