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Poet Kobus Moolman chats with Janet van Eeden about his new collection, *Light and After*

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Review by Janet van Eeden

Kobus Moolman's latest anthology, *Light and After*, is a revelation. It is the work of a poet who has mastered his craft, and more than that, it is the work of a writer who has made peace with the medium he has been striving for over the past years.

Light and After is a mature and deeply inspiring anthology of poems. Moolman has succeeded in achieving what painters like Picasso did with art: he's moved his poetry into the abstract world of suggestion rather than the pure explication of reality. And yet he hasn't succumbed to what some poets are tempted to do, which is to obfuscate meaning for the sake of it in order to appear clever. Neither has Moolman done what surrealists do, which is to throw a bunch of words together without having a clear idea of what meaning will come out of random groupings. His poetry makes complete sense at gut level. Even though the conscious mind may not be able to grasp the exact meaning behind the words as they are framed in a particular poem, there is a deep understanding and even recognition in the subliminal mind. To be able to achieve this type of universal resonance, Moolman's abstractions must spring from deep contemplation. Meaning drips out of words that aren't usually associated with the feelings described. Powerful imagery creates meaning by using a surprising combination of objects and ideas with the artful use of metonymy, where one thing is used while another is meant. For example, in "Loxton – Karoo – Dusk":

> The wind counts on old fingers
> all the birds' wings it takes
> to build a mountain.

His expert use of synecdoche – using a part for a whole – is also employed with great skill. In "Insomnia":

> Once again he gets up, puts on his feet, pours out his
> eyes/ into the dark lake of his window.

The imagery used throughout each poem is rich and evocative, and not a single word is used thoughtlessly. From "Insomnia" again:

> The window gathers silence tightly around him like a shawl.

Moolman is one of this country's most accomplished and celebrated poets. Now this volume of poetry will project his work into the stratosphere of international recognition. It's a most accomplished and beautiful work, filled with pathos, tenderness and humour, in which he examines a poet's existential journey in particular, and his own personal journey as a disabled writer in passing. An excerpt from the Dalro Award-winning poem cycle "Anatomy", which focuses unapologetically on his disability:

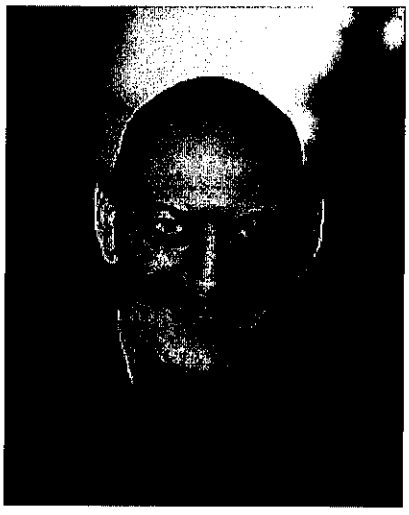
> **The Foot**
>
> The foot is a hole.
> A stone.
> A black stone.
> A hole made by the stone
> before the hole was made.
> A hole that the stone cannot get out of,
> no matter how black, and blacker still,
> its skin goes –

And another of the poems from *Anatomy* in full:

> **The Foot (the other one)**
>
> The other foot is stupid
>
> And small
>
> And not worth talking about.

Light and After is, quite simply, a masterful work by a poet at the peak of his talent.

Q&A with Kobus Moolman



Kobus, I think *Light and After* is your best work to date. You've moved into the abstract world of suggestion rather than pure explication of reality. And as I said above, your abstractions seem to emerge from deep contemplation. I find this poetry admirable and deeply moving. I loved the reading you gave, which I attended recently, as the meaning washed over listeners without its having to be spelled out for them.

Could you tell me about the genesis of this volume of poetry? How did this particular type of poetry reveal itself to you?

