ILLUMINATIONS 37 SUMMER 2022

Sculptures of Silence: An interview with Kobus Moolman
by Shaun Pieter Clamp

Kobus Moolman is Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of English Studies at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He has published eight collections of poetry and two collections of plays, and edited a collection of poetry, prose and art by South African writers living with disabilities. Kobus himself is living with spina bifida.

He has won numerous local and international awards, including the 2015 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry for his collection, *A Book of Rooms* (Deep South, 2014), the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award, and the Ingrid Jonker Prize. His first collection of short fiction, *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories* (UKZN Press), was published in 2018.

In 2019, he published a chapbook of meditative poetry with drawings by Shubnum Khan, *All and Everything* (uHlanga Press). His latest collection of poetry, *The Mountain Behind the House* (Dryad Press, 2020) was launched recently.

In his writing Kobus explores the relationship between the non-normative body and experimental textual practices that challenge generic boundaries.

The interview was conducted online through a Skype call and subsequent email exchanges.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Hello, Kobus. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. At your recent online reading with The Red Wheelbarrow [an inclusive Zoom poetry platform], you expressed prior reservations about talking about your poems, wishing instead to "leave them out in the cold and dark," to "preserve the space and the silence around them." I hope this interview will open another window onto your poems without disturbing the space and silence they evoke.

Kobus Moolman: Hi, Shaun. It's a pleasure.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: At the Dryad Press launch of your latest collection, *The Mountain Behind the House*, Sally Ann Murray [Chair of the English Department at the University of Stellenbosch] deftly brought attention to the collection's title for its emphasis on 'things' and 'place,' both serving as central motifs throughout the work. Why the poetic concern with things, and likewise, why place?

Kobus Moolman: I think I've always been interested in the relationship between an individual and the environment. I'm interested in how we as humans feel something from a space, how that space makes us think or feel, and what that gives rise to. I'm quite fascinated by how we give voice to the intangible, and it's particularly out of space or place that one has an intangible, unconscious response. One doesn't know why one responds as one does when looking at a mountain, or walking into a house and experiencing a particular reaction, or walking into a mall and there's a feeling. None of that is predetermined, none of it is often even conscious, but there is definitely something happening. And I'm trying to find how a poem can give voice to that. Does this make sense?

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Yes, it does. I imagine it requires an intense sensitivity. You have described your writing process before as one of listening. When you sit to write, what are you listening for? And is there a question in the listening?

Kobus Moolman: You're absolutely right, Shaun, it is a listening…What am I listening for?

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Is there a question in the listening?

Kobus Moolman: Yes. The poem for me is the question. Now you're going to ask, "Where's the answer?" The question is for me most important. The answer will ultimately be created by each different reader. They will create the answer. My responsibility I suppose is to listen so keenly that the poem can encapsulate a whole range of different readings in one place. It's really interesting because, as I'm sitting here now, I'm thinking *what am I listening to?* and I'm speaking back to myself all the time as we talk. Because when one suggests "listening to," it implies we're listening to 'what,' or 'whom,' that there's a voice outside me and this voice is speaking, but it's not like that. I've always been enormously suspicious of the idea of inspiration, that there are the nine muses out there, for example, or the divine, and all I am is this vessel, or this conduit. Well, I suppose in some senses I am, but it's definitely not the case that there is this thing that tells me what to say. If one thinks of listening, that's one way of understanding what listening means, but I'm listening at a deeper level. To be honest, I'm probably listening – this is probably going to sound so strange – I'm listening to silence. I'm listening to the things we can't hear. But we can only hear them through the activity of creativity, through action, through making. Does that make sense? Only in the making of the poem, as I'm writing it, am I listening. It's not that you listen before and then you write it down. In the writing is the listening, the listening is the writing.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: When you say you're listening for the things that are silent, that we cannot hear, especially with your focus on things, it makes me think of the notion of 'the thing in itself.' Because we can't ever get to the thing underlying our subjective impressions of it, the closer we try to get, the more mystical and charged it becomes. You've mentioned before your excitement in things lies in their fundamental ambiguity, that they are both "this and that." Could you elaborate on this ambiguity and why it excites you?

