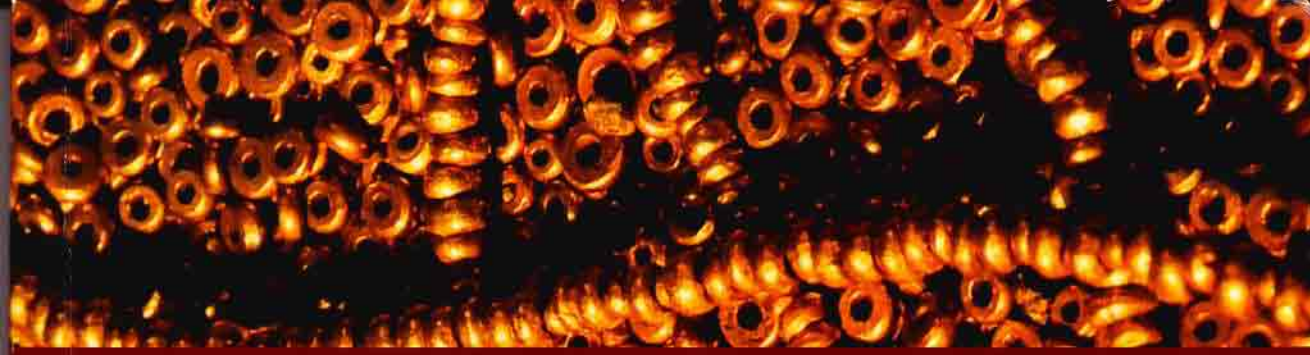

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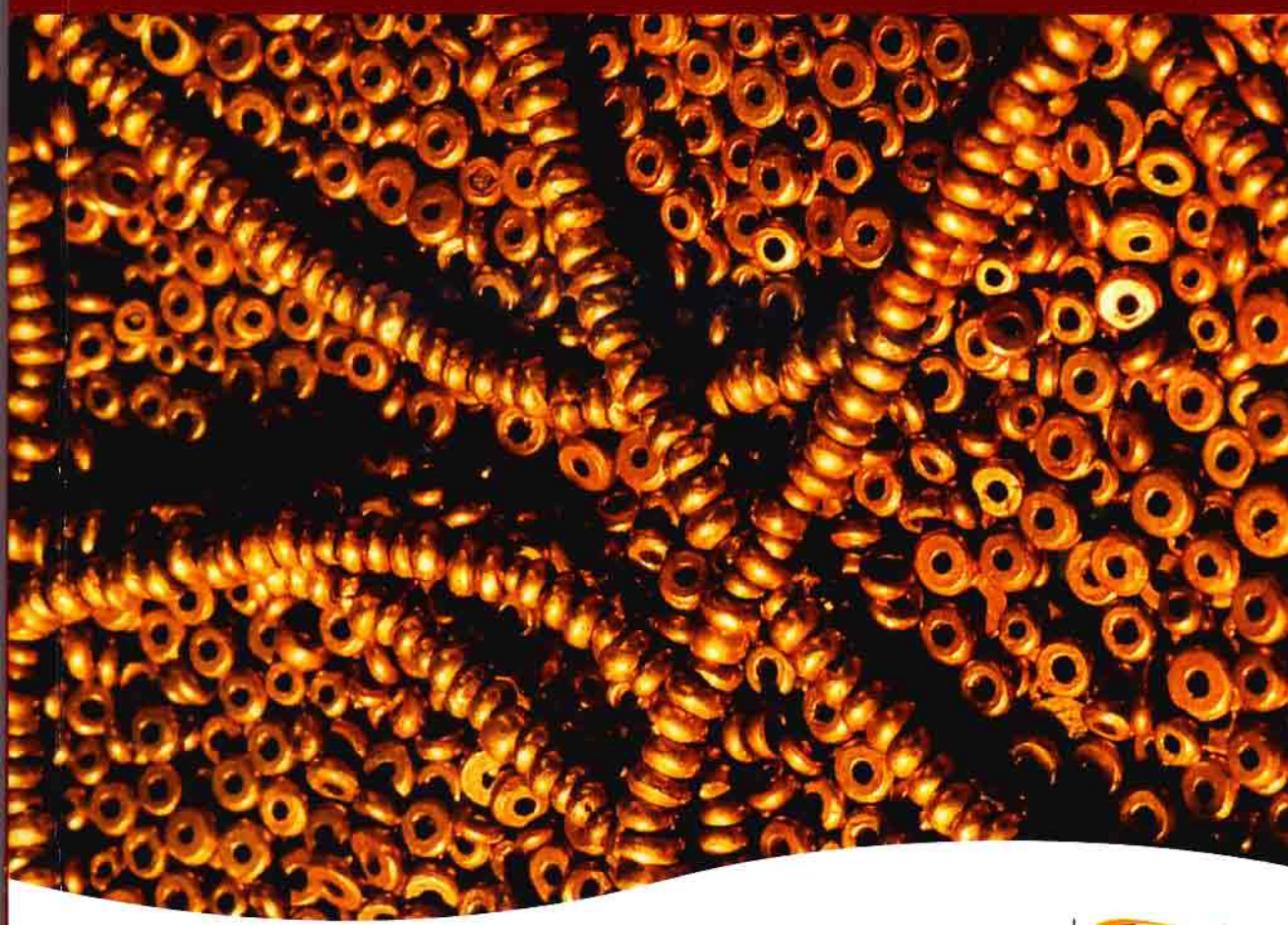

