

Natural affinity

Review of *Dog Latin* by Norman Morrissey

Review by Nigel Bell

So strong is the impression these poems give of Norman Morrissey's affinity with his natural surroundings that people seem rather scarce in them. There's William Shaw, who in 1824 "cut a wagon-track to Grahamstown" when "the bush about the Fish River 'literally swarmed with elephant'" (*Made of Things*); there are the SADF troopers "in the South West African border zone", who "couldn't wear armbands in the bush / or SWAPO trackers would scent them" (*Old*

Spice); there's the sinister, lecherous Ciskei cop who "frisked" and "groped" the poet at a roadblock one night (*Real Headlight*); there's the poet's wife Gilli, sitting on the step, smiling as a cat rubbed against her knee: "But we don't have cats anymore —so I knew it was just her witchery." (*Witchery*)

And there are a few others. But mostly the poems are redolent of the quietness and solitude one imagines to prevail in and around Morrissey's five acres in the Hogsback. In this mind-, eye- and ear-sharpening retreat he registers the shape, sound and movement of mostly other than human life, and the variations in light and temperature that govern it. Nor does the life have to be cuddly to arouse the poet's tenderness and compassion: "Light grows, / shivering things / creep out on the rock to warm / —and little songbirds hawk them. / I set poison and a rat came out to die; / and a day or so on two of her brood scabbled blind through a crack / to pant on the floor like starveling whippets; / and they nestled in my palm as I took them quick to drown, nuzzled my / warmth as their lice paddled away on the salt pulsing of my skin, / leaving the chilling little ships behind." (*The Wheel*)

The poet finds a bat that "got trapped inside, / flittered about night after night, / vanished when I tried to catch it, / hid somewhere, / lurking, / getting hungrier, / more desperate, / I thought; but at last I cornered it / so I could wear it down, / got it in hand to hold out a window / —hoarse, hissing, foxy little dragon / slipping away to the gloom of the garden. . . ." (*Exorcism*)

In one of his most moving poems, "Maureen", Norman Morrissey blends his perception of human and animal to offer a memorable image of life's tenacity in the dying. Dogs had killed "the scrub hare we'd given safe garden all those years: / eyes sharp, / tense with some last patience dragged beyond pain and fear. . . ." Did you wear that look / When the cancer'd had its day? / Then the beautiful elegiac close on the possibility of life beyond suffering: / In the old story, / Hare brought tidings from the Moon of immortality: / as she lay with her eyes so quick / and her flesh so wracked / did she have news for me?"

That tenderly ambivalent enquiry (there are two loved 'she's' in question here) is but one example of the pleasure to be had in reading this subtle, humane and witty collection from a poet deeply "versed in country things".