

**Carla Guelfenbein, *The Rest is Silence*, translated from the Spanish by Katherine Silver (Portobello Books, 2011)**

*The Rest is Silence* haunts. ‘Do you remember?’ says Juan, in the last speech act. When all is said and done it is memories shared that create the bond. I close the book. The characters are silent. But my thoughts don’t rest there, caged within the covers. The book is infinitely sad but there is reconciliation. Salvation lies in trust and being there for the other.

The narrative trope of *The Rest is Silence* is a death-spiral – metonymically attached to the exploration of marriage breakdown – family matters. Juan is a heart surgeon but he can’t talk to his second wife (Alma) or his son by his first wife (Soledad), even though he loves them both. He is riven with unreconciled anger and guilt, fed by recollections of the past. He hides in his demanding professional work and escapes above the ordinary world in his light aircraft: ‘From up here, everything becomes insignificant ... Altitude – like the passage of time – emphasizes the most pleasant parts of life’ (17). Alma is devastated by her husband’s withdrawal – innocent of wrong-doing – bereft, wondering about a future without passion or intimacy. She turns for comfort to an old flame. Twelve-year-old Tommy is the third in the middle, the lynchpin of the narrative. He knows from the outset that ‘sometimes words are like arrows. They fly back and forth, wounding and killing, just like wars’ (3). But the silences are the scary part. Papa’s silences are black and oppressive, forcing people into solitary corners. White silences let in the light – liberate. Tommy invents an imaginary mentor called Kájef and makes up stories about his mama, to remember her by. But unlike his father Tommy is determined to face up to present realities. He has come to love his stepmother and young step-sister (Lola) and would ‘do anything to make it so Alma doesn’t leave us’ (195). Tommy is fascinated by the myth of the labyrinth in which Theseus conquers and kills the Minotaur. Ariadne’s thread is the line through his drawing: ‘the thread that leads love out’ (111).

Carla Guelfenbein says that her narratives begin with the appearance of a character, one who might very well pass in a crowd but suddenly catches her eye and connects.<sup>1</sup> *The Rest is Silence* had its inception in an image of a small boy under the table with a recording device. Guelfenbein says that she was moved by his separation from the other children and his aura of solitariness. This mystery child was the basis for the character of Tommy and the back-story of a boy who grows up isolated from other children because of a heart condition. Soon after Alma comes to stay she gives Tommy a tape recorder and shows him how to use sounds to make his own music. Tommy, however, is more interested in decoding words. He tapes conversations and tells his father that he doesn’t eavesdrop to make mischief but ‘to find the invisible order of things – evidence. “I don’t only tape other people,” he said. “I also tape my own voice, ideas and things. When I say them out loud, I know they exist”’ (223).

Guelfenbein creates a precocious creature of light. Tommy is insatiably curious about the wonders of the universe and the capacity of both science and language ‘to express and understand things that otherwise would be impossible’ (158). Half vulnerable child and the rest stoic sage he embarks on the classic coming-of-age quest – *Bildungsroman*. The trope is a ‘novel of formation’ which usually involves a spiritual crisis and the passage from childhood to maturity, in which the protagonist seeks knowledge of his/her identity and place

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carla Guelfenbein, posted by Lucy Popescue on June 19, 2011. Available: [lucypopescu.wordpress.com/2011/06/19/interview-carla-guelfenbein/](http://lucypopescu.wordpress.com/2011/06/19/interview-carla-guelfenbein/)

in the worldly order. Tommy's crisis is precipitated by the lies and secrets surrounding his mother's death and an innate feeling for social justice. He believes in archetypal battles. Eros and Thanatos are personified and 'Good will always triumph over Evil' (14). He visits Aunt Corina and gives her a drawing of 'a man whose body is made of stars', flying through the universe, his elements '*formed in the heat of the explosion of a star*' (125). She tells him that it is beautiful.