Kobus Moolman: I think I find this ambiguity so exciting because it seems to me that it is out of this dual experience that poetry arises. Poetry is both in and outside the writer in the moment of production. It dwells in that nether zone of twilight and even contradiction. It refuses so much that insists on conformity, singleness, and certainty. It reminds me of that condition that Yeats wrote about in his poem 'Long-Legged Fly,' where the legs of the fly barely disturb the water, barely even touch the flowing stream.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: To your point about muses and listening, you've expressed before that you do think the poem is 'out there' in some sense. In the act of sitting to write, before even knowing what you're going to write, there seems to be an element of faith?

Kobus Moolman: Hah. I was going to use another word. I know what you mean by faith. The word I prefer to use, something that has interested me for quite a few years, is the word trust. For me I think that's closer to it than faith. Faith suggests certain connotations I want to steer away from. Trust is almost on the point of despair. It involves almost the impossible but it's not impossible. To trust that something will happen means that it probably won't or can't happen but you're going to give it a shot. It's like one in a million. Which is why it is so absolutely terrifying when one writes, because you do not know what is going to happen. You could write three lines and suddenly, despite your best efforts, nothing else happens, it goes nowhere, it dies. And that happens; we know that, you know that. You're always teetering on this line, this rope that's strung between things, and you're almost falling but you're not falling. Sometimes you do. Trust is the idea that even though I don't know what I'm going to say, even though I don't know where I'm going, I will still nevertheless

put one word down after the other. And that's all I have to do. It sounds weird. That's all I have to do. And yet that 'all' is so much.

Trust also involves "If I remove myself, the poem will come in." People have this reverse thinking about a poem that a poem is an expression of the writer, that the writer is expressing him- or herself. I'm not so sure about that. I think it's in the removing of the writer that the poem comes in, and that's about trust.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: What you said about trust brings to mind your poem, 'He Does Not Know' from *The Mountain Behind the House*, which begins: "He does not know what he is doing, / or why he is doing it." Yet the speaker keeps returning to the page, to a certain inner tension. Have you, as the poet, come any closer to answering why you do it? Why you engage in this tightrope act?

Kobus Moolman: There are several answers. The one would be because it is a compulsion. I have an itch that I need to scratch. That's on one very basic level, but one would know it. You feel this thing, there's something going on, an itch somewhere inside your body or wherever it is. Now I could try to ignore it, but what would that result in? I'm not so sure. It might make one ill.

But the other response, apart from the fact that it is a compulsion, is that I also have a very strong belief in sharing, and the value of, to put it loosely, communication. The value of putting something out into the world for someone else to find, pick up and be touched by it. Because I've known for myself the value of reading a poem or a novel or listening to a piece of music, and this hand comes out of the piece of music and just touches you. In that act there is a tremendous comfort, there is solidarity, there is a sense that I'm not alone in the world, that I'm not the only weird person with these weird ideas, that there's somebody else out there who has equally weird ideas and equally weird reactions to things. That is for me so important, and if I can do something similar for other people, if my work can in some small way touch somebody, and make them think about their life differently and find some kind of consolation in the night, then that is the purpose of my writing. I don't write for myself. Even if the stuff is buried in a chest and is never to see the light of day, I have faith, hah, a hope, that at some point in the future it will see the light of day. That for me is critical, that I am participating in some kind of shared process. Even though I'm the only one writing, I have a hope and a trust that the work can leave me and make connections with people out there. I think that's fundamentally why I also write.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: You used the word "consolation," but is it really about that? At the launch of *The Mountain Behind the House*, during that wonderful, self-described "sermon" about beauty being in the physical ("Go and look at Rembrandt, go and look at Goya!") you said, "Art based in the physical, in the ugly, will be triumphant, but it will be costly. It will be costly to the artist, the writer, and also, it will be costly to the reader." So, if it's a consolation, it's a peculiar, paradoxical consolation that you offer. Does it make the night any less dark?

