

REVIEWS

REVIEW BY JOAN METELERKAMP

The Mountain behind the House
by Kobus Moolman

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Sometimes it is difficult to review a book not because you don't like it but on the contrary because it speaks so directly to your sense of beauty your response is immediate and visceral. It knocks you a little speechless. This is not to evoke "beauty is truth" or even "beauty is strange" but in my case to use a different cliché: this book takes me home; it puts me back in touch with myself and that's a hard and painful and utterly moving experience. How to show how these poems do that, and would they do it for other readers?

I do understand that the metaphor of home means many things to many people. At the simplest level, the geography of these poems, the images of mountains and roads and flats and people take me home to a missed place. Into my view come intensely familiar, intensely ordinary scenes charged with the pathos of marginalized people and marginalized places, charged with a sense of the mystery of endurance. I'm writing this away from another place and continent; what does it mean to have left home? I do think this is part of the question Kobus Moolman is asking himself: "Morning finds him/on his knees and hands again//...He scrabbles in the dirt/like a chicken// for his lost fingerprints".

Deep homesickness – I want to be back in the comfort of my grandfather's house hung with his strange and mysterious Alexis Preller's African paintings these poems remind me of; I want the smell of pawpaw, of coffee made in the sixties and seventies long before filters and plungers. There is a modernist tradition into which I think Moolman's utterly contemporary but also relatively timeless poems fit. They bring me again the sense of a language I want to speak, not the English I read here or even its poetry with its

predominant preoccupation with surfaces and reflections and long past post-modern fractures of identity. I want the comfort of the spirit world, the wholeness of the spooks I am familiar with, just behind the early morning sun: “yellow fish that change behind the curtain of the wind.”

Familiar mystery: am I the mountain, does the mountain speak, am I stone like the mountain, can I hope something of my past will be as lasting as the obdurate spirit of mountain; can something, something that I share and that is forgotten here, that I can't reach here, can it last like the Cape mountains? “Dessicated bones.”

It is so hard for me to read this book because pain and beauty are sides of one coin. It is incredibly sad. There is nothing pretty in it whatsoever. It is deeply masculine, hard, and amazingly maternal and soft. Of course it reminds me of Mxolisi Nyezwa and Mangaliso Buzani (O god the little girl in the poem called simply “Little girl” waiting, anticipating “in case her father should ever come back”!)

And then, there is also THERE. And the geography carried into that distant cold, a geography of dark space, a love of such depth no woman could hope for more. That, and to know that, closer to home, but still not at home, in exhaustion in the Wimpy on the N1 her husband-lover is still conscious of listening to, and listening out for, his own soul: the sounds and speech of “home”.

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 building list-like images speak of a poet who thinks/feels, who perceives, with his whole being.

In the section called “mother” we have another exploration of origins and endings; my favourite is the third “Dear Letter” where the poet is writing to his mother, but to one who will never hear; so, as the title tells us, it is a poet writing only a letter...the letter itself the recognised, cherished, way of speaking to himself. For me, it begins with the mother and the cane fires of KZN. “It is that time of year./ The burning has begun. // All the animals are fleeing”. Of course this could be a reflection on the ordinary late winter fire-break burning in many parts of the country, not the specific burning of cane fields at all – the fact that I see so clearly the cane-fields smoking has everything to do with what the poem allows me to bring to it – my childhood, my fears and hopes and deep losses and longings; and the anguish of my mother's eyes (or my own anguish thinking of those eyes) “your eyes/your eyes/ your eyes/oh, Mother!”

In fact there's nothing really to add about any of the poems or the book except that the more pared down, the simpler the writing becomes, the listing of perfectly relevant perfectly observed detail (if also surreal – the familiar as surreal) the more the poet opens to us. The cliché of a poet's "getting better" (as if he were ever not well) doesn't hack it. I could peel the images like a lychee at Christmas-time, dripping the sweetness, and spitting that smooth skinned pip, or say: just taste them; they're the real thing, dry and shrunken as they may seem (like the best lychee!). The wonderful thing about the book is how open and spacious it is although the poems might seem at first glance to be small. Their preoccupations are with loss and confusion as wide and hard as the mountain behind the house.

Although my reading of this book reconnects me with a particular geography, I've read a few of these poems to two very different groups over zoom. One was a group of trainee-students of the Alexander technique – nothing to do with poetry, except that it is a technique which emphasizes the inseparability of mind/body, and in which, like certain psychotherapies, the process of living is more valued than the ends achieved. I read the first three poems and to say they were "heard" or "received" is an understatement. We agreed that their moving spaciousness allowed a very valuable experience. A similar thing happened with a group of poets and/or readers of poems from Exeter. There was a hush after I'd read "Winelands One-Stop" (p.28) even though none of them could visualise the precise place (and none had a clue how radically lovely the mountains and fields are there). We all recognized a shitty little Wimpy at the side of the road and the present continuous

It is there that all of his life is taking place,
there now inside him – amongst the plastic furniture
and the greasy leftovers and the pink balloons of his soul --
that his real self is to be heard.

