



'Pictures of Silence'
Andreea Stan

“You look crisp, with your red dress and green nails”, she told me. I thanked her and when I got home I looked up the word ‘crisp’ in the dictionary. I could never really grasp the meaning of her compliment. Was it a compliment? Possibly. It sounded like one.

There are things that nobody told me when I crossed the border. Some aspects about an immigrant’s life are kept quiet. I didn’t know about the 100 objects that I would use on a daily basis without knowing how they are called; objects that I placed in the ‘thingy’ category. Anything could be a thingy. The food grater was to the “the metal or plastic thingy with sharp edged holes that you use when you cook and need small pieces of cheese or vegetables”. So many words for something so simple. More often than not I would go and look for an object rather than ask for it. Nobody talked about the words that don’t exist, but that I would use because I would hear them wrong or simply make them up. Like ‘alimentation’. I actually meant ‘food diet’. The list is long. Did anybody warn me that I would use the word ‘bum’ inappropriately? No. I can’t remember how many times I said “the lady with the *bum* on her head”. ‘Bum’, ‘bun’, they were the same for me.

Is this important? Of course it is. Have I always had the freedom of speech as an immigrant. Yes. A freedom that I was not able to exercise.

I was never quiet. I was silent. At 21 I crossed a border that turned my silence into a pit of quicksand that separated my clumsy mother tongue from a foreign language that I wanted to adore but was incapable of doing it. I started to rate my speech by quantity, not quality. The more words managed to get over the quicksand, the better. Silence didn’t scare me, I couldn’t see anything frightening in it. But it imprisoned me. It made me feel powerless.

I was silent next to many people. It is not that I didn’t know what to say. I had so many things to say, but I didn’t know how. I always had ‘yes’ or ‘no’, though they were never enough. And when questions filled me with too much ‘yes’ and too much ‘no’, my silence was no longer just quicksand. It expanded. The first thing to replace was my uncertainty. Sometimes, somehow, people managed to figure out if my uncertainty - my silence - was pregnant with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. They seemed to know it better than I did.

I was learning more and more words, until the pit emptied completely of quicksand. Yet silence was still there. How did it become stronger than me? I don’t know. I started to use it as plaster, covering the things I knew how to talk about, but preferred not to. I thought it would be a quick fix. It turned out to be only

temporary. The scientists proved that trying to avoid discussing a subject doesn't mean we will forget it, but remember it better. So I managed to instill in myself a lasting damage by avoiding to reveal some of my thoughts and feelings. Especially feelings. People talk about everything. Apart from the things that don't matter at all, and the things that matter the most. I didn't talk about anything painful. Well, not straight forward. I never liked the words 'hurt' and 'pain'. They are used maybe too much and now taste like tea, the third time you pour water over the same tea bag. I tried to get out my pain using words from favourite writers. Their old wisdom proved to be powerless. The insufficiency of meaning was still there.

One night I painted a picture with bright red paint. It didn't mean anything. But my hands covered in blood red paint looked like hurt and regret, like things that cannot be undone. So I took a picture of my hands and titled it "Art was made". Did the message go through? Yes. Perfectly.

I've been a visual artist since I can remember. I had always used images to express what was already clear in my mind. Words were a means to reveal what I didn't think I could illustrate. I had kept words and images in two different jars. Yet, that image of my bloodied hands seemed to have cut through everything that I'd known before, glued itself to the words that made up the title and illustrated the unspeakable. It was my silence. Visualised. William S. Burrough, one of the greatest figures of the American Beat Generation, said that "visual art and writing don't exist on an aesthetic hierarchy because each is capable of things the other can't do at all. Sometimes one picture is equal to 30 pages of discourse, just as there are things images are completely incapable of communicating". Serendipity. Did it diminish my silence? No. Silence was still a creature both inside and outside me. Fluid and pervasive. But the revelation provided a way of dealing with it, a way of using it for my benefit. I started seeing it as an ally, no longer as an enemy. I started to look for ways of how to shape it.

