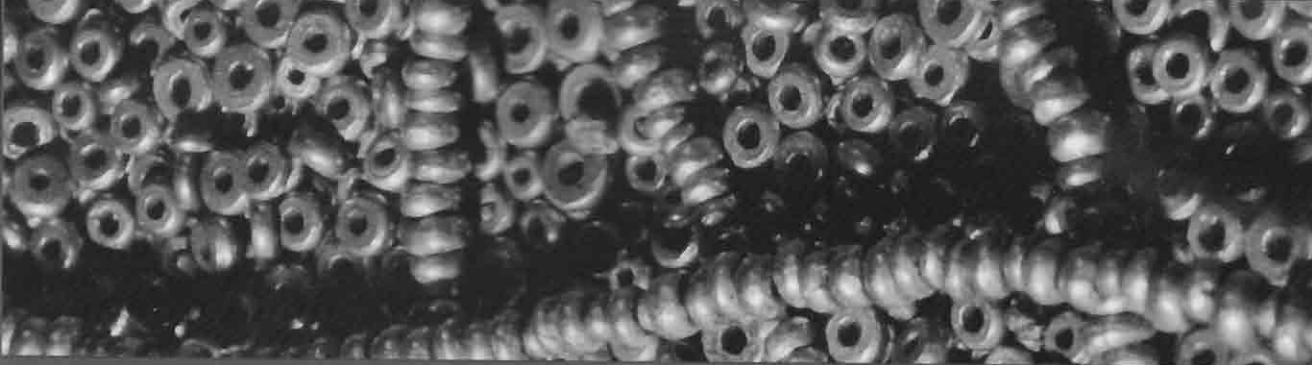

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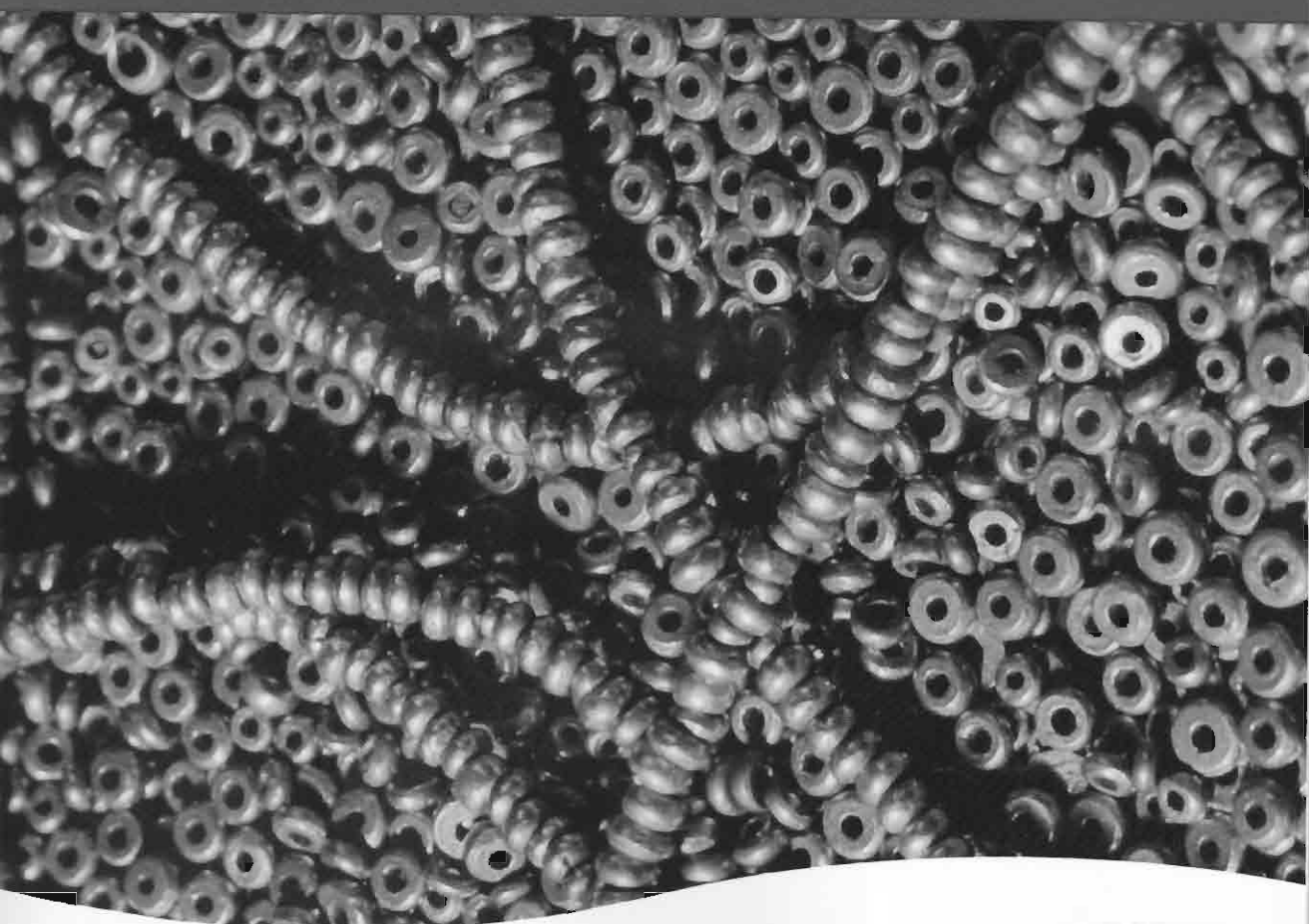

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Book Reviews

'...do they write me?'

