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문학석사 학위논문

Mourning History and Creating Survival:

Animal Figures in
On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

역사에 대한 애도와 만들어낸 생존 사이:
『지상에서 우리는 잠시 매혹적이다』의 동물들

2022년 8월

서울대학교 대학원
영어영문학과 문학전공

김아영

Mourning History and Creating Survival:

Animal Figures in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

지도교수 김정하

이 논문을 문학석사 학위논문으로 제출함

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Abstract

This thesis reads Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, through the animal figures that inhabit the human story of the Vietnamese American and queer narrator. *On Earth* consists of a series of letters from the narrator "I," Little Dog, for his mother; the letters attempt to account for the trauma of the Vietnam War she suffers from, which has in turn affected Little Dog in the form of her domestic violence. The animals and their hunted, injured and killed bodies become a metaphor for the violence that has followed Little Dog's Vietnamese American and queer life within the U.S.: the war that still haunts his family, as well as his own vulnerable and racialized position. Yet when Little Dog invokes those animals into his own story, they become more than mere figures of human suffering and signal survival in spite of their vulnerability. Through their reimagined, fantastic image, Little Dog argues that remembering and engaging with past losses of the Vietnam War coexists with and facilitates his Vietnamese family's continued living, by discovering a pleasure and agency within vulnerability, a seemingly contradictory and precarious way of survival that he terms "beautiful."

The first chapter considers how the animals first enter the text as ghostly figures representing the trauma of the Vietnam War, threatening to merge with the human body, continuing the violence and dehumanization of war. However, the text argues that the "monstrosity" of domestic violence and war must be accounted for within their mother-son relationship; Little Dog instead imagines, in a deliberately hybrid image of the monarch butterfly

as Vietnamese American refugees, a way of “mourning” those histories as alive and part of the present.

The second chapter examines the intersection of Vietnamese American refugee history and Little Dog’s own queer sexuality foregrounded in the latter half of the novel. Relationship between Little Dog and his lover, Trevor, is conditioned by norms of race, gender and sexuality that precede their encounter. Yet Little Dog insists on an agency that arises out of his seeming vulnerability, transforming pain into pleasure and discovering a similar vulnerability within Trevor. The figure of the calf that emerges from his memories of Trevor reveals small, pleasurable moments shared despite their seeming differences, and presents Little Dog’s writing as a way of preserving and prolonging those small moments within text, thereby “mourning” and extending Trevor’s memories beyond death.

This thesis will finally touch upon how the mostly figurative use of animals within the text falls short of fully bridging the distance between figurative and real animals, his own storytelling and the unknowable history of his mother, his imagined, textual survival and the reality of violence. Yet Little Dog’s act of writing, in spite of the fantastic, temporary aspect of its imagined solution, offers him a way of approaching and connecting with his mother despite their marred relationship.

Keyword: Ocean Vuong, animal, mourning, Vietnam War,
refugee studies, queer

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Introduction

A herd of buffaloes are stampeding across a field leading onto a cliffside, when suddenly, they morph into moose, then dogs, then into macaque monkeys that have miraculously returned from death. Headed towards the edge of the cliff, just before they are about to plummet, the animals explode into monarch butterflies and take to flight instead. This series of metamorphoses that conclude Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) calls back each animal that has had a part in the story alongside the narrator "I," also running through the tobacco field as if following them. By the end of the list, the narrator confides: "What we would give to have the ruined lives of animals tell a human story—when our lives are in themselves the story of animals" (*On Earth* 242). The animals within the text seem to come alive for the narrator, even when he is the one imagining them into the scene, "think[ing] of the buffaloes somewhere" only visible in his mind (241). The story of *On Earth* is a "human" one of the narrator, told through the many animal figures he invokes, but by the end, it seems to have transformed into a "story of animals," questioning the precedence of the "real" lives of himself, his mother, and his family over the figurative animals.

Ocean Vuong emerged as a "literary superstar" of a poet through his first collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), and recently published his second, *Time Is a Mother* (2021); *On Earth* is Vuong's first and as of now, only novel. He however considers prose to be an "expan[sion] on the same question that I had in poetry" (Vuong, "Failing Better")—"what it means to

be a body inhabiting this incredibly complicated, violent, and precarious country” as Vietnamese American and queer man (González). The “human story” that *On Earth* sets out to tell resembles Vuong’s own life; much like the fictional narrator “I” of his novel, Vuong was born in Saigon, Vietnam and migrated with his family to the U.S. when he was only two years old. His childhood was spent in Hartford, Connecticut where his mother worked at a nail salon among other jobs, and a young Vuong grappled with his own sexuality, substance abuse, and literary ambitions (González).

The novel is not the only work where such details of Vuong’s own life as Vietnamese American and queer are foregrounded. His poetry has already been commended for its “courage[] to confront [himself] directly [...] containing so much of [Vuong’s] own voice” (Vuong, “Failing Better”). His writing is shaped by and builds upon seemingly autobiographical facts, from works that reference his family history of war and migration, to a poem that directly addresses himself from its very title, “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong” (*Night Sky* 82). Vuong declares that part of his project is to write from these “true” experiences of his family as well as himself, in order to “preserve that act of survival” (“Failing Better”) within the field of “literature with a capital *L*” from which bodies like his are so often excluded (Chow, “Going Home”).

Similarly, *On Earth* articulates the “human story” of survival of those Vietnamese American and queer bodies; what differentiates the novel from becoming a factual memoir, however, is the presence of animals that mediate that story. Most notable is the presence of a fictional first-person narrator who is known only by his nickname, “Little Dog.” The narrator “I,” taking up an animal name, writes multiple letters addressed to his mother Ma that

narrate his memories with her, grandmother Lan, and first lover Trevor. In order to tell those memories, the text invokes various animals both directly observed and indirectly imagined alongside those human bodies. The “ruined lives of animals”—of hunted deer, trapped and injured moose, and buffaloes running off cliffs—form a metaphor for the vulnerable human bodies haunted by the violence of the Vietnam War, as well as violence present within the U.S. in regards to sexuality and race. Yet this project of telling human stories through animals transforms into recognizing that the human story is also one of “animals”; those animal images do not stay as reminders of painful history but become ideal figures that signify survival despite their vulnerability, those that the narrator models his own strategy of remembrance after.

This thesis is a continuation of pre-existing critical works regarding *On Earth* in that it follows frameworks of Vietnamese American refugee and diaspora studies as well as queer studies, to examine how Little Dog’s queer sexuality intersects with his purpose of remembering a Vietnamese American family history marked by the violence of war. The medium of Little Dog’s project, which I would like to direct more attention to, are the animal figures that come to inhabit the novel alongside its human subjects. Animals that are first introduced as metaphoric stand-in for the trauma of war, racial violence and dehumanization, come to represent a vulnerable yet resilient existence that is capable of moving beyond violence into continued survival. In remembering his family and his first lover, Little Dog brings forth animals as a vehicle to speak the “inhumanity” of war (VT Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 215) and the twofold “abjection” of queer and Vietnamese subject (Nguyen

TH 204). Those animal figures, however, shift from solely signifying pain and violence to illustrate the surviving Vietnamese refugees' "different human becoming" through memory (Espiritu 179), as well as the capacity of queer desire to discover a possible agency within abjection and vulnerability. The animal images continuously oscillate between a metaphor for vulnerability and an ideal of fantastic survival; *On Earth* records a negotiation between a violent reality and surviving it through momentary and imagined pleasures, a fraught process that seeks to bridge the seeming contradiction between remembering a violent past into the present, and transforming such present as one of pleasure and "beauty" in vulnerability.

The "human story" of *On Earth* has been read through Vietnamese American diasporic and queer frameworks, delineating how Little Dog's queer desire and acts mediate and interact with his Vietnamese American identity and remembrance of the war. An appropriate place to begin from may be the recent shift from Asian American to diasporic perspectives in literary studies. If Asian American literature "hails in part from a rights enfranchise movement [...] a historical need to claim [an] American belonging" (Park 165-66), scholars of Asian American studies have, at the time, cast doubt over the project of gaining such acceptance into America through the form of citizenship. As Lisa Lowe warns, "promise of inclusion through citizenship and rights cannot resolve the material inequalities of racialized exploitation" of the Asian "immigrant," kept in an indefinite state between incorporation and exclusion (23, 4). The proclaimed goal of "visibility and inclusion" into the nation-state that seemed to be the purpose of Asian American literature itself (Tang 1), may well turn into a "violence [...]"

that proposes to convert subjugated others into normative humanity[, a] process of racial governance” (Espiritu, Lowe and Yoneyama 184).

Alongside the recognition that assimilation into the nation-state may only further the racialization of Asian American subjects, it became necessary to re-examine the category of “Asian America” and what Lowe calls its “heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity” divided along the “particularities of class, gender, and national diversities” (63, 65). Despite the political benefits reaped by strategic ignorance of heterogeneity within Asian America (VT Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* 145, 171), mobilization through “strategic essentialist [...] cultural nationalism” risks “repeat[ing] the call of U.S. nationalists” from the other side, while homogenizing differences within Asian America that refuses to be reconciled into a singular entity (Lim 291). In the face of such “crisis” of the category, Nguyen makes a point of attending to “intersecting relationships of race, class, gender and sexuality” in Asian American bodies that delineate varying, plural identities (*Race and Resistance* 171). Then, there seems to be a twofold movement; one that resists an American belonging through assimilation, and another that reconsiders “Asian America” into a more fluid term, through its intersections with specific nationalities and history, sexuality and gender.