Clementine Kruczynski says, in 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind', that "what is true is always changing". The shift of the truth about my silence happened under my eyes. I let it happen and followed the path across which it led me. I stopped searching for words when I had something to say but didn't quite know how. Or when I had a story so personal that I wanted to share it and, at the same time, I didn't want to share it. Or when I wanted to approach a subject considered taboo. I let the images speak for me. And quietly, unexpectedly, maybe because I had ceased to look for words, my speech became able to deliver a message when my images couldn't. Conversation finally didn't leave me more confused.

I thought it was easy. Until one day when a couple of people said that one of my illustrations was 'too much' to be in the window of an art gallery. It was a drawing of a male hand carefully placing a heart inside a woman's chest. What I wanted to be a surrealist depiction of a loving feeling turned out to be perceived as sexual. It was when I caught a first glimpse of what the Charlie Hebdo attack demonstrated a couple of months later and what Neil Gaiman and his wife, the talented singer and writer Amanda Palmer, beautifully explained in their article about the ban on their chosen cover for one of the issues of the New Statesman: "we actually can discuss the unsayable. [...] We can talk about something without actually showing it. [...] Once you draw the picture, it's a different story: when you "draw the undrawable". The moment that you draw a picture that shows something transgressive, even if you are simply commenting on it, you have drawn it." There is a big difference in the perception on the things people say and the things people draw. People are more tolerant towards words than towards images. Neil Gaiman has always fascinated me with his writing that can range from delicate, poetic prose, to children's stories and explicitly sexual short stories. The way he weaves stories is something for me to aspire to. But even his genius could not save an image from censorship.

What I found striking in Jordan Baseman's 'July the Twelfth' and S Mark Gubb's 'Death of Peter Fechter' was the way they used silence. Jordan Baseman's work is very rich in sound, words in particular while the visuals are, one could say, nonexistent. The monochrome text based images allowing audiences to choose what to imagine. The onus to visualise the execution falls on the viewer. Baseman's work is first of all

visually silent. To me the work tackles topics like capital punishment and the difference in people's reaction in front of death (the reaction of the condemned, of the witnesses, the media and the executors), though the artist's position on these topics is not clearly defined.

In S Mark Gubb's piece, on the other hand, the channel of communication is mostly visual. Apart from some shouted orders and unclear words the video is otherwise silent. Though even with the visuals, the artist doesn't reveal any information about why there is someone trying to jump over the wall or why the soldiers are shooting. The understanding of the background story is based entirely on the audience's knowledge of history and life experience. Here the themes of freedom and human rights are only suggested.

What the two artworks do so well is to use silence in order to transfer the freedom of speech. In a seemingly effortless way the artists allows the viewer's imagination to formulate the message sent through their artworks. I heard people saying that the secret to show is not to show at all. The intentionally ubiquitous silence is not an absence, but a refusal to give an answer or set a point of view, opening the works to more possibilities of interpretation.

Is silence the absence of sound, words and images? Sometimes. But it is never an absence of meaning. While some might perceive silences as lies, I have the feeling that there is something painfully honest about choosing not to speak. Or, to be more accurate, about choosing what not to speak about, as well as how not to speak. My silence is a map of heartbreaks, of shameful memories, of things I want to avoid or know I should avoid. I follow the map, allowing my shortcuts to light up around dark and dusty landmarks. It feels like I am taking away pieces from a puzzle or I am taking a puzzle apart. And nothing can shake my belief that this can only make people see a clear picture of the whole. Just like the first artists who painted Adam and Eve covered only in leaves, not to hide something, but to highlight their nudity. I believe in silence like others believe in love and war, I believe it always finds a way. I know that silence never dies. I tear off pieces from its flesh and mould it with words and images, apprehensively waiting for it to change again and hoping that I will always find a way to live with it, no matter what it turns into.

Andreea Stan is an animator, illustrator and writer born and raised in Romania. She is currently living and working in UK. She combines animation and illustration with poetry in order to tell stories about mixed feelings, inner struggles, faded memories, strange situations, beautiful people and moments that go too fast. She believes in love and rock'n'roll.
