

Ru review

By Julie Wheelwright

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Kim Thuy, translated by Shelia Fischman, *Ru: A Novel*, The Clerkenwell Press, 153 pages, paperback, £8.99

Born during the Tet Offensive, Kim Thuy left Saigon with her family, escaping by boat to a Malaysian refugee camp and then to the safety of Quebec. The narrator, Nguyen An Tinh, describes the trade-offs between the peace and security of Canada and the erasure of identity. On a trip back she realizes that she has changed, ‘because I no longer had their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears.’ Despite her new life, however, she carries a past freighted with guilt.

There is much that surprises and horrifies here. Nguyen’s aunts and uncles played tennis at private clubs, read French novels and were involved in politics. Her mother, who later scrubs toilets and waits tables in Canada, was raised to be a princess who dressed in fine Parisian lace and spent her afternoons dressing for her evenings out. When the Communists arrived and the banking system crumbled, the women became experts at buying, selling and hiding gold and diamonds. When the Communists moved ten young soldiers-inspectors into Nguyen’s family home, they adapted, living with them until they were expelled in 1975.

Despite the family’s losses, Nyguyen’s family is grateful to the Canadians for their ‘tremendously scarce’ quality of generosity. But even that kindness can provoke the terror lingering beneath the surface. On a school field trip to a nature reserve, a well-intention botanist encourages the children to examine the insects. Nguyen, ‘knows the sound of flies by heart’, because at the refugee camp their hum was the only distraction from the horror of sitting above a vast pit of excrement where an old woman once drowned. Her cousins, who escaped after living through Vietnam’s ‘darkest days’, join the family Canada where, they casually describe, ‘with mocking laughter, how they had masturbated men in exchange for a bowl of soup.’

Thuy’s sparse and economic style lends itself to such disturbing disclosures. The novel is written as a series of prose poems that alternate with longer passages, none more than a few pages long. Neither is there a classical narrative arc, rather the tracking of parallel lives that eventually intertwine; Canada in the present and Vietnam in the past. Thuy often ends a section with a phrase that she picks up in the next, linking her ideas and images through repetition that in a less nuanced and graceful writer would grate.

Instead the effect is deeply moving, as she suggests that the survivor learns the ability to endure sorrow while holding their gaze steady, ‘no matter the mood of the moment’.

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