Taking such context into consideration, “diaspora” is an effective framework that complements the often-used Asian American immigrant—“a condition of being deprived of the affiliation of nation” (Lim 297) that resists assimilationist integration and attributes an “autonomous value” to the Asian countries that make up the other half of “Asian America” (Park 156). This diasporic perspective directs attention back to the “Asia” of Asian

America, and its history that defies integration into U.S.-centric narrative—a movement particularly significant for Vietnamese American literature. Viet Thanh Nguyen notes that the wider scope of “ethnic literature” often follows the “cycle of silence to speech”; the minority figure’s voice is translated and made legible to the wider American society beyond the ethnic community, to become a mark of their acceptance (“Vietnamese American Literature” 50). Nguyen differentiates this “ethnic form” that presupposes assimilation into an American voice, from the “racial content” packaged within that form. His definition is that “[t]he ethnic is what America can assimilate while the racial is what America cannot digest” (51); the racial content points to a history that cannot be separated from its particularities of violence and refuses to fit into “the American Dream [...] the American Way [and] its road of progress” (51).

Such racial content of Vietnamese American literature, one that “remains potentially, uneasily troublesome, even volatile” throughout decades of its history and development, is the Vietnam War (51). The war is “inseparable from the Vietnamese American population itself” (51); despite attempts to integrate refugees as part of the familiar figure of the Asian American immigrant and its “model minority” narrative, Vietnamese American literature cannot ignore how American militarism “*produce[d]* this very exodus, the refugee subject, and the U.S. nation-state” (Espiritu 7, 18).

Within the boundary that the form of “ethnic literature” dictates, however, Vietnamese American literature may easily transform into something that “ultimately affirms America” (VT Nguyen, “Vietnamese American Literature” 61). A “troubling tension” forms between denouncing

American violence “[done] in the name of supposedly defending freedom” and circumspectly “prov[ing] that America, in the end, [...] fulfilled its promise of freedom” by the very fact that Vietnamese literature exists (54). Nguyen notes that much of Vietnamese American literature seems to have “endors[ed] this kind of American self-regard,” where the literature’s capacity to criticize the U.S. is undercut by its “settl[ing] for having a voice”; thus, “[w]hat remains is either a resentment that returns to the bitter past [...] or the desire for reconciliation and closure” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 205). Yến Lê Espiritu makes a similar observation in her study of Vietnamese American refugees and their militarized state, compelled into a fraught position of affirming American militarism and promise of freedom while excluded and erased from the U.S.-centric history of their war.

Against an argument that defines the refugee subjects only as “good refugees” who are fully assimilated into the U.S., or troubling and backwards subjects who fail to do so, Espiritu emphasizes a “critical refugee studies” that treats the refugee subjects as complex, “intentionalized beings” (11, 15). She directs attention to the formation of refugee memories, both in transitory spaces of refugee camps and within their new “refuge” of America, that “simultaneously trouble *and* affirm regimes of power” (2)—contesting American narratives of the Vietnam War as well as presenting varied “social, public, and collective remembering” built among refugee subjects (3). Critical refugee studies that attends to such “lost and missing subjects of history” (Espiritu 19), discovers “refugees’ creative, improvised, and experimental refuge-making practices” that create “the place of ‘different human becoming,’ [...] the radical remaking of a proper humanity” (179).

This “different human becoming” connects with Nguyen’s call for a Vietnamese American literature that refuses to stay “ethnic”; rather than choosing between returning to the past or forgetting it completely, Nguyen asks for “ghosts [to] be called on not to propitiate them and send them back to the otherworld, [...] but to live in the present and animate our memories with an inhumanity that reminds us of our own” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 214). The refugee memory keeps the inhumanity of war in sight, to challenge the “ethnic” category and its normative humanity that the U.S. nation-state seeks to assimilate Vietnamese American subjects into.

These “ghosts” that Nguyen notes points to another difficulty when accounting for not only the surviving refugee memories but the losses they experienced from the Vietnam War, which are “absence[s] that I can neither know nor share [...] that resist my speech” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 222). Nguyễn-Vo Thu-Huong points to acts of “mourning” as necessary to “recover our [Vietnamese] histories” against an American forgetting and erasure, but observes similar dissonance between the narratives of the living and the unknowability of the dead (Nguyễn-Vo 159, 169).

To address the aporia intrinsic in remembrance, this thesis engages with a revised concept of “mourning” as suggested by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian which emphasizes a continuation with melancholia. While the two are defined as opposing responses to loss within the Freudian framework, melancholic attachments facilitate mourning to become a “creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history” (2). Espiritu similarly involves Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” in order to further her analysis regarding second-generation Vietnamese

American subjects and their engagement with the history of the Vietnam War. “Postmemory” names a structure of intergenerational transmission of trauma which, Hirsch notes, is “not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (“Generation” 107). What those creative works of postmemory attempt is to “*reactivate and reembody*” history—building an “affective link to the past” that persists beyond the immediate experience of the historical participants (111). Eng and Kazanjian’s idea of “mourning” precisely insists on engaging with this “creative” possibility when regarding with history, the inevitable distance from the past coexisting with a capacity to “animat[e] history for future significations as well as alternate empathies” in the present (1).

Viet Thanh Nguyen emphasizes that breaking out of the ethnic box is through a “double-edged writing” that challenges the U.S. as well as Vietnam, “not affirming either of the nations or their nationalisms” (61-62). The idea of “queer diaspora” joins “queer” onto diasporic framework, not only tracing the diversity of gender and sexuality among Asian American and Vietnamese American subjects, but also questioning these categories’ ties to Asian nationalism as their place of “origin.” Gayatri Gopinath observes that a “specifically *queer* diaspora” questions both origin and destination in its displacement, “unmasking and undercutting [diaspora’s] dependence on a genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic” (*Impossible Desires* 10). David L. Eng also notes a parallel between diasporic “displacement from origin [...] permanent disenfranchise[ment] from home” and the queer, “[t]raumatic displacement from a lost heterosexual ‘origin’” (“Out Here and Over There” 207). From this parallel, Eng argues for an

“unorthodox pairing of queerness and diaspora” (205), through which Asian American studies may broaden its scope toward diasporic, transnational perspectives (220; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 6). For Eng, queerness “exceeds the question of sexuality” and works as a “method of radical critique” from which to recognize nonnormative forms of kinship, desire and community (217); examining the intersection of queerness and diaspora creates a “malleable, tropic space” with “power [...] of queer timings, to alter territory” (Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 6, 8).

This queer “timing” is particularly noteworthy, when queer desire harnesses the “backward glance” of diaspora in order to “mobilize[] questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes” (Gopinath, *Impossible Desires* 4). Gopinath emphasizes that “‘queerness’ also needs ‘diaspora’ in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization” (11); queer diasporic perspective may find its motivation in occupying a displaced and flexible site, but this does not excuse it from questions of history, and the specific refugee memory of war that the Vietnamese diaspora embodies.

Briefly returning to the notion of postmemory, more than engaging with memories inherited from the previous generation, Hirsch also notes that postmemory’s affective links to the past extend to new horizontal “affiliations” in the present, across communities that lie outside of traditional family idioms (“Generation 114-15; Espiritu 183). These new affiliations, as “queer” relations that goes beyond family ties, present how a queer diasporic work can engage with and recover lost histories. Ann Cvetkovich notes that queer diasporic perspective “reject[s] national belonging and virulent

nationalisms as the condition of possibility for community,” and further opens a way of “acknowledging traumatic loss” rather than depending on a “healing” either through a return to origin or assimilation into destination (121-22). Queer lens—rediscovery of and connection between queer subjects—opens a possibility of returning to and uncovering silenced histories, “incorporate[ing] traumatic cultural memory as a resource for the construction of new forms of public culture” (121). This queer *and* diasporic viewpoint of looking “backward,” as Heather Love uses the term to indicate “embracing loss [and] risking abjection” (30), not only acknowledges sites of loss and the painful affects they invoke but further, opens ways of creating new narratives out of history through “desires so powerful that they disrupt the linear temporality” (133).

Regarding the force of desires, Leo Bersani theorizes that homosexual desire opens a site for a different kind of subjectivity based upon the very dissolution of self. What only seems a destructive, masochistic aspect of sexuality illustrates how “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” may be “seductive,” and further, become a new mode of building relations by rediscovering that shattered self within the world (Bersani, “Rectum” 217; “Aggression” 69). Homosexual desire, which Bersani defines as a desire towards “sameness,” transforms the “shattered” subject in relation with the desired other—not violently absorbing the other into the self, but regarding them as someone “that will give him back to himself as a loved and cared for subject” (“Aggression” 70, 81; “Sociability” 55). In this respect, Bersani’s notion of queer desire suggests a subjectivity that transforms vulnerable, humiliated state into a pleasure and further, recreates the shattered subject

through relation with another.

While Bersani himself does not expressly consider how his formulation of masochistic sexuality would intersect with historical and racial context, Elizabeth Freeman notes his observation of the “continuity between history and eroticism [...] bodily response [as] linked to history” (*Time Binds* 141). Her interpretation directs attention to the queer and sadomasochistic practices that engage with historical and racialized elements. Performances imbued with such “visceral sense of temporal and historical dissidence” hold the capacity to render a historical grief “pleasurabl[e]” in the act—thereby offering a different way of encountering the loss of the past as physically “already in the present” (14), taken up to “remix[] them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing” (144).

