from *Light and After*
by Kobus Moolman
(Deep South, 2010)

**Winter Trees**

Beneath the bare trees
stripped to sky, and
smelling of dust, two old
hands hold, fold and re-
fold a thin sheet of earth.
'Where is the wind? And
why is the wind never
a tree anymore?' the hands ask,
folding. 'The bare branches
of the bare trees no longer
hold anything. All falls
through the thin earth.
Why, even the sky,' the hands
say, 'has dropped all of
its clouds.'

**The Mountain**

At night the mountain
is a sky, cold and blank.
The mountain is the memory
of a name departed,
washed out from the loud
drum of day, day's hard
blade of blue. At night
the mountain is a silence
hunkered between
absence and feeling;
the swelling sound a
voice makes through the mist
of longing, the mist of
remembering. The mountain
is a sky, a voice climbing up
out of the black air.

**Ambition**

Yesterday he could easily still believe
that getting to the top really amounted to something.
That if he had a goal, he would ultimately reach it.

Today he woke up
and saw himself in the small mirror behind the bathroom door,
and saw the cuts under his eyes,
the holes in his hands.

And at that moment he knew
that the body is not flesh, it does not feel.
That it is made of sand instead. And it runs out.

**Hunger**

And God gave the man little wingless birds,
small as a shock,
to eat while He was away.

And a cup the size of a scab,
in case His return was delayed,
and the rain ran out.

But the man ate all the birds on the first day,
he was so hungry, and by
the second, the scab was picked raw.

Now the man has nothing left
to live on except
the dirt under his fingernails.

He doesn't know what he is going to do
when the third day comes
and goes without Him.

**Survival**

We who accept survival as our password

accept incompleteness as our blessing.

We who dress in blindness and in faith

do not know the colour of our palms

nor the weight of our feet upon the water.

We who have dust in our mouths all day

have stones instead of songs on our tongues.

We who quench fire with fire all night

know that wings are not the only ladders

to the dark, that heavy wood swims too

in the tide of the wind.

We who accept survival

accept survival as our curse.

**The Hand**

This is the hand. Talking.

This is me. Holding up the hand
and looking hard into it.

Is anyone listening?

The hand swims through the quick
water of daylight, through the slow
water of the night.
The hand burns during the day and
curls into brown smoke.
The hand burns at night and
crackles with electricity.
It jumps when anyone walks past.
It gasps and swallows short breaths
and stumbles over its broken teeth
when anyone asks it a question.

Is anyone listening?

I do not want to listen.
I do not want to sit and wait,
holding the hand in my hand
like a woman in the cold, a woman in the
cold and the dark cradling a dead child,
like a woman cradling nothing.

I hear the hand all day.
I hear it whispering behind walls.
Behind thin doors.
I hear it in my dreams. In my desire.

My lust is filled with the dark
blood of the hand, the dark light
that pulls, that calls, pulls
like a heavy rope at my heart.

I look at the hand and see
the scars of fires and knives.

I look at the hand and see
the calluses of stones and sticks.

I look at the hand and hear
the slow bending of bone, the curling
tongue of tissue and vein as the old words of my heart
close upon themselves like a leaf,
like the leaves of plants in dry lands
desperate to preserve the little that

remains in their veins.

I hear the hand call out, and turn my back.

I turn away from the sight of its large fingers
curled around the hole in my back,
its hard skin closing tightly like a
scar over the site of so many scalpels,
the loss of so many shoes.
The absence of feeling.
The feeling of being me, when I am so
few other things too.

This is the hand. Talking.

This is me. Not talking
to the one who exists at the still centre of the storm.
The one I have never seen. Only smelt.
The smell of lost flowers.
The smell of lost hair.
Eyes that opened once, flashed
like water under the sun,
spontaneously, and then were gone.
Beneath the black rock of fear.

This is me. Talking.

I cannot do anything else.
Cannot run, jump, climb, skip,
hurry, walk to the end of the sky.
Barely stand without falling over.
Because it is only the hand that
holds me up, that holds me onto
the narrow path, where there are no handholds,
only deep and empty falling.

But the hand is mortal.

It is not God.

It must burn.

Is anyone listening?

**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 –
Until its skin begins to crack, and
pieces flake off.
Chunks of rock falling into
the black hole that the foot grows
beneath its shadow.

The foot is a stone.
Underneath the stone is a hole
that stretches and shrinks and
stretches again as the wind blows.

The hole smells like words left a long time
in the crevice between two teeth.
Like words that have been closed up
too long in the dark pit of the mouth.
Sweating all night. And sleepless
in the day.

The foot is a hole made by a shard
of memory.
It walked through black mud
one morning on the edge of a brown lake,
where the birds waded deep up to their cries,
up to their blue wings.
It walked through the black mud and
into the lake.
And the water was not cold,
the foot said.
Come in, the foot said. The water is warm.

Look.
And it bent and scooped up the old skin
from the surface of the lake and
flung it up into the air.

And the flakes of water flew.

And the flakes of water fell.
And the foot came up out of the water
and it was red.
It was red where the flakes of water
had fallen upon it and cut it –

called out to it its new name.

Its new name was loss.
And rot.

The foot remembers the brown lake
always, and longs to return
to the warm water, to the impenetrable depths,
lurking with the voices of fishes.

It remembers the brown lake
with its long waving hair and its green eyes,
and it wants to laugh again, loudly,
the way the long grass does.
It wants to laugh again.
But there is a hole.
There is the hole made by the red stone
that does not heal.
The hole that never closes over.
Even when it seems to.

I hold the foot in my hand every night,
spit onto it.
I spit into its red hole and
mix the spit with sand and honey,
and pack it full. I pack the hole full
every night, and when I go to sleep 50

I dream that the hole is growing a skin over it.
That a wide bridge is falling out of the sky,
and that it lands on the foot,
and covers the deep distance
between the edges of the red hole.

The foot pretends that it has something to say.
That the fishes in the brown lake and
the birds in the air and the stones, too,
in the black desert
want to hear what it has to say.

But to be honest,
it has all been said before.

**The Wrist**

The wrist, the right one,
is a wrench.

The wrist, not the left, is rust.

It is red metal amongst stone.
It is brittle tin. It is clanking iron.

The wrist is unsettled.
It does not join or turn or fold or meet.

It grinds, stone against stone, midday
sunlight against old iron.
Cold night against cold stars.

It is a sharp moon. A blunt moon.
Made blunt on the blade of a hill.

The wrist, my wrist, my right,
is all that holds me up.

Keeps me perpendicular
to the black grave.

**a tree without light**

a sky with no bones

and a wind that rises and falls.

a book without eyes

a chair with no legs

and a window that opens and shuts.

a hand without feeling

a foot with no nerves

and a mouth that swallows and spits.

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**he was always whispering**

there was a draft in his mouth.

he was always tramping

there was blood and water in his boots.

and when he sat down to empty his hand

he found himself filling it instead.

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