

**Geoffrey Haresnape****Choice Bits of Folly***Dog Latin*

Norman Morrissey / Empangeni, Echoing Green Press (2006)

From Shakespeare to ancient Egypt; from San mythology to Charles Darwin – the referential range of the sixty or so poems in Norman Morrissey's *Dog Latin* is impressive. And he wears his accessories of knowledge with a casual ease, mixing and matching them with the garments crafted from his personal responses to life and culture in South Africa.

I get the impression that he is deep into the land, its people, history and political development. Crabs, black cuckoos, starlings, eland, and a particularly affecting scrub hare are among the creatures which make up his universe. The Boers, the Brits and the indigenes are all part of that dodgy and mysterious construct, *Homo sapiens*.

Morrissey's *Homo sapiens* is the vulnerable species out in the veld who shelters from a storm in the company of "a scraggle of baboons." His conclusion: "if prayer is the shiver of thanks cold bones give the dawn/baboons pray too." ("Them Too") He is also the species with a potential, even as "a boy of seven," for violence. "I still remember / ... the sour thrill of the blade when I butchered my Gran's frangipani."

Such behaviour gives him "a clue" to understanding "a Rwandan kid" whom he sees on camera: "machete red, heels almost dancing as he'd ... / spin, slash limbs twitching in the grass" ("Dark Turf").

But Morrissey considers it useful, too, to think of man as "Homo Ludens" who finds in a crab's playful behaviour with a leaf something of his own delight in the environment: "something warmer / seeps / from that dour-clawed world to my own." More importantly, man may be regarded as "Homo Videns." To possess an integrated and integrating view of things is essential for survival: "we .. must live by our vision ... / or die / of mere naturalness."

On the rear cover of the collection the publisher speaks of Morrissey's "natural vision [which] writes inner and outer worlds into one." There are many references among the poems which attest to the truth of this observation. The strategy is in fact encapsulated by the ultra-short "Thought":

This mousejaw's gone clean through a genet's gut  
and stuck  
in my head.

In "Wool-Gathering" Morrissey makes original use of Velcro as a metaphor to point to the relationship between inner and outer worlds. "The heart's the soft side of Velcro / and the world's / the other."

This collection is so full of surprises that it comes as no surprise that the "speakers" of "Dog Latin" are a Cape bulbul, a Cape robin and some other small birds crowding together to chase a stealthy boomslang out of their territory. The idea of a language code which is streetwise and mongrel clearly appeals to Morrissey. The register of his own poems, although evoking seriousness and wit, is in no way high-flown or pretentious. And he, too, would like to disconcert the reader "to steal a thief's stealth from under him."

At heart, Morrissey is idiosyncratic, and this makes for an original poetic voice. In a key poem, "Relativity," he states: "All things being relative... / I do have some personal absolutes ... / to persist in choice bits of folly / seems wise." If we choose to regard these poems as "choice bits of folly" affirmed in a shifting world, it is clear that he has shown wisdom in persisting with them.