



U
KZN
PRESS

the swimming lesson

and other stories

KOBUS MOOLMAN

This story collection by multiple award-winning poet, author and playwright Kobus Moolman is a volume of unconventional potency. Written in a range of styles, voices and genres, each of the ten stories offers original insights into the difficulties of staying afloat. Whether the challenge is being differently abled (with all the outsider isolation this brings); lower-income family life under unbending patriarchal rule; or being born a female child in an abusive, gendered culture, the narratives are convincing (often humorous) in their portrayal of trapped lives striving for transcendence.

The darkly funny 'Kiss and the Brigadier' invokes the stultifying boredom of small-town life and the captured mentalities of its understimulated citizens; 'Extracts from a Dispensable Life' offers a creative and sensitive reading of the gender violence theme; while the irreverent but never disrespectful 'Angel Heart' ventures into the risky waters of religious send-up.

The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories is a collection that stands out for its unusual perspectives; its frank, often uncomfortable treatment of taboo topics; its creative risk-taking; and its skilful and observant recreation of worlds gone by, which still leave their aftershocks.

Kobus Moolman is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Western Cape. He has won numerous awards for his writing, including the 2015 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry, and has presented his work at literary festivals in South Africa, Ireland and Canada.

ISBN 978 1 86914 362 6



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL PRESS

The Swimming Lesson
&
Other Stories

Kobus Moolman

University of KwaZulu-Natal Press
Private Bag X01
Scottsville 3209
Pietermaritzburg
South Africa
Website: www.ukznpress.co.za
Email: books@ukzn.ac.za

© Kobus Moolman 2017

Reprinted 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

ISBN: 978 1 86914 362 6
e-ISBN: 978 1 86914 363 3

Cover design: MDesign
Cover image: 'The Swimmer Series VI' by Louise Hall
kindly provided by Tatham Art Gallery
Editor: Elana Bregin
Proofreader: Kim Ward
Typesetter: Patricia Comrie

Typeset in 11 pt Goudy Old Style

Printed and bound in South Africa by Pinetown Printers

For Julia
with love

Soli Deo Gloria

Extracts From a Dispensable Life

Down There

That is where I live. Down there. The second house from the end. The little one on the left. Next to the one with the satellite dish. The big house with the solar panel on the roof. That one belongs to the village priest. He is new here. He only came a few months ago. But he is very friendly and smiles at all the girls in the village. Particularly my little sister, who he says has got the sweetest voice out of all the children in the Sunday School choir. When she sings the solo in 'Be thou my Vision' - a part that he had arranged himself - he says that you can hear the gates of heaven open and hear all the angels crowding in the entrance just to listen to her. That's what he says. That's what my little sister told me he told her. In the vestry after choir practice. He told her many other things too. Some of which she told me. He told her that he used to live in the capital city. That he used to go to the cinema every Saturday night in the capital to watch romantic movies. That we can come and watch the cartoon channel on his satellite television after school if we like. After homework, of course. And after we have finished all our chores at home. That doesn't leave much time because we have to be indoors before it gets dark. Mother says so. Mother says it isn't safe for young girls to be wandering the streets after dark. She says the soldiers will catch us and take us away and

make us their slaves and make us their wives too. Although they will not marry us. They will not come to negotiate for us with our fathers.

Toon Channel 24 Hrs

I like Coyote. From Beep Beep the Road Runner. (Coyote is just another name for a wolf. That's what my little sister told me. That's what the priest told her.) Coyote is my favourite. You can drop him from a high mountain, it doesn't matter. You can blow him up with ten sticks of dynamite, he will still crawl away. You can even flatten him with a big heavy tank, he will just roll himself up like a carpet and start all over again in the next episode. My little sister is on the side of Beep Beep. She makes the sound Beep-Beep. Beep-Beep. All the time. Then she runs away. Fast as her legs can carry her. And she calls me. Catch me! Beep-Beep. You can't catch me! Beep-Beep. But I'm not allowed to catch her. That's the rules.

Instruction #1.

Iron me flat. Roll me up like a grass mat. Store me away in a dark corner where no-one will ever find me.

All the Answers were Wrong

In Sunday School last week my little sister got a gold star from the priest because she knew the answer. She was the only one. I kept trying. I had three guesses. But I didn't know who was the bride of our Saviour. I thought it was Mary. The one whose brother had died and was wrapped in bandages and then came shuffling out of the cave. Next I thought it was Martha. Her sister. The one who was always working. Who never even had a chance to stop and listen to what our Lord was teaching because she was so busy making lunch for him and for all of his disciples. And getting the wood and the water and washing all the plates and the cups. But

that was the wrong answer too. At last I just said the first woman's name that came into my head. Not just any woman. From the Bible, of course. I'm not stupid. So I said Eve. But the priest made a face, like he was trying to hide a big laugh. Then I gave up. And I didn't try anymore after that. Only my little sister knew the answer. Out of all the children. Even the big ones. (She's like that, you know. Even though I'd warned her that her cleverness would only land her in trouble one day.) I was proud of her anyway. She said the answer was the Church. That the Church was the bride of our Lord and Saviour. That confused me. Although I didn't say anything. I didn't want the priest to think I was stupid. But I mean, how can an old stone building get married to our Lord and Saviour? That is not right. Don't you think? And if the Church is the bride then who is her father? Who will the angels from our Lord and Saviour negotiate with? Who will they give all the furniture and the blankets and the generators and gas stoves to? All the things that her father will expect. No. Someone must have made a mistake when they printed that page in the Bible.

