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REVIEW: KIM THÚY. *RU*. TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY SHEILA FISCHMAN. (NEW YORK: BLOOMSBURY, 2012). 141PP. ISBN 978-1-60819-898-6.

When our consciousness goes into that space right on the edge of sleep, our memories, our experiences, come back to the surface in a poetic blur, start to sing the haunting lullaby of our past, blending it with everyday life. It is in such a state that Kim Thúy jotted down the first words of her autobiographical novel: *Ru* started as a series of notes the author scribbled in order to stay awake on her drive home from her restaurant. In this story we hear dream, nostalgia, solitude, fatigue, but also a sense of urgency pointing to the necessity of remembering and recording, before the traces of our history disappear, before the song of the past is silenced. *Ru* is a woman's attempt to capture not only her own personal story – constantly shifting – but her country's, her people's.

Ru is the first Vietnamese Canadian novel and Kim Thúy's first book. Originally published in French in 2009, it received the Governor General Award in Canada in 2010, along with immediate praise and recognition from the literary community and readers alike. Since then, translated versions have been released in twenty countries. Although labeled as a work of fiction, the narrative bears a lot of resemblance with the author's life. Like her narrator, Kim Thúy was born in 1968 in Saigon and fled the communist regime by boat at the age of ten. She stayed in a refugee camp in Malaysia before finally finding refuge in Québec, Canada. The narrative follows this journey, jumping from childhood to adulthood and into the narrator's present life and her battle with her son's autism. It makes detours here and there to focus on some family members, such as Uncle Two, “a happy-go-lucky” (p. 46) yet untrustworthy Western-influenced diplomat, or his daughter Sao Mai, princess child turned business queen. Other characters appear sporadically in short episodes giving voice to stories other than the narrator's, such as Monsieur An, an educated man who came close to being executed in reeducation camp, and teaches the narrator “to count the blues of the sky” (p. 87). The novel, constructed as a succession of short and rather contemplative and reflective vignettes, explores freely a vast array of themes associated with immigration, such as identity, memory, language, the American dream, motherhood and family, hardship, survival, renewal, and national History versus personal history. With the Vietnam War and the boat people

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experience as its historical background, *Ru* could be a classic immigrant memoir. However, its originality and value lie elsewhere. By choosing to turn *Ru* into such a poetic novel, Kim Thúy allows herself to search beyond historical truth. The melody and images the book contains reveal just as much – if not more – about the Vietnamese immigrant experience, as hard facts would.

The book offers a series of fragmented descriptions, narrative episodes, and reflections, a free association of memories, whose order seems to follow the narrator's own thought and reminiscence process, instead of any kind of linear plot or chronology. “In French, *ru* means a small stream and, figuratively, a flow, a discharge – of tears, of blood, of money. In Vietnamese, *ru* means a lullaby, to lull,” the introduction tells us. *Ru* makes detours, leaves ellipses, breathes with the ebb and flow of a river of memories, extending its arms into the small, the everyday, and towards those forgotten by the grand narrative of history books. Interwoven with the narrator's immigration story from Vietnam to Canada, are the stories of broken families, distant friends, street vendors, prostitutes, communist inspectors, reeducation camp prisoners, Amerasian children, panic-stricken soldiers, desperate lovers. Women, the ever forgotten sex during periods of war, occupy an especially important place in the novel. Kim Thúy honors “all those women who carried Vietnam on their backs while their husbands and sons carried weapons on theirs” (p. 38). *Ru* isn't the story of one, but of many. *Ru* is a song that, through the voice of the one who left, recalls the colors, sounds, and atmosphere of a Vietnam torn to shreds, left behind, “no longer a place but a lullaby” (p. 140).

Through her personal narrative, Kim Thúy reaches towards the collective and pays tribute to heroes of the everyday. Anh Pi, a young teenager, retrieves the family's hidden bag of gold, and returns it untouched, in spite of his own hunger and poverty. “Why that heroically honest deed?” (p. 91) the narrator asks. Although Kim Thúy is honest about the hardships she, her family, and other Vietnamese boat people had to undergo, she is also interested in revealing the profound humanity that remains even in desperate situations and chaos. There is a strong sense of compassion in *Ru*, even for the communist inspector who came to take away her family's possessions. She takes great pains to describe and understand his story. She punctuates her tragic narrative with moments of comic relief: the communist inspector mistakes the French brassieres for coffee filters, his soldiers put the fish they are to eat for dinner in the toilet, and ask where it went after somebody flushes. Although informed by trauma, both the narrator's and author's experiences find

refuge in the everyday – the last word of the novel – and the sensual. The song of street vendors comes to haunt the narrator when she becomes a mother, the smell of a fried dish prepared by beloved hands is synonym of care. The mundane carries memories softened by tenderness. Objects are given a lot of attention: silver-rimmed bowls become a symbol of filial devotion after the narrator's aunt used them to feed her dying father, the shirt of a lover becomes synonymous of a country at peace through the smell of fabric softener, an acrylic bracelet becomes a treasure box after the mother hides diamonds in it.