Kobus Moolman: It does. It does. Yes, that's very interesting, Shaun. This is really intriguing. A poem will never offer cheap consolation. No artwork will do that. Talking of the work of Goya, for example, or Francis Bacon, the painter, there is nothing easy, comforting, or restorative about those works at all! On the contrary, in fact they – no, I was going to say "They provoke," but it's even worse! It mixes you up, it shakes you, it sticks knives into your flesh. But that is precisely the kind of consolation that great art offers, because you are forced to think about and confront the profound aspects of life: time, death, love, all of these really big things, and although the artwork's not going to give you an answer to them, it's going to say that it is worth contemplating these things. That's what it's going to say.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: That someone else has listened to those things.

Kobus Moolman: Good. Yes, exactly. Someone else has heard, someone else has listened, they have heard. They too are where you are, and probably further along the road. I dare not compare myself to these people, they are much further along the road, but they are leading something for us, however dark it is, however troubled, however jagged and painful it is to pick up, we are nevertheless consoled because we realise we are not alone. And I think that is for me a fundamental in art. And we mustn't take that lightly. Others have gone before. Others have felt. In that I take tremendous strength. It strengthens me. Yes.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: This leads beautifully to your work as the editor of *Tilling the Hard Soil: Poetry, Prose and Art by South African Writers with Disabilities* (UKZN Press, 2010). One of your criteria in curating the selection was for the authors to "draw a reader into their world, and to reveal the concrete and lived experience of being disabled in South Africa today." What struck you most about the insights yielded in this collection? Did anything surprise you?

Kobus Moolman: I think it did surprise me, but then maybe it didn't surprise me at the same time, because I live in that place. What I was intrigued to find was the inner experience of disability, that's what I was seeking. What does it feel like, what is the experience? I want to move beyond the clichés about overcoming adversity and crap like that: "If one thing's taken away from you, you get something else as compensation." I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in giving humanity, finding humanity. What is the human being? Who is the human being in this person who can't hear? Who is the human being in the person who can't see? Because they're more than just somebody who can't see, they're more than just somebody who can't hear, and that's what I'm intrigued by. It starts to move us into a place where we can get to know people, get to know what it is like to be blind. Does that make sense?

Shaun Pieter Clamp: It does. To answer a question you posed to yourself in the preface to *Tilling the Hard Soil*, it seems you were able to find "a general reference of experience and perception [for people with disabilities] that cuts across racial and economic lines" in South Africa. On the other hand, though, did you find that the works in the collection revealed the impact of those socio-economic lines on the experience of people living with disabilities in significant ways?

Kobus Moolman: Oh, yes, indeed. It is very important to foreground the fact that while there are commonalities and shared experiences that do "cut across racial and economic lines," things like medical treatment, access, social stigma, education are all heavily dependent on race and economic status in this country. And probably not just here. And these differences are telling.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Your work *A Book of Rooms* (Deep South, 2014) reminded me of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in its exploration of a protagonist's internal life through trials of shame, desire and selfhood. Unlike Stephen Dedalus, however, your would-be poet protagonist does not 'take off,' instead remaining bound to his home, within the walls of these 'rooms.' What prompted this narrative choice?

Kobus Moolman: I was struggling to understand what memory is and how memory acts upon us. The whole of that book is essentially one person, the protagonist in the story, dredging up memory after memory after memory. This is seen in the attention to detail in the book, the almost repetitive and even excessive attention to detail describing certain things. And that goes back to your point about things, things in themselves. These things are animated and they're animated through memory. Memory animates the bed, it animates the chair, it animates the desk.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: And they recur.

Kobus Moolman: Yes. For that particular book I was hugely inspired by the work of W. G. Sebald and his way of dealing with memory and time. There's a kind of circularity, of continually going back and coming back to these ideas, or not ideas but things, these things, and I found that touched a core inside me, something I can relate to.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Another question I have about *A Book of Rooms* has to do with its form. Each section, or 'room,' follows the structure of a full line, then a quarter of a line, a full line, a quarter of a line, and so on. *A Book of Rooms* is labelled as a book of poetry, but for me it was on the border with prose-poetry and prose. In one sense this form leavened the poetic-prose, and at the same time it gave it incredible momentum. I had never seen anyone use this form before. How did you come up with it?

