

The Mountain Behind the House

Kobus Moolman (Dryad Press, 2020)

Kobus Moolman's *The Mountain Behind the House* presents vivid external and internal worlds in diverse, often troubled, relationships. The opening poem, 'The New House', places the reader in an unfamiliar world where distinct parts fail to form a familiar whole: lines of a single sentence place the images before us, the speaker seeming to intrude little except in an awareness of the parts and their separateness. In contrast, the next poem, 'I Am That Stone', places him in a position of deep identification with a landscape.

We observe a 'Harvest', pregnant with possibilities, and experience an internal land carried "across oceans" in the flowing, tumbling enjambment of 'I Carry a Geography', to an eerie vision of Australia where ravens arrive "out of the sun carrying / sharp flakes in their cries". Here again there appears to be little conscious decision, the images instead being transfigured as if by intuitive associations or a sudden understanding (though only available to the reader through the conscious and careful choices of the poet). To my mind the book is at its strongest in such pieces, where the reader is placed in a world tightly organised by concrete images, suggestive of William Carlos Williams' "no ideas but in things". Each image resonates in a stillness unstirred by uncertain definitions or authorial comment.

In 'Highveld Hospital' we see an external world that can only hint at the interior worlds of those who "stand and shiver / leaning together", an idea carried further in 'Winelands One-Stop' where the majority of the poem comprises a description which is dismissed in favour of interiority in the final lines. The internal world finds an echo in the external but the reader can only approach the internal world through the arrangement of the poem (though the uncertainty of the word "soul" might be seen as muddying the stillness in a way that the flakes of the ravens do not).

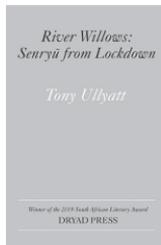
At times we find ourselves in a world where interior and exterior are no longer distinct, as in part 9 of 'Road Trip' where "you have to grip the arms / of the chair to stop yourself / pitching overboard" or the following three poems of the moving section entitled *Mother*: in 'The Dripping', the thoughts of his mother's childhood are indented within a poem where external life continues, illustrating a tension that comes to overwhelm the

poet. In ‘Morning Finds Him’, the penultimate poem of the book, the poet’s body itself is invaded by images (“Branches and small birds / squabble inside his mouth”).

Such poems are suggestive of the quality of paintings and the reader might be reminded of Giorgio de Chirico’s wish to paint “that which cannot be seen”, though equally of the anguish of Egon Schiele or the unsettling South African realities of Walter Meyer, in transfigured worlds through which we might consider our own experience.

Dryad Press continue to provide an invaluable service to poetry in South Africa with the latest additions to their stable, put together with their customary care in sturdy, attractive volumes.

STUART PAYNE



River Willows: Senryū from Lockdown

Tony Ulyatt (Dryad Press, 2020)

This moving sequence of poems by Tony Ulyatt explores life under lockdown on an intimate level as the poet and his wife take shelter from Covid-19 yet find her illness (unrelated to lockdown) advancing as they do. Beginning with a prelude (*Praeludium*), written during the excitement of the launch of her own book, it progresses to the time of lockdown (*Lockdown*) with moments of joy found in the stillness, as when the poet drinks a cup of tea while “an ant grooms itself neatly”. But the poet is also reminded of the restrictions placed on human life, and frustrations appear before the course of the book is altered by “pain’s chance roster”, passing to the devastation of day sixty-six and the fragile, tender acceptance of the final poems.

Although only lightly revised (so as to keep the day’s *senryū* “*about that day in that day*”), the poems are the work of a craftsman, written with the lack of revision only afforded by earlier practice. At times, the final line comments on the preceding two; at others, an image appears, as if in a single brushstroke. Throughout the book, the reader can occupy the position of the poet without distraction and so the moments of awareness become our own, whether considering the foibles of others or the distance to the stars; in situations familiar to us or those that we have been spared.

STUART PAYNE