

***A Book of Rooms***

**by Kobus Moolman**

**Deep South, 2014 113 pp.**

**Review by Denis Hirson**

**'That he may still be'**

The terms in which Kobus Moolman has written *A Book of Rooms* are set down in an epigraph by Georges Perec, part of which reads: "I have no alternative but to conjure up what for too many years I called the irrevocable: the things that were, the things that stopped, the things that were closed off – things that surely were and today are no longer, but things that also were so that I may still be".

Perec's writings are well known in France partly because of the multitude of inventories he drew up, concerning – amongst other things – dreams about a woman he loved, all the food and drink he consumed in a year, what he witnessed in particular parts of Paris on given dates. Together, these inventories trace paths he took across the map of his life. They allow for little excess of language or imagination. They are as slender, for the most part, as the thread Theseus was given by Ariadne to find his way out of the labyrinth once he had decapitated the Minotaur. They are sometimes playful and unexpected, and yet they are ultimately inventories of survival, constituted by a man who, as a child during the Second World War, was faced with the death of both his parents and several other members of his family.

In a very different context, yet facing high stakes of his own, Kobus Moolman has drawn up a very particular inventory in *A Book of Rooms*. It consists of a description of thirty-five rooms and key events that occurred in each of them, together tracing the path of a young boy into adolescence and on to manhood. The book progresses through its first three sections, named "Who", "What" and "Why", to reach the final one, "When", in which certain events, particularly the most painful amongst them, are hauntingly recorded once more, this time eliding into each other, refusing to be exorcised: "It keeps/ It all Keeps coming/ Back & back To him". In this section the trace of time passing takes precedence over earlier descriptions delimited by space, so that the inventory turns into an uneasy procession of memories continuing in its pulse to the end of the book.

The details involved in the book appear to be autobiographical, but the protagonist is presented in the third person, so that there is an essential degree of leverage between the writer and his subject, the one examining the other, turning over his doings like a prosecutor in a court-case or a director plotting out the path of an actor in a play. Pitiless investigation and theatricality are two essential ingredients of the entire sequence. It is almost entirely written out in long lines that reach the far margin and spill over each time by a few words, this measure constantly repeated, sentences uninterrupted by full stops, so that what could be prose turns into a methodically scored prose-poem advancing across eighty-five pages at a constant yet halting pace:

There is the same  
old pine desk with four drawers filled with unopened NBS bank  
statements and old  
school exercise books he had bought because the girl with the  
red hair, who had a  
boyfriend waiting for her at home, had told him that all real  
writers keep notebooks  
for their thoughts and ideas But since he had never

had any profound thoughts  
and ideas (or the discipline to be still and listen for them) the  
books are still sealed  
in their brown paper wrapping [. . .]

One way to assess Kobus Moolman's achievement here would be to measure what he has done against one central aspect of his six previous collections of poems. These are finely crafted yet emotionally raw, often beset with a sense of the mortal pressures of the material world upon a human body. This opposition sometimes reaching extremes, as in an untitled poem in *Left Over* (2013): "And suddenly he thinks/ how easy it would be/ for the chair behind his desk/ to plunge a sharpened slat into his back." The reference to a comfortless physical state appears to be not only a constraint but a precondition for the writing itself, a preoccupation so strong that the contours of the outer world are sucked into inner perception, while the troubled voice of the poet constantly risks becoming that of the victim.

In *A Book of Rooms* the stage is considerably, even unrecognisably widened. The reader is supplied with enough detailed information to constitute a biography, enough dramatic tension to need to know what is going to happen next, enough distance to paradoxically want to come closer to the central protagonist. This person has been dealt a few lousy cards by fate. We see him at the doctor's, his plaster casts being removed with "a small electric circular saw" and a new one being put on "all tight and wet and hot", we see him later with "his small feet in their differently sized orthopaedic boots" leaving a party where the girl he wanted is asked to dance by an older boy who arrived "in a red beach buggy with a surf board tied to the top". We see him surrounded by numerous precisely described minutiae dredged out of memory or invention but dredged nonetheless, because it is by bringing them to the surface of the page that the essentials emerge too, the pain and the unrequited desire and then also the guilt and shame associated with various acts driven by unutterable hunger. His hands and eyes are "like hungry dogs against the hot rope of their longing" and there is a hole in his heart, he says. Even as he holds a woman in his arms, the hole in his heart weighs him down.

Through room after room we follow him, The Room of Maybe, The Room of Family Holidays, The Room of What He Excels At, The Room of the First Time, The Room of Promises, The Room of Self-Pity, The Room of Hunger, The Room of Absolute Whiteness. Under examination in each room he insists on his faults, feeding fresh details to the prosecution while never calling on a witness for the defence. He does this not without self-deprecating humour, not without a paradoxical assessment of his wider surroundings. In The Room of Rural Teaching, there is

Excitement that he is finally out of his parents' home and can do  
what he wants for  
the first time in his life    Pride that he is helping those less  
fortunate than himself  
and fear that they will murder him in his sleep

Yet his ultimate target, against the shifting drama of each room, is always himself, in intimate combat, while the limelight glaring into his eyes is often held up to him by a woman. If this means that preoccupation with self is placed before relationship, the result is nonetheless no mean feat, for we are presented with the rare sight of a man overcoming, word by simple yet hard-earned word, the temptation to play the pinioned, impotent role of the victim. To reach this point, he shifts radically beyond that point at the beginning of the book where "he learns how/ much easier it always is to pretend than to admit a painful truth". By the end, the pretending has been cast aside like a heap of old clothes as the protagonist stands before us shivering. Can we bear so much reality? Would we not rather have at least some of these events occur out of sight, in the wings?

Maybe so, yet when was the last time we were presented with a book of poetry which raised the stakes so high and seemed to leave all hiding places so far behind? Kobus Moolman emerges from his rooms as from an impossibly dark labyrinth, and he arrives at this considerable, moving and highly readable achievement by entirely taking on his protagonist and the ache of his memories. He finds no easy path leading in the direction of hope. Near the end of the book he still asks: "How does he stop himself feeling that all feeling for him has/ ended where his skin begins?" Yet, to return to the Perec epigraph, he has put words to the irrevocable past he evokes, set it moving along a current words out in the world, making out of his writing an open if tentative breathing space, one where the third person who could well stand for himself "may still be".

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