Kobus Moolman: I struggled and struggled! Part of my challenge was that I knew I wanted to create a large piece. It necessarily needed to span about fifty-odd years or there about. But at the same time, I also knew that I needed to break it up. Because if I was working with the conceit of rooms, that meant that I would have to compartmentalise this boy's, this man's, experiences into these small fragments, these small sections, these small rooms. Now, that then gives me a huge problem as a writer, because what's going to hold it together, what's the framework? And then I realised I could come up with a structure, a poetic form, to hold the whole piece. There are one or two conscious exceptions in the book where suddenly the line is different, but ninety-eight percent of the book is written in, as you quite rightly point out, this long, short, long, short format. Not only was this a way of creating an overall structure that held all the different parts together, but it also created momentum. The pattern sets up a momentum, and I needed that momentum because otherwise the piece would be very jerky, as if there was nothing connecting one section to the other. They are stand-alone, but they do connect. With the form, I was trying to create a bridge, solely through rhythm, to link the different parts. When I originally wrote it, I used long and short lines and proper punctuation. I then removed the punctuation because I wanted a sense of moving forward. I wanted a kind of rolling rhythm that just goes on and on without any stop. But the lines themselves would help you as the reader to stop because of their strange jagged pattern. Yes, so it was very complex and complicated. And to be honest, I had tried a whole range. I've got all the different versions, the different patterns, saved. I knew it had to be consistent, apart from one or two really exceptional places, so it was about finding the one shape that would give me all of these things that I was seeking. And that's what I came up with.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: It really works. Especially with the attention to things and their importance in memory. If I can give my own interpretation, it's almost as if the rhythm is like the motive energy of memory and the words are the things. The physical thingness in the memories is driven by memory's compulsive rhythm.

Kobus Moolman: Yes, absolutely. I think you're spot on. Thank you. I really like your way of reading that.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Thank you. I remember the first time I read it, I read the section 'The Room of Rural Teaching,' over and over. Lines such as "straining / like hungry dogs against the hot rope of their longing" just blew me away. I really appreciated that section.

Kobus Moolman: Thank you, Shaun.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: So, that was a really innovative way of dealing with structure. If we could return to *The Mountain Behind the House*, when asked as to how you structured that collection, you described it as a process of listening and shaping. Could you elaborate on listening and shaping in relation to structure?

Kobus Moolman: For a long time, I think in all my writing, I'm drawn to writing that does interesting things with itself. A conventional lyric poem on a page is okay, I can read it, it gives me something. But I'm always interested to see what a writer can do with shape, form, structure. What does structure do for a poem? And so you'll see with a lot of the poems in *The Mountain Behind the House* that each of them in its own way is straining to find its own voice. When I mean voice with a capital V, it's got to do with sound, it's got to do with shape. Shape affects the sound; the lines, the length of the lines, how the lines run, how the lines are broken, what punctuation is used, all of that creates and forms part of structure, and structure affects rhythm, rhythm affects meaning. How one accesses what the poem is saying, how it acts upon you. In every single poem I would listen out, literally test. Thank goodness we have computers because in the old days you would have to write out the same poem five hundred times, trying it in different ways. Now I can at least write it, copy it, make a new page. I have all these different versions saved, and late at night, I'll go to them. Often I used to diminish the screen so that the text is very small, which helped to push it away from me and make it strange and foreign. Then I can get some kind of distance, look at it as if it's not mine, be able to listen, look, decide "Is it reading? What's it reading like?" It's a slow process, but that's the part that I love. I love coming up with weird and wonderful shapes and ways of constructing poems.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Did you take that same approach to arranging *The Mountain Behind the House* as a whole? If we describe this process as one of shaping, what shape did it take?