Through “an optic of decolonial queer diasporas,” Sandeep Bakshi interprets *On Earth* as an interrogation of the colonial trauma of war that discovers a queer “regenerative capacities for healing” (537, 548-49). The intergenerational trauma of war is supplemented by the horizontal and queer relationships formed within the community, enabling a queer method of remembering the painful past, a “decolonial healing [through] making visible the colonial wound” (543). *On Earth*, however, does not offer an easy, “healing” resolution with regards to the violence narrated within the text; Christina Slopek directs attention to the intersection of Vietnamese American and gay male subjectivity within *On Earth*, to observe the “abjection” that follows Little Dog’s queerness as much as healing (740). By embracing the abject, vulnerable aspect of his physical relationship with a white American lover, Slopek argues that the novel traces a “diversity of

queer relationships and of stratifications within the field of masculinity” (756).

With regards to this multitudinous subjectivity of Vietnamese American diasporic and queer narrator, Birgit Neumann focuses on the language of *On Earth* that mediates the Vietnamese “mother tongue” and borrowed language of English, in order to “model[] alternative, open and non-identitarian ways of community building, which [...] thrive on a flow of mixing, borrowing and ‘lending across porous . . . boundaries’” (278). The “body” in Neumann’s analysis emerges as a nexus of queer desire and vulnerable racialization, which forms a “third language” beyond either Vietnamese or English, finding power in “nearness and immediacy, unrepresentable as such and rigorously exceeding the semantic functions of language” (287).

This thesis similarly reads *On Earth* through a need to account for and “mourn” the silenced history of the Vietnam War and the vulnerability of a queer Asian American subject, and the queer desire that brings forth and transforms that painful past into an agency to survive in the present. The alternative language that Neumann suggests at the intersection of Vietnamese diaspora and queer language, is not only discovered in the body of Little Dog, but also through the fantastic images, imagined “bodies” of animals that are invoked and presented within his text. The way *On Earth* tells its human story *through* animals seems to utilize them solely as a metaphor of dehumanization and vulnerability to violence that haunts racialized, queer bodies. Yet *On Earth*’s various animal images expand beyond that representation of violated and injured state; rather, they come

to highlight an imagined survival beyond violence, an escape Little Dog attempts through his text. Little Dog's project does not move towards a humanizing narrative—which may, as Viet Thanh Nguyen has noted, erase the very history of inhumanity that the text sets out to remember—but also looks to the animals he has invoked as another language that exceeds what human language can articulate (Neumann 287). Where imagined animals and human bodies overlap in his mourning of historical loss, the hunted and injured animal images that magically come alive by the end of the novel present a wish to preserve those memories of loss and survival beyond death. Little Dog hopes for this fantastic textual transformation of loss into preservation within his storytelling, a continuation of life he deems “beautiful.”

The first chapter centers on the idea of “monster” as indicating the overlap between animal and human, a hybrid being of multiple origin that crosses human and nonhuman boundaries. Animals enter Little Dog's narrative as ghostly figures of haunting; their damaged and injured bodies represent losses during the Vietnam War as well as the Vietnamese American refugee subject placed in a suspended state between past and present, between living and dying—excluded from U.S.-centric narrative of the war but still bearing that war's traumatic memories. Ma attempts to distance herself from these memories that not only haunt her, but threaten to transform her into a similar, inhuman ghost. Yet Little Dog insists that despite the violence and vulnerability that accompanies the name, he and Ma are both “monsters.” His project to “mourn” Ma becomes one to recover the silenced history of war, inseparable from the “monstrosity” of war and

domestic violence that has conditioned their mother-son relationship. Through a hybrid of human and animal in the image of “monarch butterflies,” Little Dog argues for a mourning that keeps those histories “alive” and reimagined as part of the present. Such mourning must acknowledge the risk of absorbing and erasing his family’s story into his own; the letters that never arrive reflect the fact that he cannot fully “reach” Ma’s experience, and must maintain an impossible distance between his writing and her memories.

The second chapter takes the certain “good” pleasure made possible by returning and recreating the past, and directs attention to another aspect of Little Dog’s life that names him a “monster”: his queer sexuality, explored through his new-found relationship with Trevor. This relationship is conditioned by norms of race, gender and sexuality that precede their encounter. Little Dog meets Trevor as a Vietnamese American refugee painfully aware of his “yellow,” racialized position within America; Trevor meets him as a white American boy forced to become a “man,” masculine and violent, whose aggression targets gendered, racialized and animal bodies.

Little Dog, however, argues for an agency that arises out of his submission and vulnerability within their sexual relationship. While sex seemingly re-enacts those racial and historical violence, it also reveals a pleasure and agency in actively creating pleasure. Little Dog returns Trevor’s desiring gaze with a gaze of his own, to discover both Trevor and himself as “beautiful” in their simultaneous vulnerability and agency. From this relationship, the “calf” and its precarious survival between the cage and slaughterhouse, emerges as an image of small, pleasurable moments that allow Little Dog and Trevor to connect with and desire each other despite

their seeming differences. The calf's momentary survival in Little Dog's text represent his strategy of preserving and prolonging those small moments within writing.

Nearing the end of the novel, the figurative "mourning" of his and Ma's shared history shifts into a literal mourning after losing both Trevor and Lan. The discrepancy between a textual, fantasized survival and the inevitable reality of death disrupts Little Dog's text; yet at the same time, this distance that remains impossible to bridge indicates a way of "reaching" his mother and his family's story without entirely subsuming the necessary difference between their experience and his writing of them. Rather than speaking for Ma, Lan and Trevor's stories, Little Dog's attempt directs him back to memories of Ma where he finds a way of connecting with her through their shared strategy, of imagining and creating small "good" moments of pleasure that let them survive through the American landscape.

I. Mourning a “Monstrous” History

Haunting Animals

Let me begin again.

Dear Ma,

I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. I am writing to go back to the time, at the rest stop in Virginia, when you stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hung over the soda machine by the restrooms, its antlers shadowing your face. In the car, you kept shaking your head. “I don’t understand why they would do that. Can’t they see it’s a corpse? A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that.”

I think now of that buck, how you stared into its black glass eyes and saw your reflection, your whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror. How it was not the grotesque mounting of a decapitated animal that shook you—but that the taxidermy embodied a death that won’t finish, a death that keeps dying as we walk past it to relieve ourselves. (*On Earth* 3)

The writer-character “I,” Little Dog, declares that he is “writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*” (4). This statement becomes a summary of the first chapter to *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, where he begins the letter by stating the very reason he is writing to his mother: “I am writing to reach you.” Within the same section, Little Dog refers to a moment that directly inspires him, a sentence that he comes across while reading Roland Barthes’ *Mourning Diary*: “I have known the body of my mother, sick and then dying” (Barthes 4; *On Earth* 7). He recounts that this is the moment he “decided to write to you, you who are still alive” (7). *Mourning Diary* is a collection of Barthes’ notes between 1977 and 1978, the year following his mother’s death. Richard Howard observes in his afterword that these fragments of “aphoristic losses” together form a record of Barthes’ “realization that yet another kind of utterance might, eventually,

be constituted out of this deprivation, this dispossession” (256). Barthes’ mourning is a textual remembrance and preservation of “the body of my mother” lost in death, transforming grief into new creation; despite his “fear [of] making literature out of” an inconsolable loss, Barthes recognizes that “as a matter of fact, literature originates within these truths” (23). This thesis would like to suggest that Little Dog’s own writing, as an attempt to “reach” his mother by putting his memories in writing, also becomes an act of mourning that resembles Barthes’. To call it “mourning,” however, raises an obvious question: what does it mean to mourn a person who is “still alive”?

Little Dog’s attempt of reaching mother begins by reaching back in time, to a memory of Ma “at the rest stop in Virginia.” The taxidermy buck at the center of this episode is an animal that has already been killed, yet its head is preserved and on display as a decorative piece. Its lifelike appearance is suspended between life and death, capturing the form of a living animal, but at the same time exhibiting the violent death and decapitation that must take place before such resemblance of life is made available to view. Taxidermy thus entraps the animal’s once-living body in a state of unfinished death, a symbol of “get[ting] stuck forever,” neither living nor dead and gone. For this reason, Ma protests that the act is unnatural—it disrupts the boundary between what is alive and what is dead, and the “natural” course of death that crosses from one side to the other, coming to a “finish” with the body “go[ing] away.”

Yet looking back on this moment, Little Dog notes that Ma’s horror stems from something more than the sheer grotesqueness involved in mounting an animal. Staring into the “black glass eyes” of the taxidermy head,

Ma's gaze finds there her "own reflection, [her] whole body, warped." The horror arises from the realization that the perpetually "dying" animal body has become her "mirror," an unsettling moment of identification with the animal that "warp[s]" her body into something other than the human "we," who are able to walk past the animal without cause for discomfort. The figure of the taxidermy buck points to an endless repetition of death that dissolves the boundary between human and animal, as well as living and dying, or past, present and future. To return to Barthes' sentence, Little Dog's writing is mourning "the body of my mother" in this figurative sense, where Ma is still alive, but her body in his memories has already been slipping into the realm between living and continuously dying.

An earlier version of this first chapter, an essay titled "A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read" (2017), contains an additional sentence at the end of the episode: "The war you lived through is long gone, but its ricochets have become taxidermy, enclosed by your flesh" (Vuong, "A Letter"). The sentence makes more explicit what is gradually revealed throughout *On Earth*; what prompts Ma to see herself in the taxidermy buck is her own traumatic memories from the Vietnam War. Ma, whose name is Rose or Hong, is a Vietnamese American refugee who was born in 1968 during the height of the war. She has experienced its violence and aftermaths before migrating to the U.S. in 1990, with her mother Lan, husband, and young son, Little Dog. Despite the war being supposedly over and "long gone," the memories constantly resurface and pull her back to that time, keeping her in a state of "death that keeps on dying."

