

*My Beautiful Death* by Eben Venter, translated from the Afrikaans by Luke Stubbs (Tafelberg)

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*My Beautiful Death*, a long-overdue translation of Eben Venter's 1996 novel *Ek Stamel Ek Sterwe*, would initially seem to be, like Venter's first novel, *Foxtrot van die Vleiseters*, in the tradition of the Afrikaans farm novel: here, too, the protagonist has grown up on a farm, and has returned to take stock of his life in the light of a larger experience elsewhere.

But the first sentence alerts us to the fact that the novel invokes the tradition only to reject it: "To get the hell out of here and make a life of my own somewhere else": that is how the narrator, Konstant Wasserman, sums up his ambition. He feels ill at ease with the indiscriminate conviviality of the rural community, as manifested by the assistant at the town Co-op.: "Jeez, I wonder what it is with the dorp's old women. Forever wanting to kiss you."

Konstant yearns for stronger sweets than kisses from Co-op ladies, and moving to Johannesburg as a prelude to emigration to Australia, duly finds them: first in the uninhibited Deloris and her orange BMW coupé ("I realise I've always wanted someone like her"), and then, fatefully, in the enigmatic and sexually ambiguous Jude.

In the Afrikaans original, Jude is at first, ingeniously but awkwardly, never referred to by personal pronoun, and later as "she"; but his/her sexual behaviour is pretty clearly that of a gay male rather than a woman. In the English, there is no such coyness: Jude is unabashedly male, for all that he does favour dresses and plaits.

What is hinted at in the Afrikaans is thus made explicit here: Konstant's rejection of his farming background is also a sexual choice, and his journey is one of sexual discovery. It is also necessarily a rejection of his father, to whom his sexual orientation would be anathema.

Konstant's arrival in Sydney and his adaptation to the new environment are engagingly described, in a meticulous recreation of milieu and atmosphere: the vegetarian restaurant where he works, the house he inhabits with Jude near a noisy station, the outings to the fly-tormented bush. The unblinkingly realist rendering of his surroundings is, apart from its intrinsic interest, important as an anchor, to ground the narrative before it becomes ever more subjective, as Konstant's relationship with Jude becomes more problematic and as, eventually, he realises that he has contracted AIDS.

In keeping with the reticence of the novel, the disease is never mentioned by name; but in a his rendering of Konstant's growing realisation that he is dying, countered by bouts of hope, punctuated by relapses and remissions, Venter gives us a harrowing account of what it is like to die of a disease that wastes your body, blinds you and makes you mad before killing you. It is all the more remarkable that the experience is registered from the inside, as it were, in a subjective stream of consciousness.

"At least," Konstant prays as he faces the inevitable, "allow me the chance to verbalise my body's decay to the very end. Not mad, please, don't let my brain ignite and my tongue spew forth the ash of demented words. Merciful God, don't allow my tongue's deft words to slip away."

This wish, at least, is granted Konrad: his account only falters towards the end, as language also slips away from the dying consciousness. Before that, he has time to make his peace with those he leaves behind: Jude, his brother Albert, his mother, above all his father, with whom he now discovers an affinity. The troubled relation of fathers and sons is something of a trope in Afrikaans literature, especially when, as here, the son is gay. Venter revisits the territory compassionately and movingly – also quite daringly, in suggesting a certain erotic charge to the son’s vexed love of his father. “I see too,” he says as he is losing his sight, “how Pa was able to prepare himself at night to ensure that he and Ma fitted into one another perfectly and with great joy. ... My own heat has been formed on Raster Wasserman’s warm anvil.”

In a sadly ironic reflection on Konstant’s determination “to make a life of my own somewhere else”, he has instead found his death. Insofar as the “beautiful death” of the title is not ironic, its beauty lies in Konstant’s resignation: “The day is done. It’s been good. I have sat in the sun and eaten and soon I’ll be asleep.”

The translation by Luke Stubbs is workmanlike and accurate. Perhaps inevitably, given the richness of Venter’s Afrikaans, it seems at times a rather pallid rendering of the original – when, for instance, Venter’s flirtation with Afrikaans cliché is flattened into something merely literal. “Hoe meer dae hoe meer om te leer. Van lag en skree kom nie noodwendig huil nie ”, which contains two half-quotations of Afrikaans idioms, loses its aphoristic echo in being rendered as “Every day there are new lessons to learn. Laughing and screaming do not necessarily end in tears.”

In short, the translation can lose metaphoric force in pursuing literal meaning. But these are the quibbles that any translation is vulnerable to. On the whole Stubbs has performed a valuable service in producing such a vivid and accessible rendering of a compelling and deeply moving novel.