Kobus Moolman: I knew I didn't want a collection that was like "Here's the beginning," and "Here's the end," and the poems just ran throughout it. Although the poems were not necessarily disparate, they were talking about different subject matters. For example, some poems talk about the speaker's mother, others are more about place, and then there are others that have absurdist, surreal ideas. Now, I needed them to have their own sections, so that you can encounter them and they're not mixed up.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: You gave them their own places: 'Here,' 'There,' 'Everywhere,' 'Nowhere.'

Kobus Moolman: I look back now and there are some poems that are just by themselves, they are one-poem sections. Now I'm in two minds. I'm not sure whether that works, whether I shouldn't perhaps have collapsed that one poem into the section that comes after it. I'm not sure, that's something I'm undecided on. It could be a bit artificial having single poems in sections by themselves. It's a little bit of my feeling.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: But it's structurally interesting in that way. It makes me think of, and perhaps it's just the section 'Bone,' but archaeology or palaeontology. I've spoken to Robert Berold [South African poet, editor of Deep South Publishers, and editor of *New Coin* magazine from 1989 to 1999] about editing and he describes it as removing the debris to lift out the essential structure of the poem. If it's like that, then structuring the collection is like a sort of palaeontology, of arranging the various bones into an overall structure, in a sculpture.

Kobus Moolman: What a nice idea. No, I like that, I like that very much. I'm particularly flattered that you would use that analogy because I like bones. I don't know much about bones but I think they're very cool.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: A personal question – how did you come to know Robert Berold?

Kobus Moolman: I met Robert many years ago when I was involved with my first book, *Time like Stone* (UKZN Press, 2000). We went out to dinner, myself and the publisher of my collection, Veronica Klipp, with Robert and Joan Metelerkamp. I loved Joan's work too. That's where I met Robert and we just kind of connected. I then started reading a lot of his work and his work has had a deep impact on me. Now, Robert is my mentor in a certain way. He's the one person writing at the moment that I trust implicitly to get what I'm trying to do. And in any new book that I work on, I always chat with Robert about it and get his advice because I respect his judgement very deeply.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: It's very fortunate to know him. He's a generous man in that sense.

Kobus Moolman: Enormously generous man, unbelievably generous. You're quite right.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: During your reading with The Red Wheelbarrow, when asked for one piece of advice you have for young writers, you responded, "Authenticity. Integrity. Be authentic, which is not the same as being true." What does that mean? As Professor of Creative Writing at the University of the Western Cape, how do you encourage students to write authentically?

Kobus Moolman: Well, I think we've got to first separate authenticity from truth, or we've got to interrogate what is meant by truth. A poem or a play or a novel is not necessarily true in the sense that it really happened like that. Often it's a lie. It happened in another way. But for the purposes of the story it needs to happen in this way because we are concerned with a deeper truth. I think it was Picasso who said something like "A painting is a lie that tells the deeper truth." And it is a lie. A poem is a lie. This is not real, it is not true, it didn't happen like that, I didn't really do that, I didn't see that, and even if I did, that's not actually what the purpose of the poem is about. The purpose is to drill further. Authenticity means writing it in a way that gives priority to my vision of the world. It's about the writer trying to hear what their vision is. And that's what I need to get when teaching. It's so much about getting people to let go of what they think a poem should be, because that is inauthentic, and rather, to respond from where they are. Even if they live in Belhar or the Cape Flats [historically impoverished areas in South Africa] and they've never travelled outside of the Western Cape, and they feel that they have nothing to contribute, that's not true! Authenticity is about finding what is unique to you, what only you can talk about, even if it is the bunion on your big toe. You've got a bunion on your big toe like nobody else has, claim it, be authentic about that. But people sometimes feel that a poem should be about grand subject matters or big love affairs. I'm working in the opposite direction. I'm saying focus on where you are, focus on what you know, and what you don't know about what you know. For me that's interesting.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Beautiful. I'm definitely going to use these as quotes for my own writing assistance. I've managed to get a free lesson out of you.

Kobus Moolman: It's a pleasure. I'm glad.

Shaun Pieter Clamp: Kobus, thank you so much. It was a privilege to have this conversation with you.

Kobus Moolman: Thank you very much, Shaun.

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