Little Dog remembers another instance where Ma, seeing a roasted

pig hanging from the butcher's shop, offhandedly notes: "The ribs are just like a person's after they're burned" (*On Earth* 8). The spontaneous observation draws a "clipped chuckle" from herself (8), which soon fades when the implications of her comment set in for both her and Little Dog—she knows what burnt human remains look like through the war, from the casualties left in the wake of "the napalm cloud of your [Ma's] childhood in Vietnam" (14). Similar to the moment between the taxidermy buck and Ma, an animal body becomes a mirror image through which Ma discovers human deaths. These moments of "ricochet" where violence of the past resonates over the image of animals in the present, collapse the distinction of past and present to reveal that "the war was still inside you [...] that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes" (4).

In this sense, animal figures that intrude Ma's daily life become "ghosts," figures of haunting that, according to Avery Gordon, indicate "those singular yet repetitive instances when [...] the over-and-done-with comes alive[...], alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future" (xvi). It should be noted that the phenomenon of haunting "registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence," which may be invisible in its "repressed or unresolved" state but becomes perceptible through the presence of ghosts (Gordon xvi, 8). But the two "ghosts" of the taxidermy buck and the burnt pig, while both pointing back to the Vietnam War, are not quite the same. In the latter, it is not Ma's own body but the numerous, unnamed Vietnamese bodies lost during the war that emerge over the image of the animal. The burnt pig points to how those Vietnamese losses caused by U.S. military violence are still unresolved

sites within U.S.-centric history. The taxidermy buck, on the other hand, reflects how the very haunted state of the Vietnamese American refugee becomes something ghostly.

Yến Lê Espiritu observes that the need to justify U.S. militarism has led to selective remembrance and forgetting of the Vietnam War. The war is referred to specifically “as an *American* tragedy,” a narrative that “skip[s] over the history of militarized violence inflicted on Vietnam and its people” (18); meanwhile, Vietnamese refugees fleeing to America are actively cited as the “purported grateful beneficiary of the U.S. ‘gift of freedom’” (2), in order to affirm American “triumph” as the provider of refuge. Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo notes that American commemoration of the Vietnam War involves a “historical amnesia” that not only forgets Vietnamese presence in the war, but pressures the “successfully” assimilated Vietnamese refugee to “deny the complex history as well as the collective agency of the group they represent” (167). This demand to forget the past and reciprocate with gratitude, a structure Mimi Thi Nguyen summarizes with the phrase “gift of freedom,” severs the refugee subject from acknowledging their own history even as they, as “representative” of Vietnamese people, remain “bound indefinitely to those particularities of race or gender that are traces of his or her debt” (19). Within this system of the gift, the refugee is confined in a suspended temporality where they are expected to distance themselves from the past but “*can never catch up*” to the promised freedom of the future (16-17, 19). The unacknowledged history does not disappear, but returns to haunt the refugee subject in the form of unresolved memories—such as Ma’s encounter with the pig at the butcher’s; in turn, the suspended state of the refugee,

stuck between a repeating past and an impossible future, resembles the temporality of a “death that won’t finish” that ties Ma and the taxidermy buck.

These two aspects of the ghostly animal that haunt and transform Ma, merge into one particular story—that of the haunted macaque monkey. *On Earth* is for the most part narrated from the first-person perspective of Little Dog, and what he sees and remembers of Ma and his family. There is, however, one peculiar chapter where Little Dog diverges from that point of view and turns toward scenes of Vietnam during the war, those that he himself never witnessed. Little Dog begins with the observation that wartime Vietnam “is a beautiful country depending on where you look [...] depending on who you are” (35-36). In the two scenes that follow this statement, “who you are” makes each character susceptible to violence. One scene is that of his grandmother Lan with a newborn Ma in her arms, held at gunpoint by American soldiers; the other is of a macaque monkey hunted and about to be eaten alive by a group of unspecified men.

These scenes may not be directly observed by Little Dog, but are passed on to him through family stories from his childhood. Lan, whose post-war schizophrenia makes her “flicker [...] dipping in and out of sense” (16), repeatedly tells her grandson stories, some mythical and some personal—how she survived in Saigon, how his mother was born, and how they were stopped by American soldiers on their way back to her hometown of Go Cong. The story of the macaque monkey, on the other hand, is one Ma used to tell. By the very end of the novel, Little Dog recounts how he asked Ma for a bedtime story, “the one about the monkey” (239). Ma attempts to deflect this request by beginning a tale of the mythical Monkey King, but Little Dog

insists on the “real-life” story instead (239), which is how Ma comes to tell him a story set “in the old country, [of] men who would eat the brains of monkeys” (240).

The two narratives at first seem sharply divided; but they increasingly interrupt and merge with one another throughout Little Dog’s writing—the human bodies of Lan, Ma, and the Vietnamese people threatened by American military violence unsettlingly paralleled with the animal body of the macaque about to be consumed. The wind from a helicopter taking off nearby brings toward Lan a “sweat-soaked char, its odd and acrid taste blowing from a hut [...] [a] hut that, moments ago, was filled with human voices” (37)—implying that Vietnamese residents were massacred in the fields she is standing next to, now occupied by American soldiers. The expected sense of smell shifts into a taste, an effect that reverses later when the narrative veers its attention to the macaque monkey brought into the room to be eaten, its “burnt-red hair reeking of alcohol and feces” from its time in confinement (38).

Bodily excrement, especially when faced with threat of death, increasingly tie the human and animal bodies together. Lan’s name means “lily,” a flower “that opens like something torn apart” according to Little Dog’s description. The violent image of the tearing flower—and the body attached to that name—carries over into the scene of men feeding on the macaque’s brain, “wip[ing] their mouths with napkins printed with sunflowers that soon grow brown, then start to tear—soaked” (41). The liquid image is in turn transposed to the “liquid warmth [...] a circle of wet heat” around where Lan stands, as she urinates in fear that she and her child may

not survive this encounter with the soldiers (41). The series of disturbing correlations culminate in Little Dog's observation that concludes this paragraph: "The brain of the macaque monkey is the closest, of any mammal, to a human's" (41). The violence that targets Vietnamese bodies becomes something not so different from the violence of macaque hunting, the distinction between human and animal blurred when faced with the threat of death. When Ma is reluctant to tell Little Dog the "real-life story," it further implies that the hunted monkey is another "ghost" that points to Vietnamese losses during the war, a repressed history that still remains to haunt the survivor's memory.

Among all the implicit correlation drawn between human and animal bodies, the body most explicitly associated with the macaque monkey is Ma's. As a young Little Dog observes when she tells him the story: "You were born in the Year of the Monkey. So you're a monkey" (240). What seems to be a solely figurative connection, made by a child's mistake, gains unexpected weight through certain bodily characteristics shared between the two bodies. Ma is half-white, born in the Year of the Monkey of 1968, between Lan and an unidentified American soldier during the time she had to make a living as a sex worker, "as a young woman living in wartime city" (23). Ma's body, with her "too-pink skin" and hair with its "errant cinnamon tint," makes her visually recognizable as mixed race (42). This color is how the American soldier recognizes the "whiteness showing from her yellow body" (42), which complicates the racial boundary set between white American soldiers and "yellow" Vietnamese targets. Realizing that "[he] could be her father [...]" someone he knows could be her father" (42), the soldier lets them pass; Ma's

body allows her and Lan to survive this encounter.

Yet the “errant cinnamon tint” simultaneously complicates that survival by linking her body further with the macaque monkey’s “burnt-red hair.” This color that marks her as half-white is also what associates her with an animal, continuing to threaten her survival after the war. Little Dog recounts how, when the war was over, Ma was “a half-white child in Go Cong, which meant that the children called her ghost-girl, called Lan a traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy” (61). The same color of her skin and hair that once saved her from American guns, now becomes another target for violence. The children cut her hair and attempt to darken, or even peel, her skin—threatening to “scrape you [Ma] away” from existence (63). Listening to Ma’s story of the men who hunt monkeys, Little Dog observes that she is a “monkey” by her birth year and goes on to ask: “Why didn’t they get you then?” (242). Because Little Dog is still a child who does not know “that there was a war to begin with” (4), Ma answers:

“Why didn’t they get me? Well, ’cause I was *fast*, baby. Some monkeys are so fast, they’re more like ghosts, you know? They just—*poof*,” you open your palm in a gesture of a small explosion, “disappear.” (242)

Her words, together with the gesture reminiscent of bombing during the war, again calls attention to the threat of death that hangs over both Vietnamese bodies and animal ones. Her explanation notes that the transformation into something “like ghosts” is a condition of survival, recalling her position as a “ghost-girl” in her post-war hometown. Surviving as a Vietnamese American refugee becomes something “ghostly” still, “disappear[ing]” from their own part in history even as they remain alive, into a state of being “stuck” that the taxidermy buck points to.

Ma is haunted by and paralleled with animal images, which embody the historical violence and dehumanization of the Vietnam War. Little Dog's project of "mourning" her therefore becomes a mourning of that history of loss, forgotten in American narratives of the war but present in refugee memories. These animal figures that signal haunting remains of history, however, are those that are hunted, taxidermized, burnt and consumed. To occupy a body that can be conflated with those vulnerable animals, even figuratively, risks reliving past violence and threatens present survival. It is perhaps understandable, then, that Ma's reaction to these memories is to deliberately distance her human body from haunting animal ones. Ma's horror at the taxidermy buck leads her to verbally insist that "a corpse should go away," in order to regain a distance between living beings in the present and a haunting past that should, literally and metaphorically, be buried and gone. Ma's observation of the burnt pig "clip[s]" her laugh and renders her silent—but she turns her attention instead to "recount[ing] our money" for groceries, choosing to focus on their present living within the U.S. and turn away from the painful reminder of war.