Tommy's drawings are symbolic, significant in any interpretation of his actions. He would have liked to tell Papa his worries 'but the words are trapped inside me, like the birds inside Grandpa's aviary' (76). His father has become a stranger, an imposter sent by enemy forces, to be resisted. Tommy makes a picture for Grandpa – a man, a child, a cage, a ship faraway on the horizon (for escape) and the caption 'Hi I love you' – which he throws out of the car window after the debacle at the birthday party when he provokes the old patriarch. But he can't hate his father like he wants to (195). Guelfenbein includes facsimiles as part of the narrative – drawings, emails, pages of notebooks – to give insight into the mythic dimensions of Tommy's world and the clarity of his judgments.

Culture and artifacts connect people; expressions of meaning and intentionality beyond words, through encoded and shared understanding. Tommy makes a kaleidoscope decorated with two figures embracing as a gift for Mr Milowsky who is Jewish and knew his mama when she was incarcerated at Aguas Claras. Mrs Milowsky befriended Soledad and always put fresh flowers on her shrine at the roadside. Mr Milowsky explains the significance of religious rituals – the *Shabbat* blessing. Tommy also makes use of sign-language for private conversations with Alma. She taught him the rudiments, although this form of communication loses something of its exclusive power when Lola learns to use it too. And at school, Tommy discovers the psychic range of poetic language to build empathic bridges between people: 'there could be a place, deep down inside our bodies, where we were all the same. Because otherwise, how would it be possible for Mr. Huidoboro [a poet], who died sixty years ago, to talk about what's going on inside me?' (158). Tommy comes to appreciate that the way words are packaged gives shape to the overwhelming chaos of thought and imagination – communicates the certainty of collective control and binding across an incommensurable void. Later Juan hacks into Tommy's computer files and is frightened by the evidence of his son's research – edited sound files of salient conversations and the Letterbox which captures the hate mail. Aunt Corina's indictment '*Those sonsabitches*' strikes a raw nerve. Juan is shamed by Tommy's courage in dealing with the issues on his own: 'Tommy has been living with this knowledge, this anguish all these weeks ... the only thing I want to do is hug my son' (231).

*The Rest is Silence* is not a monological tract but a composite of perspectives. Guelfenbein suggests that there cannot be a one-eyed truth.<sup>2</sup> The duty of a writer is to run away from preconceptions and commonplace expectations. She says that it is satisfying to write from different points of view – heart surgeon, second wife, son by a previous marriage – allowing the characters to speak in counterpoint. The author suggests that her work is strongly influenced by 'stream of consciousness' techniques – Virginia Woolf and the Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector. However, Guelfenbein says that perhaps the best Latin American writer is Roberto Bolaño who died in 1977. Reading his work is like being shown a piece of fabric and coming into awareness of a secret subtext. Life and art converge with

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<sup>2</sup> Guelfenbein in the interview posted by Popescu, 2011.

visceral realism and reactive intensity, political because the work raises consciousness of what it means to be human. Tommy tells his science teacher: ‘when I find out about something, I can’t pretend it doesn’t exist and that this is called “raising my consciousness”’ (165). Guelfenbein believes that a writer should capture the world through the eyes of personal experience, self-conscious reflection and critique, weaving a veil to capture the many notes of consciousness trapped in the light.<sup>3</sup>

Guelfenbein excels in crafting interior monologues. Present events are intercut with surreal dreams and flashbacks which reveal psychic clues to character and motivations. Tommy, Juan and Alma all come alive in the flow of their reveries. The chapters alternate, well-signposted by iconic naming. Juan’s sign is an hourglass because somehow time is running out on fragile realities and he is impotent in the face of events. He dreams that he falls overboard from a ship carrying both Alma and Soledad (whose name means ‘solitude’ or ‘outcast’) who move further and further away from him. Alma’s sign is two wavelets because she imagines herself as a fish, living in a house of water, protected from human frailties – her mother’s embarrassing promiscuity, in particular – by the vast distances of the ocean. Tommy’s sign is a warrior’s arrow, representing rising manhood – ‘spunk’ says Juan (17) – or in testimony to his growing facility to use words as weapons, to ‘express and understand the things that otherwise would be impossible’ (158).

