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A poet between endings and beginnings

Kobus Moolman

begin
 Mari Peté

umSinsi Press
 2002

the sun has touched the leaves
 soft dipped brush
 september days shrink here
 inch by inch
 ("north and south")

One of the quotations that precede each of the different sections of Mari Peté's anthology *begin* is by Bonnie Friedman (whoever she may be): "Daily life is always extraordinary when rendered precisely." This attention to the detail of everyday life — the sights and sounds and the smells of the ordinary — provides both a rich storehouse of imagery and a resonating medium of expression for the poems in this bilingual collection.

begin is Peté's aptly named debut collection, whose title (able to be read in both Afrikaans and English) calls to the recurring cycles of change in life: birth and death, the seasons of time in both the natural and the human world.

Peté was born in 1964 in Middelburg (Mpumalanga). She grew up on the Transvaal Highveld and has lived in Durban for the past fifteen years where she works at the Durban Institute of Technology as co-ordinator of the Online Learning Centre. She also has a post-graduate degree in Afrikaans and Dutch literature.

Prior to *begin*, her work appeared regularly in the Afrikaans literary journal *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* and in the anthology *Collaborations — a Book of South African Art and Poetry*. A third of the sixty-eight poems in the collection are written in English and the remainder in Afrikaans. According to the author the poems were written over a period of twenty years, and as such span the adventures of a young girl on the brink of adolescence through to the experience of a first pregnancy. In the fictive space

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of memory, though — a central concern for Peté, and the source of some of her most urgent writing — the works push the poet's powers of recall further back, to childhood, and to the pain and the joy of being innocent again. But this innocence is always balanced on a fine knife edge, and the threat of loss is never far off. One of her most successful English poems, "shawl", is written on the death of her father in a car accident when she was only nine:

my sorrow has trailed behind me

crochet shawl in the dusty road
miles and miles of precious quilt
woven with the colours
of my life's moments

I started making it
the day my dad died
in the dusty road

In broader socio-political terms the poems also move from the narrow and introverted focus of childhood (resonant with the keenly-observed textures of small-town life) to receiving news of the assassination of Chris Hani while in England and the excitement and apprehension of the first democratic election in 1994.

This movement or narrative journey in the collection from (in rather broad terms) innocence to experience is at the same time an important initiation for Peté as imaginative writer. A key quotation from the poet Andrei Tarkovski introduces the section titled, "paradys": "The loss of childhood is the beginning of poetry." Interestingly, though, it is only when the writer returns to his or her own childhood, bringing with them all their powers of recall, observation and expression, that childhood is finally released from the realm of the purely personal (and anecdotal) and can be shared with and understood by an objective reading public. Peté's poem, "my ma se briewe", demonstrates this paradox of personal writing most powerfully, and deserves to be quoted in full:

my ma se briewe vou oop
peppermintgroen soos sondagroomys:

hoëveldse lente madeliefiebos
bobbejaanvygies
boeties sop en vetkoek
koffie basaarsjokoladekoek
operettes tannie elma se operasie
gou regmaak vir kerk

briewe wat ruik soos blaaie uit kinderbybels

This tension between past and present, between remembering pain and wanting to forget it, between beginning and ending, is thoroughly exploited in this collection for the rich and complex yield of ideas that Peté is more than accomplished to exploit. But

it is with the dynamism set up between the two poles (the in-betweenness), not the facile resolution of one to the other or cancelling out of one by the other, that Peté is overwhelmingly concerned in *begin*. Hence, perhaps, on a very mundane level, the two languages used in the collection. And also, perhaps, why the translations of certain poems by her husband (Steve Peté) simply cannot convey any of the lyricism and fullness of their Afrikaans original. In a statement prepared by Peté for the media she writes significantly:

Perhaps most prominently, there is a state between endings and beginnings. In Tibetan Buddhism that place is called the bardo. In the native American tradition it is called the crack between the two worlds ... As poet I often find myself in the crack between the two worlds — a place of dual perspective. It is not an easy place to be.

In his foreword to the collection Dorian Haarhoff picks up on precisely this element of the in-between (which he relates to language) when he argues that Peté writes "in the crack between two languages". Peté has herself organised and participated in several of Haarhoff's creative writing workshops, and admits to having been influenced by him. In fact, the quotations at the beginning of each of the different sections of the book are drawn from his manual, *The Writer's Voice: A Workbook for Writers in Africa*.

Haarhoff goes on in the foreword to describe Peté's use of language as "display[ing] the centering, concentration and dexterity of a fire dancer swirling the vowels and consonants of both tongues around her in circles". Certainly, the best of Peté's Afrikaans poems have a musicality and ease that is charmingly seductive. One is almost bewitched by the child-like delight the poet takes in rendering the colours, smells and textures of her world with a simplicity that often obscures the technical effort and skill. As Peté herself comments in her media statement: "I like to write accessible poetry on the first level, but I try to build in layers — to leave space for the reader to imagine, uncover and co-create. Sometimes simplicity can be deceptive. I strive for simplicity on the other side of complexity."

The delight that Peté takes in painting her world for us is (in her best Afrikaans poems) more than merely descriptive or photographic. There is a spontaneous welling-up of emotion in these poems which comes from deep within the rhythm and nerve of the words themselves. Thus in a poem like "Maandagmiddagluilyf", for example, Peté's inventiveness with words (joining words together to create new ideas) creates a layer of enticing entry points for the reader and moves the poem away from the confines of the purely personal:

My lyf bleik slaapslap
in vanmiddag se suikerson.
Lui-lui herkonstrueer vingers
fragmente naweek aanmekaar,
knibbelende vaakkrinkels soos rysmiere
aah die stam van my krummelboomdroom.

But it is perhaps in her love poems (of which "eve's delight" is the best) that Peté fully marries her delight in describing the natural world with her equal love of the texture of the words themselves in themselves. "eve's delight" plays with the extended metaphor of a tree which she likens to her husband's body. An almost sacred sensuality (I can find no other way of describing it) is conjured up in this poem which reminds one immediately of the Biblical Song of Songs: "jou bors het 'n duikie vir drinkplek / daar's 'n klein fontein in jou mond."

While *begin* may be the first collection by Mari Peté, we can only hope that it will not be the last.

The book is available from umSinsi Press at PO Box 28129, Malvern, 4055 or from Felicity Keats at felicity@umsinsi.com. It can also be ordered from Adams Bookshop in Durban at the Musgrave Centre branch, 031-2015123, or their campus branch, 031-2612320.

It is well worth purchasing.

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