In each instance, Ma is unsettled by the haunting experience where human bodies are associated with animal images, past deaths breaking into the present. Her following reaction is to reinstate the boundary between the two sides, to keep herself human and alive, separate from the past that haunts and transforms her into another animal, or a ghost. These responses lead to the moment where she tells Little Dog, "I'm not a monster" (13):

That time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother."

[...] I put down the book. The heads of the green beans went on

snapping. They thunked in the steel sink like fingers. “You’re not a monster,” I said.

But I lied.

What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.

I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war. [...]

I don’t know. (13)

Differentiating the human mother from the hybrid body of “monster,” which Little Dog defines as “an animal with myriad origins,” Ma rejects the threatening conflation between human and animal. By denying the name “monster,” Ma rejects what she saw in the taxidermy buck and the butcher’s pig, also “monstrous” moments where human bodies are fused over animal images. This refusal of both “monstrosity” in her wartime memories surfacing over animal images, and calling herself a “monster” haunted by and merged with animal figures, serves to distance her past from the present, her traumatic experience of the Vietnam War from her current life in the U.S. and mother-son relationship with Little Dog.

Yet Little Dog responds to Ma’s statement with the observation that “a monster is not such a terrible thing to be,” accepting the hybridity of monster as opposed to denying the animal images and the unresolved history they represent. In order to better understand this suggestion, it should be noted that for Little Dog, mourning Ma’s body becomes mourning his own body as well: “I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son” (10). To speak about a “body that used

to be yours” first seems to point to a biological similarity, a child’s body formed out of the mother’s. Yet Little Dog expands this connection by calling back on the metaphor of bullets as memories of war, embedded and “ricochet[ing]” inside Ma’s body. Later in *On Earth*, Little Dog notes that a bullet “older even than himself” now exists inside his own body, which “had merely wrapped around the metal shard” (77). Little Dog’s physical conception is preceded by the bullet wound of Ma’s experience during the war; it is not the child that entered “my mother’s womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around” (77).

Espiritu observes in her study that second-generation Vietnamese American children, even if they did not experience war and migration directly, inherit those memories in the form of a “shifting specter that hover over personal heartaches, family tensions and dissolution, and/or economic insecurities,” affecting their family life as well as their own tenuous identity as both Vietnamese and American (141). For Little Dog, the ghostly animals that haunt Ma—one of “indirect, quiet, or even wordless ways that subjugated histories get told” (Espiritu 180)—are inherited by the son to become part of his embodied history. This trace of traumatic history is compared to a bullet wound, and connects the mother and son with matching scarring, the child’s flesh that “bloom[s]” to close the wound mirroring the mother’s body “enclos[ing]” the ricochet inside her flesh (Vuong, “A Letter”). By “writing you” in his work, Little Dog is also writing and mourning his inherited boy “that used to be yours”; in this regard, his project resembles “the position of self-mourners” Nguyễn-Vo argues for Vietnamese refugees, “because no one else mourns us” (170).

The work of mourning Ma's losses that Little Dog inherited, however, is complicated further when *On Earth's* opening chapter gives glimpses of yet another way those memories are transmitted. Little Dog remembers Ma's horror, silence, and stories of the war—but further, her trauma inflicts itself directly on Little Dog's body through domestic violence that begins when he is four years old. This violence is something he does not understand then, and only later recognizes as another mark of Ma's PTSD, its "monstrous origin" in the war. With age, Little Dog learns to stand up to Ma and tell her to stop; he recounts that "we both knew you'd never hit me again" from that moment (12). Yet memories of violence already taken place still remain and haunt Little Dog as another trauma, leading him to ask: "When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?" (12). The history that seemed to connect the mother and child's body under a shared wound, simultaneously damages their relationship when that historical violence refracts into something inflicted *by* the mother.

The complexity of the loss that Little Dog inherited is what troubles his own mourning. Denying the name "monster" may help Ma safely distance herself from her past trauma, but for Little Dog, it risks erasing her part in the violence she inflicted on him. The beatings Little Dog experienced, and the "monstrous origin" that precedes them, cannot be separated from his memories of Ma. Even his acknowledgment that she is not a monster is framed by her pruning of green beans—a chore that takes on a surprisingly violent tone with "snapping" heads and cutting "fingers." Ma's very attempt to keep haunting memories at bay reveals another history of violence that

once led a young, bruised Little Dog to declare, “I don’t want you to be my mom anymore [...] You’re a monster” (127).

Hopefully Retelling a Hopeless Past

If Little Dog is to contend with “what you left behind,” that is, the violence he experienced and the trauma of war that precedes it, his mourning must begin from that “monstrosity” that cannot be entirely separated from his relationship with Ma. He thereby concludes the first chapter by stating that “You’re a mother, Ma. You’re also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can’t turn away from you” (*On Earth* 14). The idea that they are both “monsters” is repeatedly presented through the text, in deliberate juxtapositions between animal images and human characters. The taxidermy buck and the butcher’s pig emerge from memories with Ma, in moments of haunting that she experiences with horror. The “colony of monarch butterflies [...] beginning their journey south” (4), on the other hand, enter Little Dog’s text as an abrupt, almost incongruent presence.

Little Dog’s personal address to his mother briefly shifts into something that resembles a nature documentary, detachedly observing the monarch butterflies preparing to migrate “[s]omewhere over Michigan,” far from Little Dog and Ma’s present home of Hartford, Connecticut. But by noting the butterflies’ vulnerability to their surroundings, that it would “only take[] a single night of frost to kill off a generation” (4), Little Dog opens a possible metaphorical connection between the image of butterflies and his family history. The observation is immediately followed by another scene from Little Dog’s memory, when he surprised Ma with a “prank, leap[ing] out

at you from behind the hallway door, shouting ‘Boom!’” (4). As “an American boy parroting what I saw on TV” (4), Little Dog unknowingly reminds her of the air strikes and explosions of the Vietnam War—large scale military violence that has similarly devastating consequences for the people as the “single night of frost” has on the monarch butterflies. Similar to how hunted macaque monkeys and Vietnamese bodies are intertwined by Little Dog’s narrative, Vietnamese refugees fleeing the war and its aftermaths are superimposed onto monarch butterflies fleeing winter. The concluding comment that “[to] live, then, is a matter of time, of timing” becomes a statement applicable to either human or animal, both vulnerable bodies that only survive their migration and make it across to their destination with fortunate “timing” (4).

Monarch butterflies’ migration intersects with Ma and Little Dog’s memories, to draw a relation between their journey south and the family’s refugee passage from Vietnam to America. Little Dog, however, extends this metaphor further to parallel the “yearly” repeating nature of migration with his own writing, which seeks to figuratively “return” to Ma through his letters, tracing back Ma’s trauma and the overlooked history of the Vietnam War. He observes that monarch butterflies lay eggs along their migratory route, and those offspring travel north again when the winter has passed while the parents themselves will perish: “Only their children return; only the future revisits the past” (8). This second generation of monarchs inherit the “memory of family members lost from the initial winter [...] woven into their genes” (12), and will make their own journey south in time, fleeing winter to begin the cycle once more. If Ma’s experience of the war is the “initial winter”

that she escaped, that history is now “woven into” Little Dog’s inherited and wounded body, felt as a “bullet” lodged inside him since birth. The parents do not “return”—Espiritu notes that “silence [...] prevail[s] within refugee families,” the first generation refusing to tell stories from the war both to safely conform to the American narrative and protect their family from the painful past (140, 144-47). As the next generation, Little Dog is charged with the task of returning to that past deliberately, in order to understand his own experience of domestic violence and the war that looms beyond it.

Describing the migration of monarch butterflies across generations, Little Dog poses two questions that mirror each other: “What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life? [...] What is a country but a life sentence?” (8-9). The monarch butterflies’ migration from Canada and the U.S. to central Mexico, a journey “more than the length of this country,” points to a kind of transnational migration and survival—also applicable to the Vietnamese refugees’ lives. This often-celebrated “gift” of survival offered by the “refuge” nation cannot be separated from the traumatic history of displacement. The war transforms the refugees’ country of origin into a “life sentence” of haunting memories that follow them (9); it is not incidental that the roasted pig’s human-like remains divides his two questions, presenting how “life” in America may still be a “life sentence” of trauma. Yet Little Dog plays on the multiple definitions of the word “sentence,” to acknowledge such persecuting presence of the past but also to insist that his act of writing literal “sentences” might transform that past into new stories of their survival in America, a “borderless” continuation of life. He observes that even if migration is by nature repetitive, the journey is not necessarily identical for each generation

of monarchs, and describes those slight changes that occur with each cycle as a continuation of writing: “If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin [...] something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron” (10). In migration, where one sentence or “life” ends is where another begins, memories of loss passed onto the next generation, who would then return to those losses to yet again create something new in the present.

How can returning and contending with past memories of loss, as a “mourning” in a broad sense, lead to new creation? Little Dog presents a precedent for his textual “return” to the past in his grandmother Lan’s tales from his childhood, “[s]cenes from the war, mythologies of manlike monkeys, of ancient ghost catchers [and] personal stories” (22). Lan, who suffers from worsened schizophrenia since the war, repeats her stories often, so much so that Little Dog nearly memorizes them and “mouth[s] along with the sentences, as if watching a film for the umpteenth time” (22). From this, Little Dog notices that Lan’s stories shift slightly with each telling:

Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed.

