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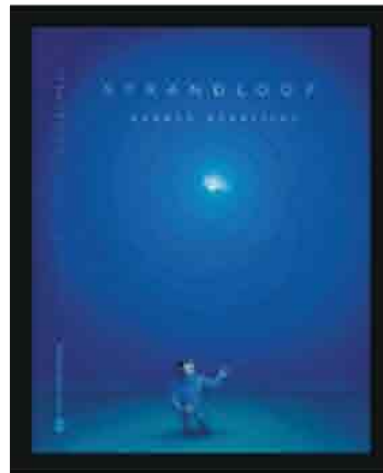
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A Review of Norman Morrissey's 'Strandloop'

Norman Morrissey, *Strandloop*, Fish Hoek, South Africa: Echoing Green Press 2016. R290 pp. 174. ISBN: 978-0-9870099-2-0

Tony Voss

Norman Morrissey, born in 1949, has 'made poems every day since 1979'. This work has earned him a distinct reputation in his native land, he has also published in the United Kingdom and the United States.

This volume is 'a beachcomb through the poems [he has] published in various ways from 1979 to 2015'. The first poem in *Strandloop* (Beachwalk), 'Today: 26 August 1979', may be the first poem he composed. The approach to observing detail in this poem is characteristic of the piece as a whole. The experience is given a Gregorian date, and located by details of the southern hemisphere season including the sight of identifiable birds. If the stork is a white stork, it may be a summer visitor or a resident (here probably the latter). The swift, which is marked as migratory (perhaps from Italy or Spain), may be the Eurasian (European). The speaker is first an observer, his field of reference includes Blake illuminations, heavy metal (if 'a Bedouin axe' is a kickaxe guitar), Michelangelo, the Bible and Shakespeare, but soon he is a worker in the field and a father. The wording '...grow away' ironically echoes 'go away' and the feeling that any day may be an Edenic opportunity is tempered by a sense that seasonal change is both a pattern and a routine. That this is a real beginning, a significant coming to awareness and change of direction, is recorded in the second poem 'Notes to Myself'. Here, as a poet, he has found a 'vein' to tap and a way of talking about 'That old cliché of my struggles' which:

...has really suffered things, has piloted itself
By real mad stars, wrecked for real...
(‘Notes to Myself’)

These early poems, then, establish themes and characteristics that will steadily emerge more fully as *Strandloop* progresses: nature simply observed, work, family, emotional and psychological candour, and a willing and distinctive acknowledgement of poetic precedent and example.

Apart from the recognisable ecology of his settings, Norman Morrissey identifies in imagination with South Africa in a number of ways. *Strandloop* as a ‘beachcomber’ aligns the poet with the strandloper San¹, and one poem identifies him as a member of that group (‘Strandlopers’), while in ‘Beachcomber’ the poet hears the message:

Grab the bright shells tumbling in the waves—

Poesis itself is a kind of beachcombing. The shells the Strandlopers are likely to have gathered are pêlemoen: emptied of their flesh they are still to be found in middens beneath the beaches of the Overberg. Norman Morrissey’s stronger association, however, is with the inland Bushmen. The cave-painter’s works are:

Fine-wrought windows on Eternity
Left like lark eggs on the veld.
(‘Beachcomber’)

The Bushman marks the southern limit of ‘The Africa of my myriad conceptions’: the northern limit is Egypt, whose mythology the poet evokes on a number of occasions.

While identifying himself imaginatively in this way, the poet is candid about the mundane actuality of existence in which he must fashion his poems. His father, who is a recurring presence, is acknowledged for:

Gentling my tones to my son,
Saying with your eyes...
Things that shame me for my pettiness...
(‘My Father’)

But is also honoured and cherished:

My father,
I bury you who have no grave
High on my own heart’s mountain,
Place you firm in the wrangling winds
There, where I return to, always, as by gravity.
(‘My Father’)

The last line seems to me to lose its rhythmic way but the imagery is striking. Two poems (‘Swimmer’ and ‘Sorrow’) recall his father’s death in hospital, acknowledging in memory a debt to his father’s skills, holding on to ‘a brass-hinged ruler’ (‘From the Wings’) and, perhaps rather disingenuously, in ‘Sound Piping’, finding a parallel between their callings:

I'm not
an intellectual
—just a plumber's son
who's learned sometimes to run a stream
through
sound piping.
(‘Sound Piping’)

The poet's relationship with his mother seems more troubled. She appears ‘like a spectre (‘Crone’), he remembers ‘all the ill you did me’ (‘Sometimes Chains’). He realises that:

I must forgive you
I must forgive myself
And let us both carry on.
(‘My Mother, in Limbo’)

Norman Morrissey's hardships do not qualify his celebration of the beauty and intensity of life. In ‘Ripsaw’:

Sawing a log,
A robin hopped to my wood box
—and you can put that on my headstone.

And a spider web inspires the thought that:

If a man could leave
Such a jewelled track behind
Through his days
He could die and have his monument.
(‘Jewelled Monuments’)

Norman Morrissey is a lyric poet, of the speaking rather than the singing voice, whose material is autobiographical. *Strandloop* includes no adoption of the tongues of others, no dramatic monologue, no translation, no re-telling of the stories of others. Formally there is no engagement with the prosodic resources of English or any other stanzaic verse. To my ear, the rhythms are dictated by the poet's train of thought. The risks are an occasional loss of connection and rhythm, but this focus gives the collection its own kind of intensity and even integrity—very little is simply for show.

Note

1. The San are the aboriginal hunter-gatherer people of Southern Africa, also known as Bushmen. The Australian term ‘Bushman’ (one who lives off and travels through the outback) may be an adaptation of the South African name.

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Tony Voss was born in Namibia. Educated in South Africa and the USA, he taught in universities before retiring to Sydney in 1995. He continues to publish poems and academic essays.

Those interested in obtaining *Strandloop* should email **ringer@echoinggreenpress.com**. Further information about *Strandloop* and purchasing arrangements can be found at: **www.echoinggreenpress.com**