Absolutely no one will know the true story of the pink bracelet once the acrylic has decomposed into dust, once the years have accumulated in the thousands, in hundreds of strata, because after only thirty years I already recognize our old selves only through fragments, through scars, through glimmers of light (p. 139).

It is because the traces are being erased, because the stories contained in objects are as elusive as the river, that the writer sets herself the task of singing the song of what has been left behind, even as it is disappearing, floating away in a thinning stream of blood and tears. The fragments the novel so patiently strings together like beads carry the hope of a rebirth, a renewal. The phoenix is one of the last images of the book: Vietnam, the author is convinced, will rise again from its ashes, victorious, just as she herself gave birth to a novel, from the ashes of her past. Death is rarely presented without the hope of a new life, heaven is never far from hell.

Chiasmus and contrasts permeate the novel from the beginning: the narrator is born amidst the celebration of the new year, and the conflict of the Tet offensive, sky and sea blend on the boat. This is emblematic of the situation of Vietnam at the time, divided between North and South, family and territories alike separated by a wall the author compares to the Iron Curtain. On one side, Uncle Two, in spite of his daughter-princess Sao Mai, and for all his decadent francophile parties, denounces his children for fear of political payback. On the other, the narrator's parents, although more attached to traditions and unable to show their daughter the horizon, protect her and give her tools to overcome the hardships of life. Kim Thúy's narrative is an attempt to build a bridge that would connect past and present, East and West. However, the identity of the migrant, of the exiled, is defined as an impossibility

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to belong, rather than a happy reconciliation. “Half this, half that, nothing at all and everything at once” (p.132). Thus the narrator defines her identity, and that of those who, like her, have left Vietnam but still carry on their bodies the scars of their origins.

Some may argue that *Ru* tries to tackle too much at once, and in a rather short narrative. How could one sum up and explain the division of Vietnam at the time, the discrimination against the Amerasian children left behind by the GIs, the lure of the West as a promised land, the sense of guilt or deliverance in those who left? Those expecting *Ru* to be another book of answers about the Vietnam war and the boat people experience will be disappointed. Reflections are made in passing and used more for their poetic power, than as a way to analyze the historical situation and make a statement. *Ru* is not a political book, a history book, or even a social critique. It is, rather, a chorus of voices, much like in classic Greek tragedy, singing to us the story of forgotten heroes – except heroes inspired not from history books, but from the everyday.

The melody of the text is beautifully rendered by Scheila Fischman's elegant English translation. A text as poetic as *Ru* could have given way to a clumsy translation, given the fact that French and English have such different cadences, sentence structures, sounds. For example, French long and grammatically convoluted sentences do not always translate well into English. Yet Fischman has accomplished the feat of staying very close to the original text – her translations are often quite literal – and keeping its musicality, while providing a translation that English readers will find perfectly accessible. Given the fact that language is such an important theme in the novel, Fischman has kept the original French words when necessary. When the narrator explains her autistic's son's relationship to language, for example, the words and their sounds remain in French – a clever choice, since the idea of the passage is more to exemplify the little boy's difficulty with pronunciation and language appropriation, rather than to linger on the words as concepts. “Probably, he'll never call me maman lovingly, even if he can pronounce the word poire with all the roundness and sensuality of the oi sound” (p. 7). Staying close to the original text, however, does not prevent Fischman from occasionally taking liberties with vocabulary, tense, repetition, or punctuation. Consider this sentence: “D'avance, je suis vaincue, dénudée, vaine” (21). The French word “vaine,” which, in this context, can be understood as “pointless,” or “useless,” Fischman interprets as “beaten down” (p. 7). She departs from the original text even more in the conclusion for the story of Monsieur An. While the French reads, “Depuis, chaque jour, il se don-

ne la tâche de les répertorier pour eux, avec eux,” (137) a sentence written in the present, the English translation transposes this in the past and omits half of the anaphoric last segment “for them, with them.” “Every day, then, he set himself the task of listing those colours – for the others” (p. 87). In a couple of places, whether by choice or inattention, Fischman either neglects to translate a sentence, or makes a surprising choice in terms of vocabulary, thus changing the meaning of the original phrase. One of the most striking instances occurs towards the beginning of the novel: Fischman translates “Grâce à notre exil” (14) by “Because of our exile” (p. 3). While “grâce” in French implies that the exile had a positive effect, the English “because” remains neutral, refusing to acknowledge the unexpected perspective Kim Thúy offers in the original text. Nevertheless, in spite of a few omissions or misinterpretations, Fischman's translation remains artful and close to flawless. It is important, however, to signal to English readers that the original dedication present in the French edition does not appear in the translated version. This dedication is too revealing of the novel's project not to be mentioned here. Kim Thúy writes, “Aux gens du pays,” (9) which can be translated literally as, “To the people of the country.” Even though the narrator claims to have followed her father's advice never to look behind, the author sends her words back to the people of the country she left.

(The reviewer would like to acknowledge Scott Simon, “Interview with Kim Thúy: A Refugee Multilayered Experience in *Ru*.” NPR. November 24, 2012.)