Strandloop
by Norman Morrissey
Echoing Green Press, 2016. xix + 174 pp.
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In 2002, Norman Morrissey concluded a brief metalyric, 'The Rites of the Matter', by asking 'so do I write poems,/ or do they write me?' (ll. 18–19). The teasing question is not meant to be answered, but has gained new resonance since Morrissey's death in July 2017. As Auden notes in his moving elegy 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', once the 'current' of a poet's feeling fails, 'he [becomes] his admirers' (l.17) and 'the words of a dead man/Are modified in the guts of the living' (ll.22–23). In some sense then, any attempt to review *Strandloop*, described by Morrissey in his preface to the collection as 'a beachcomb through the poems I've published in various ways from 1979 to 2015' (2016, v), becomes an attempt not just to read his work, but also to write Morrissey and however tentatively, to shape his legacy.

Morrissey was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1949 and educated at the University of Natal, where he was taught by Colin Gardner of whom he writes with loving irreverence:

> Old friend, fellow who tutored the best in me,
> with the odd lifted eyebrow showed me how not to think,
> I shall miss you. ('For Colin Gardner', ll.13–15)

In his time at the University of Natal, both as a student and later as a lecturer, Morrissey developed an enduring passion for British nature poetry and his later work is infused with allusions to Wordsworth, Blake and Clare as well as their successors Yeats, Hughes and Heaney. As he conducts his own beach walk through life, scavenging for poetic value among metaphorical grey stones and bleached driftwood, Morrissey also tracks the voices of these poets saying,

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Through caverns of nightmare, chapels of dream
– waking windings of shore and scarpland –
Soul wanders its ways.
its tracks
linger
as poems. ('Tracks', ll. 1–6)

Yet Morrissey's responses to a British canon are grafted firmly to a lived experience of the South African landscape. Interestingly, despite three years spent working as a ranger naturalist and education officer, he writes only rarely of the 'big five' popularised by colonial romance and contemporary marketing, preferring instead to note a striped swallow on a fence of whom he writes, 'the heart that invested you, made you herald/ of a land that only was within me' ('Heart's Geography', ll. 18–19). Even more unusually, Morrissey celebrates even those creatures least appealing to the popular imagination as he records 'the final torpor' ('Even a Brick', l. 15) of a young mole snake found under a washing machine, 'the big rain-spider who's been hanging out in the kitchen' ('Midnight Cuppa', l.1), and his boomslang who would lie 'hammocked atop the hedge/ – thick as my wrist/ two metres and more in the lounging' ('Eden', ll. 2–4). This sympathetic identification with other creatures and recognition of even the serpent's right to Eden is characteristic of some of Morrissey's most remarkable lyrics and is particularly apparent in 'Crab' in which he writes:

When I've watched crabs before
Or turned a shell in my hand
And seen
That strange brittle frame
And stalked, stony eyes
I've always felt –
How far away!
How impossible
To look out with a crab's eye
On that terribly simple world:
Felt my imagination
Murk
Before a thing unknown:

But now –
I feel something warmer
Flow
From that old
Dour-clawed world

Into my own. (ll. 19–37)

In 1983, Morrissey took up a post at Fort Hare and continued living in his home in Hogsback even after his struggles with endogenous depression and other health issues forced him into early retirement in 2002. It was here in 1989 that Morrissey became a founder member of an informal group of poets known initially as the Echo and later as the ECCA poets after the fossil-containing shale found between Grahamstown and Fort Beaufort. The group, which includes or has included poets such as Cathal Lagan, Brian Walter, Basil Somhlalo, Mzi Mahola and Morrissey's widow, Silke Heiss, conducts regular readings and creative writing workshops and has published 21 collections in the past 25 years. While the poets making up the group have their own distinctive styles, they have undoubtedly influenced each other, favouring poems that display eco-critical awareness and a distinctive, pared-down lyricism.

In keeping with this, Morrissey's later poems show his understanding of Emily Dickinson's claim that

> Essential oils are wrung:
> The attar from the rose
> Is not expressed by suns alone,
> It is the gift of screws. ('675', ll. 1–4)

In his Preface to *St Mark's Diary* (2004), Morrissey speaks of most of his poems as 'being written or sketched while I was too tired to think straight, in too much physical pain to sleep, and afraid of tipping into pits even deeper than the one in which I sincerely tried suicide' (*Strandloop*, 2016, 172). Because of this, he records that he came to feel the need to self-edit his work almost obsessively. The later poems are compressed and polished into shining pebbles, misty fragments of sea glass reflecting an acute awareness of his world. In this sense, Morrissey's two-beat lines, characteristic three-line stanzas, and finely-observed and mischievously-named Hogsback 'hiku' can be seen as indicative of limitation. Certainly his gaze rarely strays beyond the confines of his rural Eastern Cape life, but he knew as Wordsworth did that 'In truth the prison, unto which we doom/ Ourselves, no prison is' ('Nuns fret not…', ll. 8–9).

I believe that a final volume of Morrissey's poems is soon to be published by Jim Phelps at Echoing Green. Admirers of these deft and unassuming poems are likely to order it with some sadness, but also with delight, knowing that as Morrissey himself acknowledged, while verse 'trimmed' him ('My Poems', l.1), it was Jim who 'trimmed/ my mind-flights true' ('To Jim', ll.6–7).