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***Separating the Seas*, by Kobus Moolman.**
Pietermaritzburg:
University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. 2007. 64pp.
ISBN 978-1-86914-124-0

***Dog Latin*, by Norman Morrissey.**
Empangeni: Echoing
Green Press. 2006. x + 29pp.
ISBN 0-9802501-0-2

***Road Work*, by Dan Wylie.**
Empangeni: Echoing Green Press.
2007. viii + 82pp.
ISBN 978-0-9802501-3-8

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Reviewing three volumes together might at first glance seem to collude in the wider social neglect of poetry, particularly in a country where three volumes make up a notable fraction of the annual tally. There is, however, one thing to be gained by the exercise of happenstance and it is something akin to the ambition of trial-by-jury. The imaginary audiences of poets are every bit as fabulous as their poems themselves, but their real audiences probably do consist in disproportionate measure of other poets. It is a fair expectation of any book of poems to be read alongside others of its time and place, even if that is an accident without rationale.

If we are to win a reason *after* the fact of the accident, then it might be something like this: here are three voices writing in South Africa in the early 21st century. With three referents we might begin a tentative triangulation, the relation of voices. Since literature is essentially discursive, let us listen to it in discourse. Is there a conversation, or do the voices ask an interest in themselves alone?

All three volumes, pleasingly, conceive of themselves as integrated projects, each derived around its single theme or purpose. Norman Morrissey's *Dog Latin* concerns itself with domestic and quotidian epiphanies in the frontier country around Hogsback. Dan Wylie's *Road Work* undertakes a peregrination of global proportions, and is more public and expatiatory in its consideration of places and histories across the world. Kobus Moolman's *Separating the Seas* keeps a kind of coastwatch, returning again and again to vistas of rather dark and briny seas, in between excursions into other landscapes still somehow imbued with the same battleship-ominous mood. (Naughtily, Moolman includes one section, called 'Cost of Living', which doesn't belong in the book, and in

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which some 'found' satire produces effective poems at odds with the introversion of the rest of the book.) South Africa is present in different and illuminating degrees. We have Morrissey observing it as his backyard, Moolman gazing anxiously from its coastal seams back to its equally spooked hinterland, and Wylie determinedly looking away and into the whole wider world. The last's 'Driving to Jo'burg' is as good an evocation of crossing the country as we have in the literature, and all the way the tyres sing '*Let it go, let it go*'. One feels that Moolman wishes he could, but can't, for want of a subject or a self. This is every poet's problem. Morrissey seems to me to have made the best reconciliation with his self, time and place, and perhaps that's why his art seems best to me.