Lan, through her stories, was also traveling in a spiral. As I listened, there would be moments when the story would change—not much, just a miniscule detail, the time of the day, the color of someone’s shirt, two air raids instead of three, an AK-47 instead of a 9mm, the daughter laughing, not crying. Shifts in the narrative would occur—the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen. Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone. “Make me young again,” Lan said. “Make me black again, not snow like this, Little Dog.” (27-28)

Lan’s repeated storytelling, which Little Dog comprehends as “travelling in a

spiral,” recounts but at the same time changes the past she has lived through by a “miniscule” amount. When experiences contained in Lan’s “fractured” mind are put in to words (23), they are no longer solely factual events from a “fixed and dormant” past but become “something new” for the present, in the form of her storytelling. It is significant that Little Dog is tasked with plucking Lan’s grey hairs when she relates these stories, in order to “[m]ake Grandma young today” (22). His listening is transformed into a collaborative work rather than a passive act; Little Dog remembers those stories as a “movie made by Lan’s words and animated by my imagination,” during which “the blank walls around us [...] open into [landscapes,] the plaster disintegrating to reveal the past behind it” (22). The description of this experience reveals that making Lan “young” again is fulfilled on two different ways. On the surface, visual signs of aging—the grey hairs that look like “snow”—are removed to make her “black again.” But further, telling Little Dog of her younger self in Vietnam brings that past into the present, so that Little Dog feels himself “standing next to [a younger Lan] as her purple dress swayed in the smoky bar,” having “forgotten myself into her story” (23).

Lan’s stories, if in fragments, has the effect of bringing the past “alive,” something materially felt by Little Dog through her words—an effect that may be comparable to a “mourning” of history as proposed by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian with regards to Walter Benjamin’s formulation of historiography. The central argument of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) is that the past is perceived only as “an image which flashes up at the instant [...] and is never seen again” (255); yet it should not be treated as an irretrievable and eternal image separate from the

present (262). Rather, Benjamin urges that the brief image of the past should be “seized [...] by the present as one of its own concerns” (255), as part of the present from which history is written (262). Eng and Kazanjian, taking Benjamin’s engagement with loss in historiography, asserts that his theory presents a way of “mourning what remains of lost histories as well as histories of loss” (1). Psychoanalytic frame of mourning and melancholia, first suggested by Freud, presupposes that the two concepts are opposing responses to loss. Eng and Kazanjian note, however, that not only is there a continuity between the two, but that melancholia’s “continuous engagement with loss and its remains” is precisely what opens a creative possibility of “rewriting the past as well as [...] re-imagining the future” (4). A revised definition of mourning that encompasses such melancholic attachments thus becomes a “creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history” (2). The “hopelessness” of grasping the past coexists with the “hope” that motivates the “creative process [of] animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies” (1); returning to those sites of loss allows “the past [to] remain[] steadfastly alive for the political work of the present” (5).

Lan’s stories, in Little Dog’s observation, enable her to “travel[] in a spiral” and figuratively return to the past, to recover a lived history that is so often erased in public, American accounts of the Vietnam War. Through the repetition of her stories, the past is continuously remembered within the family, passed down from Lan to Little Dog. He would later recall Lan’s stories once more; a young Little Dog is woken by a blizzard raging outside their home, and Lan soothes him by telling him again of how “One woman

hold her daughter [...] on a dirt road” (191). The story that first accompanied the removal of figurative “snow” that is Lan’s white hair, now becomes a measure of protection against actual snow as Little Dog is calmed by her voice. Lan’s sentences here, rather than progressing the story, keep breaking off into a repetition of “her name,” Rose, “till the street below glowed white, erasing everything that had a name” (191). The seemingly meaningless repetition gains significance when Little Dog describes the blizzard as “erasing everything that had a name.” By repeating her daughter’s name, Lan insists on the “name” as a continuously voiced presence against an external force that attempts to erase their existence; the history of Lan and Ma, which threatens to be forgotten alongside the Vietnamese cost of the war, is continuously reminded and remembered, kept “steadfastly alive” in Lan’s stories for Little Dog.

The repetitions and alterations within Lan’s stories may appear to be a symptom of her fractured mind; but with the slight “shift” of “the daughter laughing, not crying,” Lan is not simply reflecting the damage of war but “creating something new” out of the it, rewriting and reimagining the past. Inserted between Lan’s memory of the American soldiers is a brief scene where Lan imagines “another world” without helicopters or soldiers, where she is not held at gunpoint but “only going for a walk in the warm spring evening” (40). Even as she speaks of her experience during the war, Lan is voicing a world without it into existence, where she can tell her baby daughter stories not of violence, but only of a mother’s survival and self-identification by “nam[ing] herself after a flower” (40-41). The daughter’s “laugh” that seems dissonant within the memory of guns and American soldiers, reveals

a desire that briefly—and if falsely—changes the past within its retelling, presenting a hope for joy alongside a painful experience.

Little Dog's writing assembled from Lan and Ma's stories, however, is not exactly the same as Lan's own mode of storytelling. Viet Thanh Nguyen cautions that "war stories" of the Vietnam War and refugee narratives could too easily become one-dimensional tales of recuperation and humanization; he warns against "steal[ing] the stories of those victims, ghosts, and survivors, or mak[ing] them up [...] speaking for others is a simple and insufficient notion" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 222). The obligation still stands to remember forcefully forgotten Vietnamese losses; but Nguyễn-Vo emphasizes that such project of mourning should not result in "consum[ing] the dead [...] to justify stories about ourselves" (170).

Little Dog is aware of such risk; returning to Barthes' mourning of his own mother, he recounts how Barthes regards writing the mother as an attempt to "*glorify* [the mother's body], *to embellish it*" (*On Earth* 85). Little Dog partly subscribes to this definition, stating that he "want[s] this to be true" (85). But when the memory of massaging Ma's back after a workday is juxtaposed with Barthes' idea, Little Dog admits that "the physical fact of your body resists my moving it" (85). There still remains a distance between his "translat[ion]" in writing and the mother's actual "body," representing all of her experiences that he will never know. "Mourning" the mother and the grandmother's experience is not simply a matter of taking an absolute truth and glorifying it, but a difficult process that recognizes this impossible distance, that "by writing [...] I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once" (85).

His wariness of this “marring” that seems inevitable despite his intention to preserve, is hinted by how his text often hesitates or negates itself by the next sentence. From the beginning, he proposes that he cannot separate his relationship with Ma from the “monstrous origins” of war that affected it, and speculates the associative relation between the violence he experienced and Ma’s PTSD: “I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it [...] Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war” (13). But his immediately following statement is that “I don’t know” (13)—cautious of either justifying the violence he suffered as a mode of protection, or forming an inadvertent diagnosis of trauma that, after all, is something he does not fully understand. In a similar instance, he explains that Lan’s “spiral” of stories may be her way of perceiving and preserving the history she experienced; by the end, however, he admits that “the truth is I don’t know, Ma. I have theories I write down then erase and walk away” (28). Indeed, Little Dog’s hesitation and self-doubt is already signalled in the continuous cycle of letter-writing, erasing and writing again, that forms the very opening sentence of the novel: “Let me begin again” (3). The statement hints that while this is the beginning of this one letter, there exists “previous draft[s] of this letter, one I’ve since deleted” (15).

By the end of the chapter where Lan’s tale of American soldiers and the scene of macaque hunting converge into a single story of violence, Little Dog comments that by feeding on the brain of the monkey, the men are consuming its “memories” (43):

The men will eat until the animal is empty, the monkey slowing as they

spoon, its limbs heavy and listless. When nothing's left, when all of its memories dissolve into the men's bloodstreams, the monkey dies.

Who will be lost in the story we tell ourselves? Who will be lost in ourselves? A story, after all, is a kind of swallowing. To open a mouth, in speech, is to leave only the bones, which remain untold. It is a beautiful country because you are still breathing.

Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. Don't shoot. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. No bang bang.

The dissolution of memories constitutes the animal's death. Following this observation, Little Dog questions his own act of linking the macaque and his family to form a new story to tell. If the parallel so far was only between the hunted animal and his Vietnamese family, the juxtaposition of men consuming the macaque and the act of storytelling as "swallowing" reveals that stories may risk consuming memories into further oblivion, despite their intent to remember and preserve. Little Dog's recognition that even "mourning" may result in a different kind of violence seems to make him falter, knowing that the story he writes may become a metaphorical "consumption" of Ma and Lan's memories. Even after putting certain memories into speech—or in writing, as Little Dog does—there will always be other parts to their history that "remain untold" and unknown to him.

Nguyễn-Vo argues that in order to avoid the utter consumption of the dead, "[we] must respect their radical alterity [...] the indeterminacy of various histories" (172). Her argument for this alterity is partially based upon Derrida's notion of mourning the other. His *Work of Mourning*—texts that mourn his friends and, at the same time, question how such mourning may be carried out properly, if at all—is motivated by the paradox of an impossible mourning. Derrida delineates the "unbearable paradox of alterity" (159) as a state where a right way of speaking for the dead seems non-existent,

yet the mourner is compelled to speak than forget and “risk[] making [the dead] disappear again” (45). Certain internalization of the lost other into the speaking subject ‘I’ is inevitable: “it is only ‘in us’ that the dead may speak [...] if we are to give the dead anything it can now be only in us, the living” (Brault and Naas 9). Yet speaking of, or as, the other cannot be perfected; such mourning threatens to “reduce[] [the other] to images ‘in us’” (11) rather than preserve “the otherness of the other, their irreducibility to ourselves” (Kirkby 466). The contradiction of “having to do and not do both at once” (Derrida 45), seems to foreclose the possibility to mourn altogether.