*The Rest is Silence* is a transnational project – Spanish to English. Katherine Silver is an experienced translator. She is co-director of the Banff International Literary Translation Centre in Canada, although she lives in California. Her most recent translations from the Spanish are works by César Aira, Horacio Castellanos and Daniel Sada – all very different in writing style. Silver says (in an online interview with Barbara Altmann) that there is no living to be made out of translation – unless it is associated with what turns out to be a best-seller – however, translation studies are making their way into universities, attracting academic interest for what is a complex literary task.<sup>4</sup>

Silver suggests that cultural sensitivity is what makes a translation work. Research is important because cultural stereotypes and commonplaces won’t do. Her task is to stretch English to cover the original text – not simply a question of word for word correspondence. A good translation invokes metonymic associations rather than the equivalence of metaphors, thus opening ‘a way for cultures to expand outwards.’<sup>5</sup> Silver wants to know if the wherewithal can be found in English to do what the author does in Spanish. The creative challenge is to bring the work alive in a new landscape. The reader must be transported beyond the words to connect with the underlying human experience. Something new comes into being which bridges cultures.

*The Rest is Silence* is meticulously crafted, capturing the frozen moments of a nightmare descent on a path with no return. There were markers – dreams and portents – and ‘occurrences’ which demanded auguries rather than closed silences. The book cover is a greyscale picture of a grave, dark-eyed boy – sensitive mouth, enigmatic presence. A fantasy flight of exotic coloured birds hover in the foreground. Alma observes: ‘He’s been watching me the whole time with his pale, whimsical face’ (110). Tommy’s presence mediates the action. Juan says: ‘suddenly, a question pops into my head that makes me tremble: Why did

<sup>3</sup> Guelfenbein to Popescu, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Silver, ‘UO Today #49: Katherine Silver with Barbara Altmann’, Oregon Humanities Center: [uoregon.edu](http://uoregon.edu)

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Silver, ‘UO Today #49: Katherine Silver with Barbara Altmann’

you let the birds go? It's never occurred to me that Tommy had a reason to do what he did. I should have asked him. I should have listened to what he had to tell me' (252). Would the right word of intervention at the right time have made a difference? Was Tommy's action the heedless irresponsibility of a child or a reasoned gesture of defiance against authority, in an event which marks his individuation from the father's house? Sometimes the fine network of invisible supports set in place by parents for their young as they fly the nest is no proof against happenstance.

Guelfenbein weaves a veil to catch the motes of consciousness. Events are dramatic, stylised in conversational dialogues and acted out through interior monologues which climax in moments of poetic realisation. The deft use of language is disciplined to a purpose and gripping. Characters are brought to the edge of the sublime. Juan in fear, Alma in guilt and Tommy ... Tommy is a bright star that streaks the night sky. Tommy's existential well-being rests on the psychic and physical connection with his mother and the reinstatement of her symbolic value, a pilgrimage he feels compelled to take alone: 'I don't know if you realize this, but I got here all by myself. I think I grew a few inches on the way, because I feel taller' (214). The work moves – deft with sorrow and understanding for the pity of it all.

Guelfenbein declares that she began writing short stories as a young girl and that writing is her only steady love. Her debut novel, *El revés del alma* (in English, *The other side of the soul*, 2003) is semi-autobiographical, about an exiled artist who returns to a post-Pinochet Chile from London and can only feel his estrangement. Her second work, *The Women of My Life* (to name it in English), is a best seller in Chile and has been translated into twelve other languages. *The Rest is Silence* is Guelfenbein's third novel but the first to be translated into English. Her next book – to be published simultaneously in Latin America, Spain, Germany and France – is called *Naked Swimmers*. Why not another translation into English?

### **Christine Runnel**