Thank you for your comments. Enormously perceptive and accurate as always. That sense of what you term the "abstract", and the exact term you use, are precisely what I am aiming for, what I am hoping the reader will emerge from my poems with. I have been gravitating slowly toward a less direct, less representational type of poetry for a long time. I don't know where this all comes from. Where it started. It is probably a confluence of a lot of different factors: firstly, probably the kind of poetry that I myself like to read. People like Paul Celan, Anne Carson, Marina Tsvetayeva, Nelly Sachs, Ingeborg Bachmann, and so on. All poets that are not at all concerned overtly with meaning, but with the unconscious forces that push through a poet and on to the page, ultimately carrying meaning with it, but only as the by-product, as the afterthought, and not the primary focus. Secondly, too I suppose this style or voice in my writing has been some kind of journey, something toward which I have sensed myself moving for a very long time but not able to put a name to it or a description, because I was standing inside it and so could not see it for what it was. In many ways it is for me a spiritual form of writing. There, I've said it. It is my way of talking about the wordless, the mysterious, the numinous in a way that hopefully does not reduce the power and the darkness and the silence that for me always surrounds the great unknown, what we call God. There is a wonderful quote by the Greek poet Odysseus Elytis that sums it up perfectly, and that is for me my mantra of sorts, my ideal for all excellent poetry: "Poetry is the art of leading you toward that which goes beyond you." If my work can do that, if it can somehow voice the silent without depriving the silence of its mystery, then I will be very happy.

Your poetry is dense with meaning. Do you spend a long time contemplating your poetry before you put pen to paper, or do you write a few words down and then play around with ideas until you find your poem? What I'm asking, essentially, is, "*How* do you write your poetry?"

An interesting question. My answer is related to the first point. Ultimately, I aim more and more in my work for an unconscious way of writing, for a way that attempts to sidestep the rational and cognitive mind, with its ego and its need always to understand everything, and to allow more of the instinctual to take over. And this is interesting too, because never before have I been able to do this without running the risk of obscurity. Now I don't believe my poems are obscure; they just need or expect a different way of being read. A freer, looser way of reading. And this way of reading is related to a freer and looser way of writing. So that often as I'm writing I don't have the faintest clue (a) where I am going and (b) what any of it means. But experience has shown me that if I just trust (a very, very important word in my writing process now), if I just leap off every time into that unknown, then the poem will take over, and the poem will become itself. I must merely try and keep as much in the background as possible. But again, this is now possible for me, here and now, only because I am facing and trying to face all of myself, and so while the poems are on one level so much more personal than ever before, they are also so much more impersonal too, so much more than just about me.

This poetry deals with your disability for the first time, although there was one poem in a volume a few years ago which mentioned it briefly. Was it difficult to write about something which you've strived to minimise through your life? What was it like to confront this reality head-on for the first time in your writing?

I think I have come on the same journey with the issue of disability as I have with the one on spirituality, which I tried to describe above. And perhaps they are the same road. Not two separate roads. Which is perhaps why they have met together here in the same volume. I have almost deliberately avoided writing about my disability before, because I felt that I did not know how to do it. Because I felt that I did not have the language and the form to do it yet. But why? Mainly, I wanted at all costs to avoid sentimentality, to avoid self-obsession, to avoid pity. But more than this, because I wanted to find a way to speak about disability that was not in fact a limiting way and that confined me to being a disabled poet, or a poet who wrote about disability. I need my work always to speak more widely. So it needed then to be a way of seeing disability in a different light. Seeing the "disability" in all of us, the brokenness in all of us, the lack, the loss. And this is we all have. This sense of being broken over and over by life. So whether we carry it in our bones or in our hearts (or both) it doesn't matter. It is the same thing. In this way my poem cycle "Anatomy" in the book is a turning-point in my work. It is the piece that really for me shifted my work on to another level.

Although you deal with issues such as your disability in this poem, as well as the existential crises which face any thoughtful person, your poetry has an ease about it which I've seen for the first time in your work. And even though it deals with very serious subjects, such as the meaning of life – or lack of it – and the reality of a disability, the poetry is almost light and humorous. There is a peace coming through in your writing which hasn't been there before. Are you finally at peace with your writing and yourself?