Little Dog’s writing has begun from a similar paradox. At the very moment he declares his intention to “reach you,” his mother, by writing the memories shared between them, he realizes that he cannot—“each word I put down is one word further from where you are” (*On Earth* 3). Yet Little Dog’s writing still continues to “begin again” in new drafts of letters, returning to the past despite the seeming futility of his efforts. Derridean mourning insists on holding such “ongoing conversation with the dead,” in order to preserve the other’s trace of “having *already* spoken” (Kirkby 467). The “image” of the lost other, internalized by the mourning subject, is not static but holds a “look” that belongs to the dead. Held responsible by that gaze, the subject bears the duty of—and is transformed by—engaging with the dead, “reading and re-reading [...] writing and thinking and creating in relation to the words and ideas of the other” (471). Little Dog’s repeated “beginning again” indicates such continuous “work” of mourning negotiates between the necessity of remembering and the risk of consuming another’s experience for his own (3).

Little Dog's connection between storytelling and swallowing is preceded by a series of similarities shared between human and macaque monkeys, "traits once thought attributable only to humans" but found in the animal as well (43). Among them is the observation that "[t]hey are able to recall past images and apply them to current problem solving. In other words, macaques employ memory in order to survive" (43). Memory and putting memory into language is crucial to survival for both animal and human—an example of which Little Dog offers immediately before. Lan, faced with American soldiers who do not understand her attempt to communicate in Vietnamese, appeals to them in her broken English, presumably picked up during her time in Saigon: "No bang bang. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won" (42). Compared to the complete consumption of memories in the men's hunting and feeding, which defines the macaque's "death," the capacity for memory, "creativity, even language" (42) to tell stories is what makes survival possible.

The hesitating and repeated beginnings of Little Dog's letters, then, is a way of "mourning" these histories of loss and recovering them into the present as something "alive" despite the threat of consumption it involves. His reflection that storytelling may swallow Lan's story, simultaneously gives way to Lan's voice saying the words "*Yoo Et Aye numbuh won*" again, picking up where Lan's speech had faded out in fear before (42). Little Dog may only be able to tell Ma and Lan's stories from his own perspective, but his writing also offers a space to reveal the resounding presence of Lan's voice itself, a trace of her "having *already* spoken." The experience she is speaking of cannot be known completely and will "remain untold"—reflected in the broken English that obscures the meaning of her sentence—but the very

presence of that voice echoes the thought that “you are still breathing.” Lan and Ma survived, and their stories, too, remain alive in text.

Little Dog’s writing thus continues to travel between the “hopelessness” of those histories’ otherness unknown to him, and the “hope” that despite the risk, his creation may become a form of remembrance and preservation, similar to the way Lan’s stories had brought the past alive for him. This oscillation takes the form of letters that are written even when it is impossible for them to actually reach Ma. Little Dog often demands an answer from Ma, asking if she, too, remembers or understands (49, 229); yet he knows that the chances of her “ma[king] it this far in this letter” is extremely slim (240). The letters are in English, which Ma cannot read; literacy is a “privilege you [Ma] made possible for me with what you lost” (240). Even so, it is very the impossibility of the letter, its hovering state between Little Dog and Ma, that indicates the “impossible” mourning Little Dog attempts nonetheless. He is repeatedly addressing and thereby “returning” to Ma, without putting a definite end to the process by entirely subsuming Ma’s story as his own, conscious of a distance that divides them.

This unresolved suspension, while necessary to properly “mourn” Ma, also signals the violence Little Dog experienced from her—and the difficulty of recovering from those painful experiences. Later in the novel, Little Dog remembers Lan’s remedy of rolling a warm boiled egg across his bruised face after Ma had “flung an empty ceramic teapot that exploded on the boy’s cheek” (105). After, Lan instructs Little Dog to eat the egg: “[y]our bruises are inside it now. Swallow and it won’t hurt anymore” (106). This healing property of the egg is undercut by Little Dog’s admission by the end of the paragraph,

that “[h]e is eating still” (106). The remedy does not remove the pain of the experience; by “eating still,” his letter-writing is not only telling stories as a “kind of swallowing” with regards to Lan and Ma’s stories, but also “swallowing” his own memories of domestic violence that he cannot directly communicate to Ma.

To imagine a time when “it won’t hurt anymore” is an impossible task, much like sending a letter that would actually reach Ma. It is why Little Dog admits that his fantasy becomes “careless” at times: “Sometimes, when I’m careless, I think survival is easy [...] Sometimes, when I’m careless, I believe the wound is also the place where the skin reenounters itself” (137). If his writing is mourning such wounding experiences, by reviving the loss into the present, Little Dog realizes that “knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it,” let alone close it (62). The wound-like distance between him and Ma, torn by each of their memories of violence, always remains in the impossible distance the form of an unanswered letter evokes. The letters will not offer an easy, perfect “reencounter” of the wound healing itself.

Thus, even as Little Dog imagines a hopeful, almost fantastic conclusion to his letter, it is grounded by the distance that stands between him and Ma, impossible to bridge. By the end of the first chapter, Little Dog fully merges the monarch butterflies and the refugee bodies into a single image, to imagine a different kind of future for him and Ma (14):

Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed, their tiny black-and-red wings jittering like debris that kept blowing, for thousands of miles across the sky, so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their

wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof.

“That’s so good to know, baby.” You stared off, stone-faced, over my shoulder, the dress held to your chest. “That’s so good.”

In this image, monarch butterflies are escaping not winter but the “napalm clouds” of the Vietnam War—their migratory route equated to the Vietnamese refugees’ flight. Little Dog imagines that after their journey away from fire and toward “clean, cool air,” they no longer are debris or by-products of war, but become “only a family” much like his own (14). Their “fireproof” wings point to a fantastic, hopeful future where the haunting memories of war seem to have healed over, no longer having an effect on the “unscathed” survivor. The word “fireproof,” however, pulls a memory from the past even as it attempts to move forward into a future where those memories are forgotten. The word references the time Little Dog and Ma went “splurging” at a Goodwill store (9), where they discovered a white dress that Ma considers buying. “[Her] eyes glazed and white” as her trauma resurfaces, Ma holds out the dress to Little Dog and asks him if the tag says the material is “fireproof” (13). Too young to be able to read, Little Dog tells Ma it is fireproof anyway.

Even as Little Dog imagines an almost magical resolution, the “fireproof” wings remind him that they are only his imagination, and that the haunting presence of the past persists even through that imagined future—placing him back in time when Ma’s voice at the Goodwill store cuts into the imagined scenery. The hopeful future Little Dog builds by transforming the violent “monstrosity” of the past into imagined survival of “monster” bodies, paradoxically points back to the past it cannot be freed from. But what Little Dog remembers from being pulled back into a past memory, is how Ma told

him “That’s so good.” The memory reveals that the “good” lie he told is what allows her to buy the dress in spite of her trauma. The leap from pain and violence into a lie or fantasy, as in the imagined monarch butterflies taking flight from Vietnam, offers a tentative hope that does not forget but transforms the violence of the past into present joy that allows Ma and Little Dog to keep on living through that violence—the small, “good” moments of being able to buy a dress despite the war.

II. Desire Beyond Loss

Hunted Animals

I would like to begin this chapter with the observation that there is another aspect of Little Dog's life that names him a "monster," besides his inheritance of Ma's traumatic memories of the Vietnam War (*On Earth* 14). Little Dog mentions the "fireproof" white dress as part of a memory shared between him and Ma; yet later, he recalls something else about the dress that Ma does not know about. Several days from their purchase at Goodwill, Little Dog tries on the dress himself while Ma is away at work, "thinking I would look more like you" (14). The neighborhood children spy him wearing women's clothes and bully him the next day, calling him "*freak, fairy, fag*"—words that are "also iterations of monster" that mark and ostracize him for being gay (14). Embracing the name "monster" for himself refers not only to the loss of war and the ruined relationship between him and Ma, but also his queer sexuality that comes to play a more prominent role in later parts of *On Earth*.

Turning fourteen, Little Dog finds his first job as a tobacco harvester at a farm on the outskirts of Hartford (86). Among adult men, who are "mostly [...] undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America" (88), Little Dog encounters a worker who stands out much like himself—Trevor, a white boy around his age and grandson to the farm's owner, Mr. Buford. Throughout their friendship that would eventually develop into a sexual attraction, Little Dog "learn[s] there was something even more brutal and total than work—want" (94). The brutality of loss that has prefaced Little

Dog's life as Vietnamese American refugee exists side-by-side with this newfound "want," the desire he feels for Trevor. Little Dog's narrative from this point on navigates what it means to be Vietnamese *and* queer, when his relationship with Trevor is conditioned by the family history of war and migration that precedes their encounter. Little Dog's friendship with Trevor is overlayed with Lan's stories from the war as well as the racialization of Vietnamese American refugees against white American citizens; the very relationship he desires seems to remind and repeat the historical and racial violence.

When he finally meets Little Dog face-to-face, Trevor is introduced as a boy "a head taller, his finely boned face dirt-streaked under a metal army helmet, [...] as if he had just walked out from one of Lan's stories and into my hour, somehow smiling" (94). Despite the smile that first greets Little Dog, Trevor's appearance with the army helmet echoes "one of Lan's stories"—in particular, the story he has already mentioned in his text, that of the young American soldiers who held Lan at gunpoint. Little Dog remembers Trevor's eyes as "grey irises smattered with bits of brown and ember so that [...] you could almost see, right behind you, something burning under an overcast sky" (97). The clouded sky and the fire mirror the scene Little Dog has constructed from Lan's fragmented stories, where Vietnamese huts were set on fire and, stopped by the soldiers, Lan stood in the open air and smoke as it started to rain (35-36). Reflected in Trevor's eyes, Little Dog's own shadow is placed momentarily where Lan stood in the burning field, so that although he "knew that nothing behind me was on fire, [he] turned back anyway" (97). Trevor's gaze seems to contain Lan and Ma's memory of the war and present them

back to Little Dog, Trevor himself transformed into a living figure of the past military violence that continues to haunt Little Dog's family.