*

Moolman writes short gnomic poems derived of the modernist interest in the epiphany of the image and the Asian example of such writing. His epiphanies seem over-freighted to me, though, largely because they don't seem to arise in consciousness possessed simultaneously of themselves and their meaning. The very hard-won success of Chinese and Japanese image-poetry lies in the delivery of the *koan*, that Zen inscape in which the sensory data of the material world are universally reconciled with the numinous or nihilatory beyond. The poem needs, at least, to give the impression of having arisen as a unitary insight, of image and purport as one in the instance. The reader receives the text as the mimetic report of the original revelation, even if it is not truly so, and for this to happen the poem must conjure the image to the satisfaction of its destination in meaning. It cannot betray the poet's work in aiming the image at a meaning that precedes or postdates the image, because that would not be an epiphany. Moolman is more than capable of exquisite and telling imagery: 'The wind wears the face / of the sea today'. That is a perfect insight into the wind's materialisation in the world of its effects. The use of personification ('wears' and 'face') does all that is required to insert the image into the human experience of the self among the other(s). By that personification the wind and the sea become correlatives of spirit and body, or idea and matter. The image blows through and is realized in the text, as a wind moving upon the face of water. That is sufficient, entire, perfect. But it is not the end of the poem. For the rest of 'The name of the moon' we are delivered four more two-line stanzas of increasingly synaesthetic or semantically adventurous epiphania. It is such a pity. The stanza following the perfect one I have quoted runs thus: 'The sea weaves long fingers / out of the glass of the sky'. That is too much; three metaphors mixed awkwardly to produce only opacity as the mind baulks at the work placed before it. (There are two metaphors mixed in the first stanza, it is true, but mixed after ancient example, to the point of having become one. There Moolman redeems the cliché.)

The poem ends 'I must repeat its old name / three times to redeem it'. I can't fathom the need for this repetition any more than the need for the moon's (or the name's) redemption. In a poem of five iterating stanzas, each enfolding some insight, the three-ness of repetition seems gratuitous or, worse, cabalistic. Again, the epiphany is obscured,

almost deliberately hidden, and the 'found moment' advertised on the book's back cover becomes instead a lost one. It may even be that it becomes a stolen one, lost to the reader in the act of being found and riddled by the poet.

The problems of this poem are really raised by Moolman himself, because they arise as a dissonant 'noise' in the silences he creates with his own accomplished images. 'Limpopo village', for example, is a poem in which the mind is brought to bear upon six fulfilled images whose destination is themselves and no moral beyond themselves, no device of Moolman's. This faithful accounting is Moolman at his best, and it is, of necessity, self-effacing. The problems arise when the poet tries to make the poems mean more than they do in themselves when he attaches a kind of homiletic that addresses the interests of his own soul, or his interest in his own soul. Moolman's thoughts and feelings are less interesting than his intuitions, in part because he writes a poetry whose attitude is derived around a venerable tradition linking the poem to intuition, and in part because a poet whose metier is imagery is better off seeing and telling than explaining (or hinting). Perhaps this is also why the notebook excerpts don't come off in this volume. They have the resonance of apperception, but Moolman has chosen them for something more than that for a 'depth' or purposive inclination. And this is wearying. These excerpts carry tell-tale questions and abstractions, wandering far from the delivered concretions of the imagistic poetry, and this reader is left wondering what the point of a notebook is if its questions are mistaken for poems.

I like enough of these poems to make the point I am making here; that is, I rue the intrusion of Moolman's intellect into the unwavering receptivity of his eye and ear, his fidelity to the world. It is this intruding which hustles the poems towards dark matters, distractingly, and amasses the 'greyness' of the volume. (A university press and its teachers should, by the way, know not to spell it 'gray', as also not to 'centre' the disposition of the poem recycled on the back cover, a 'transfiguration' that makes a mockery of the poet's formal labours.) Fleeting and powerful these poems are, as their back-cover blurb promises, but their power wanes when they tarry to signal their significance, as with all evanescent things.

Wylie's *Road Work* marks a welcome return to the road from a poet who pleased us with the stations of his first book, *The Road Out*. Wylie travels well and here finds a canvas wide enough to accommodate his robust intellect and language. There are four journeys here: a long haul to Australia via the US, a peregrination around southern Africa, a trip to Greece and a pilgrimage to Patagonia. The last is very much a pilgrimage, redolent of Chatwin, as all the excursions of writers in that far south must now be. It is a delicious section, splendid with the ethnography of language, as in Chatwin, where strange names and words are turned over like colourful stones or feathers. Travelling, Wylie is brought closer to those other otherworlds of animals and history, for example which he evokes with almost companionable intimacy. Moving behind Chatwin, he so enjoys 'rebuilding the little cairns', and, like Chatwin, does so with words.