Busy, Busy

I wasn't feeling well the other day. There was something sore inside my tummy. Like a little frightened fish inside me trying to get out. And when I told our mother she just shook her head and said she was too busy - although I could not see what she was busy with, her hands were trembling under the blankets - and I must go and fetch water.

Instruction #2.

And it rained for forty days and for forty nights and when it stopped they were not allowed to go out and play because they would get covered in mud.

Special Discounted Rates on Weekends

But when I went to the water pump there was a long, long queue of girls already there with their plastic drums and their wheelbarrows. And they were playing clap-clap games while they waited. And some of them were skipping. And two of the bigger girls were talking on their phones. The phones that their boyfriends had given them. Plus airtime. So I had to wait. And listen to them giggling and whispering. Pretending to be very grown-up. Like the ladies who wait there at the crossroads outside the village. Where the trucks stop and decide which direction to go in. This way. Or that. Heads or tails?

Solo

And next to me my little sister was standing all the time singing softly in her sweet voice that can make all the angels come out:

'Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.'

Changing Places

And my hands were sore from holding the handles of the wheelbarrow so tight. I don't know why I held them so tight. The drum was empty. I was still in the queue. Waiting. And listening to the big girls, giggling and whispering into their phones. Pretending to be very grown-up with their expensive hair styles and their white bras with the label still on so that everyone could see how much they had paid for them. How much their boyfriends loved them. And I had to put the wheelbarrow down. Suddenly the sky and the earth were turning and changing places inside my eyes. And inside my head there was the sound of bees. And I looked at my little sister and she was still singing.

Still Singing

'Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.'

Instruction #3.

And after that you can peel me completely and take out all the seeds and then you can divide me between everybody there.

At a Price, of Course

Mother says that the blood is good. It is a sign from our Lord and Saviour. That I am ready. That I am no longer a child. A child that needs to be kept away from the evil of the world. And the evil of men. The evil of men, she said it again, and she took her chapped hands out from under the blanket and held them up in the air as if they were dirty. Mother says she will tell all the neighbours now and they will tell all of their friends and their friends' friends and all the members of their families. Tell them that I am available.

Cont.

And they must hurry before I go sour.

The Light of the World

There is a lot of excitement in the village. Why? Because at last the men with the blue overalls and the yellow helmets – the men who have been here for months bending and digging and lifting and pulling and swearing and whistling at the girls – they have finally finished connecting the wires to the last pole in the street. Right outside our little house. And tomorrow there will be a big celebration when the mayor of the district comes here with his three wives and they switch on the electricity. There are twelve

poles in each street and there are two streets and on top of each pole is a big yellow light. (I don't know how many poles and lamps that makes, but if you ask my sister when she comes back from choir practice she can tell you.) Tomorrow the priest will bless the lamps and pray that they will burn for a long, long time and that they will cast their light into all the dark corners of the village, and brighten our lives with knowledge. And after he has done that the choir will sing 'Be Thou my Vision' and my little sister will do her solo, and all the angels will lean out of heaven to hear her sweet voice. I will have on my special white dress. The one with the bow at the back. The one that is too tight for me across the top already. And then afterwards I will put on my old apron so that I can help with the peeling and the chopping and the cooking and the washing up.

Instruction #4.

Peel and chop and cook and wash and chop and cook and wash and peel and.

For Ever and Ever

There will be no more darkness then. It will be like the moon is always shining in the night. And the night will never put the lights on the poles out. That is what the priest will say. And the mayor will say Amen. And his three wives will say Amen, Amen, Amen. But together. And then the choir will sing, and my little sister will sing her solo.

Solo Repeat

'Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.'

Waving to the Crowds

And then the gates of heaven will open and Mother will be standing there waving at us with her chapped hands, and all the angels will be crowding around her in the entrance to watch my little sister in her own special white dress – the one with the bow at the front, unlike mine that has the bow at the back – and everyone will be smiling and waving as the men with the blue overalls and the yellow helmets wrap my sister up in bright plastic cables and lower her slowly into the hole outside our little house, and hammer the big pole with a bright yellow light on top right through her heart.

Instruction #5.

Cover her with sand. Cover her with stones. Stamp the earth flat. There will be no more darkness now. Our lamps will burn for ever and ever. Amen.

Kiss and The Brigadier

Fok said willem. Fok fok fok.

They were sitting on willem's small front stoep listening to kiss on his old sanyo cassette player and drinking black label tallies straight out the bottle when the brigadier went past.

Fok said willem again and ducked behind the low wall of the stoep. I'd like totally forgotten what day it was.

It was willem without a shirt and jj without a job and gene simmons with his white devil mask and mr glass himself on the stoep that afternoon and kleinjan in his paint-splattered overalls was just coming out the front door with a packet of marie biscuits in one hand and his texan plain in the other when the brig and all the others went slowly past in a little bunch and willem said Fok fok fok.

Jislaaik that was close said jj wiping the sweat off his greasy number 2. D'you scheme they checked us hey?

Nooit said kleinjan. They too preoccupied.

What? said jj. What the fok kind of word is that?

Preoccupied you poes said kleinjan. It means like when someone has got something on their mind.

Like poes said jj wiping his number 2 again because it was january and 34 in the shade.

Preoccupied with poes said willem.

Ja nee said jj. Like the one and only time you not preoccupied with poes is when you preoccupied with stuffing your face.