Well, thank you for saying this. I am flattered that you feel it. But I don't know if any writers/artists are ever at peace with themselves and with their craft. Hopefully, yes, there is more of a confidence, more assuredness of what I am trying to do and how to do it. But I think there will always be some kind of tension inside, a tension between the outside and the inside, not because I am a martyr or a masochist, but purely because this tension makes art.

You've been to Canada recently. Could you tell the readers of LitNet a bit about this trip and why you were there? What were your thoughts of Canada, and how was your writing received?

This could take forever. I will try and be brief. I am busy with my PhD, with a creative writing focus. Now there are no precedents for such a course in South Africa. And not many internationally. But at the University of Calgary in Alberta there is a programme that has been running for a while. So I went across mainly to see how they do it; meet people, you know, examine past theses, and so on. And then I generally wanted to get a sense of creative writing pedagogy in Canada. So apart from UC I also went to the University of Alberta in Edmonton to see their courses, and then spent some time at

the Banff Centre for the Arts in the Rockies. Banff is this glorious multidisciplinary centre just for the arts. State of the art facilities. So I gave readings of my work at UC and at U of A, and at Banff. I was also invited to participate in the Calgary International Spoken Word festival, which lasts a whole month across various towns. I did three shows there. And the reception was absolutely fantastic! I got a real sense of how to place my work in some kind of international context. I loved Canada. Such warm, generous people. From day one right through to the end. I was there for two months. And did a little bit of travelling too. And then I did loads of research in the Edmonton and Calgary university libraries, and I discovered a whole tradition of poetry – the long poem – that is uniquely Canadian, and which fits perfectly into what I am trying to do for my own thesis. And new writers! Oh, boy! Check out the work of Erin Moure and Nichole Brossard.

You teach Creative Writing at UKZN in Durban. Does teaching and talking about writing feed into your own work at all? How does dealing with the art of writing on a daily basis affect your own work?

I love teaching. And I love talking about something that is so close to my heart. And I like to be able to help young people discover the wonder of writing. Of course it is draining. But universities have these beautiful institutions called sabbaticals, and I have just come out of a nine-month sabbatical which enabled me to go to Canada, write this present collection of poetry, edit and complete the collection of writing by disabled South African writers, and then write as much of my PhD project as I can.

As I said earlier, I feel like this volume of poetry has been a breakthrough of sorts for you. Do you think the style you have uncovered, as it were, in this anthology could be put to use in a play? Are you working on another play at the moment? Or have you plans for another anthology of poetry or something else in the near future?

Aha! Well, the PhD project that I referred to earlier is what I am busy with and what has been obsessing me off and on for the past three years. It is, for me, a way of bringing together my poetic and my dramatic writing. But I did not just want to go down the rather staid route of a verse play, as in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. So I am intensely creating new forms that comprise a very large and long (about 270 pages at the moment) narrative in an essentially poetic voice, but making use of dialogue, character and staging. It may possibly be unstageable, but I don't think so. Have a look at the latest work of the British playwright Sarah Kane and suddenly the director is forced to find symbolic means of representing actions that clearly can't happen on stage. Wonderful. I can't talk too much about the project, as it is still in progress, and I never reveal pieces until the whole is complete.

You've just edited a book of poetry by disabled South African writers. Could you tell readers of LitNet about this particular project?

Yes, this has taken quite a while. I was approached six years ago by the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons in the Presidency to help them put together a collection of poetry and prose by a range of South African writers

living with various forms of disability. They had some material and I sourced others, and then I edited the whole, and found artwork as well by disabled artists to fit in with the book. But sadly, after all that work, the project was stymied by all kinds of bureaucratic delays and postponements. And it stopped. Then at the end of last year we had a breakthrough and the whole thing happened very suddenly, and the UKZN Press loved the idea. They have produced a very lovely book, *Tilling the Hard Soil*. Congratulations to all the contributors. All proceeds from the sale go to the Open Air School in Durban.

Where can readers get a copy of *Light and After* as well *Tilling the Hard Soil*?

Hopefully at Exclusive Books and through other bookshops, and even online through kalahari. *Light and After* is published by deep south, and distributed by UKZN Press. The ISBN is 9780958491570. *Tilling the Hard Soil* is published by UKZN Press.