In Greece Wylie must confront the far past of his poetry. He'd like to escape into

the exotica of language, as the pleasures of a new and salty cuisine, but the nativity of history and tragedy, big things like these, nag at him. The Parnassian excursion is somewhat overwhelming, and the long trajectory from Sappho to Seferis unravels in inexactness, a 'dusty buzz of birdwing'. The tramping poet finds his poems repelled and we are left with the image of the ludicrous Byron showing off in the water. This is not Wylie's self-image, nor should it be, for these are excellent poems, especially the elegies for his father, and they show us again how necessary the public and historical occasion is to produce the sense of, and in, the personal. Any young poet wanting to write about their grief or their loves should read Wylie here and, like him, walk to Delphi and listen there for a few thousand years to the dusty buzz.

The flip around the world, to the US and on to Australia, lets Wylie meditate on travel itself, transience and the condition of strangeness. But the gravity of the poems about "home", southern Africa, South Africa, and a re-sought Zimbabwe, are more fulfilling precisely because they are what he is leaving and returning to, never leaving and restless about. Wylie has become our greatest poet of the road, the journey in and out. Unlike others he has no one landscape, but writes as the poet who has made the passage of landscapes his particular province. Those who have been to one or another of his many way-stations will agree that he evokes the beaches of southern Mozambique as accurately as the dry dunes of Namibia. But it is the road itself which is his heartland, with the 'blue bacilli' of its road-signs, its cat's-eyes streaming past 'like tracers', its skies rotting over Sasolburg, its Ultracity 'battened to the flank of Bloem'. In these sad-glorious passages Wylie has us in thrall to the peculiarly South African influx control of the heart, our condition of migrancy, the perpetual forced removal of our special post-coloniality.

What is there to fault in these poems? Only the insidious aggregation of metaphor, of which the poems come to suffer as from a surfeit of sugar, an accurately South African Type 2 Diabetes. As Moolman is lured into peril by his talent for images, so Wylie is seduced by the sirens of his figuration. As I have just turned two metaphors (sugar and sirens) for the cleverness of each, so Wylie does and, like me, loses the force of his first thought. Any poems will illustrate the hazard; take 'Intercostal': 'The piers claw through the corduroy beach: / the stubs of the ribs of a fossil whale'. Magnificent figures, each for each, but cumulatively absurd. In consequence *Road Work* is a book to be read one poem at a time, or maybe two. That is inevitable in a country where poetry books are such rare events that poets publish too much at once, and volumes are albums instead of integrated works. But the sad thing is that Wylie's book is the exception, itself an entire whole, an integral argument, one conversation, all that a book of poetry should be. It asks for a single reading, and so it should be capable of that.

Road Work is haunted by old loves and the final sickness and death of Wylie's father. It is an elegy for Zimbabwe, an atonement for a colonial childhood, a thanksgiving for the planet. All these things are blent in the occasion of travel, not as the metaphor of a liner life, but in the abundant treasure of life's happenstance. This is a generous,

courageous volume by a trencherman at the boards of language, and it enriches our common life.

Morrissey has been underrated for too long. It is his own fault also, because the wry detachment of his writing has its eyebrow raised at any and everything, and his own worth seems as dubious to him as many of the commonsenses he turns over like stones in his garden. Like Moolman, Morrissey inclines to the gnomic, but his apercus are on the whole ironic and brightly coloured. His lightness, even levity at times, allows him to offer philosophical afterthoughts, because he is thereby insured against inflation and deflation.

I think *Dog Latin* is a wonderful album of wonderful poems. It has that simultaneous detachment and attachment that we find in the haiku masters; here the world is much loved but never worshipped. The domestic round becomes a pilgrimage of accidents and occasions. Sometimes it could be the album of a Candide, sometimes of a Basho, sometimes it could be a volume of Coleridge's notebooks. Morrissey lives in the Hogsback and has a debt to pay to that blessing. At times I am reminded by his poems of the young Wordsworth's compositions for walls and seats and stones places to be written on as much as about. Morrissey's accommodations are Epicurean in the best sense, needing little, suffering little, inclined to friendliness. Even an encounter with the brutal officialdom of apartheid's puppets is rewrought in a shrug that simultaneously condemns and forgives, resists and pities. These poems are not like Horace's, but I think Horace would have enjoyed them. Perhaps they can best be described as resisting quotation a peculiar notion, but one which reaches directly to their integrity, their character of wholeness (none is very long, most quite short). One can quote them, but not from them; they need to be read. And I would urge that wider readership