When Little Dog's relationship with Trevor turns sexual, the parallel between Trevor and the American soldiers becomes further complicated by Lan's stories. Lan has told Little Dog about her time as a sex worker in Saigon, a job she takes on in order to support herself and her young daughter Mai from arranged marriage. Her words convey "barbed pride" and grief over the choice she had to make (46), as well as her fear and unease of the soldiers she had to take on as clients. She remembers how their army boots "sounded like bodies dropping, making her flinch under their searching hands" (47); the sexual act she must depend on to make a living is transformed into an extension of the violence and death caused by war.

In 1967, however, Lan meets an American soldier named Paul, with whom she "fell in love, and a year later, [...] married right there in the city's central courthouse" (46). Little Dog takes note that Paul "was not her client" (46). Rather than the sexual contact of the "client" that reflects and re-enacts the ongoing war, Paul and Lan bond as a "Virginian farmboy [and] a farmgirl, as it happens, from Go Cong" (46), discovering grounds for companionship in "their shared rural childhoods [... and finding] themselves transplants in a decadent and disorienting city besieged by bombing raids" (48). In Little Dog's present time, he meets Trevor on a tobacco farm in the rural neighborhood removed from the city of Hartford, recalling the background that first allowed Lan and Paul to build a relationship beyond the violence of war. Little Dog's first impression of Trevor, as a soldier come alive from Lan's past experiences, thus bears another possibility. The parallel may point to

him being someone like Paul, and recall the genuine affection shared between him and Lan, an “exuberance so rare it looks fake” glimpsed in a polaroid Paul kept through all those years (54).

But if Trevor with his army helmet can simultaneously invoke Lan’s trauma of war and her affection for Paul, Trevor as an echo of Paul also registers an ambivalence between Paul’s affection for Little Dog as his grandson and their racial difference that complicates that affection. Little Dog remembers visiting Paul in Virginia, thinking him his grandfather. At the same time, he also recalls how they met a neighbor while walking Paul’s dog, and how the woman immediately assumed that Paul hired a “dog boy” (64). It is only when Paul clarifies that Little Dog is his grandson that the woman finds “[his] body now legible” (65). This memory is only one of many instances that Little Dog finds himself defined by racial stereotypes, as Vietnamese American.

In the early 1970s, Paul is called back to the U.S. by his family and is prevented from returning to Lan as the war ended in American defeat. They remain separated until Paul, now remarried, receives news that “there was a woman with a marriage certificate with his name on it looking for him in a Philippines refugee camp” (212). Following this letter, the family’s arrival in the U.S. recontextualizes Paul’s presence as well as his relationship with Lan, through the color of their skin: “color was one of the first things we knew of yet knew nothing about. Once we stepped inside [Hartford’s] predominantly Latinx neighborhood [...] the rules of color, and with it our faces, had changed” (51). The family learns that not only does the shade of their skin defines how they are perceived just as much as their English, but that those

very shades have been redefined in this new American context. Among their relatively dark-skinned neighbors Lan turns “lighter” (51); Ma, who was already ostracized in Vietnam as half-white and half-Vietnamese, now becomes light enough to “‘pass’ for white” (51), “look[s] the part” so much so that a store clerk asks her whether Little Dog is “yours or adopted” (52). Growing up in Hartford, Little Dog comes to recognize his family as Vietnamese and therefore “yellow” among their neighbors and friends, and further, learns that the same rules privilege “whiteness” over other colors.

These “rules of color” most notably play out in the workplace of the nail salon where the workers and customers are racially divided. The salon, where mostly Vietnamese immigrant workers converge, is remembered in Little Dog’s memory as a place for sharing Vietnamese food and “folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country” (80). The customers of the nail salon, on the other hand, are hinted to be mostly white, affluent enough to employ such services. Little Dog recalls a time when a friend, whose “dad was a light-skinned Dominican, his ma a black Cuban,” invited his family to their church service (58). The church, “where no one asked them why they rolled their r’s or where they *really* came from” (58), lets Latin American neighbors gather and enjoy a brief reprieve from exclusion based upon their skin and language. While Little Dog and Ma are the only Vietnamese visitors, they are allowed the same freedom “to lose yourself and not be wrong” within the service and the singing (59). Yet when they return from church and Ma resumes her work at the nail salon, the “rubber mannequin hands” she uses for manicure practice are “pink and beige, the only shades they came in”—excluding the “darker hands in the Ramirezes’ congregation” and, implicitly,

those of his Vietnamese family and neighbors as well.

Recontextualized through the family's arrival as "immigrants" in the U.S., the rural farm does not remain as a place of companionship across enemy lines as it had for Lan and Paul. The tobacco farm is also a place run by Trevor's grandfather, Mr. Buford, whose appearance reminds Little Dog of "that maniac sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket*" (89). The farm in Little Dog's experience is not simply a place of friendship with other workers and Trevor, but also where he glimpses the divide between the white owner and the immigrant workers. Working alongside them, Little Dog draws a connection between the farm and the nail salon as both places where immigrant workers "lower[] oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable" (91); the divide between client and worker is imbued with racial hierarchy.

Paul, as white and American, is also transformed into someone who holds certain power not available to his Vietnamese family. It is implied that he helped Lan enter the country from the Philippine resettlement camps, at a time when American policies were turning more restrictive, sorting between "desirable" refugees and those "unworthy" and indefinitely confined; those limited refugees allowed to enter included "family members of [...] persons already in the United States" with "their Amerasian children" (Espiritu 54-56). Little Dog, aware of his position as "yellow" Vietnamese, comes to view the presence of this white American grandfather as his "tether to this country": someone who has "a face, an identity, a man who could read and write, [...] whom I was a part of, whose American name ran inside my blood" (55). His description of Paul once again notes that a "face" of certain color is what provides identity, becoming "part of" America as a proper

citizen.

Yet this “cord [is] cut” (55) for Little Dog when Ma reveals that Paul is not actually her father, nor his grandfather. She tells him the truth before one of their visits to Paul, that Lan was already pregnant when they met and Ma’s biological father remains “just another American john—faceless, nameless, less. [...] nobody” (55). The awareness of his racialized belonging, made even more tenuous by this “less”-ened family tree, conditions Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor, a white American boy “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity” (203).

Little Dog rediscovers his family history of war within Trevor; yet he also seeks something from him that he has lost with Ma’s revelation, a “tether” that materializes in the gaze directed toward him. When Trevor regards him with interest, Little Dog realizes that he “[is] seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone” (96). As a Vietnamese American child who has so far perceived himself as “[y]ellow and barely there” (153), Little Dog regards this gaze as something that can “fix me to the world I felt only halfway inside of” (96). When the gaze culminates into their sexual relationship, “queer” and therefore dangerous and vulnerable, Little Dog recognizes that Trevor’s “whiteness” provides the very grounds on which their relationship can continue: “He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white [...] this was why there was space for us” (111). Having a “space” to explore their desires, if only in a “broken down mobile home,” is still a “privilege” for Little Dog (112). This recognition of Trevor’s whiteness simultaneously confirms Little Dog’s own relative position: “He was white. I was yellow” (112).

The power that accompanies American “whiteness” complicates

Trevor's gaze; on the one hand, it grants Little Dog a measure of belonging as a subject part of the American landscape, but on the other, it marks him as an object seen, desired, and made possible to harm. As Little Dog observes later, "to be seen allows you to be hunted" (238)—and Trevor is someone who actively hunts animals. As Little Dog is further involved with Trevor, animal images are reintroduced into his narrative with a notable shift. Before, dead and injured animals have merged with past memories of human bodies from the Vietnam War, to become a haunting reminder of violence that remains with Ma and is inherited by Little Dog. Trevor, on the other hand, is "an American boy with a gun" (116)—he is a hunter who wields violence *against* animals, producing those injured and dead bodies that have haunted Ma and Little Dog. Memories of Trevor are scattered with such moments of violence: he hunts squirrels, skins raccoons, fires at a sparrow to pick up its "one-winged" body "thrashing in black dirt [...] smoldering" (135), and routinely shoots up an old park bench for target practice (116).

Situated inside Trevor's destruction of the park bench is another memory, of Mr. Buford's story about his hunting days in Montana. Buford tells the two children how he once found a moose caught in his trap by the hind leg. He describes that the animal's "groan[] against its body" was "[a]lmost like a man's [...] like you and me" (117). As Buford continues to narrate how the moose "charged, tearing its leg clean off [...] hobbling on what was left of itself," Little Dog repeats his statement in response: "Like you and me, I said to no one" (117). The phrase in Buford's use indicates that the animal's voice is not so different from a human's, like those of himself, Trevor, or Little Dog. When Little Dog repeats it, however, the phrase is

directed to “no one”—opening the possibility that he is speaking to a “you” other than Trevor or Buford, the overarching “you” of his letters, his mother. The animal’s injured body and its escape “on what [is] left of itself” draws a parallel with the condition of the refugee, who has been wounded by the violence of war and escapes still bearing those lasting marks, leaving behind a part of themselves—their village, homeland, people.

This fleeting moment where the moose becomes another animal image for the history of war and refugees, is immediately followed by the remnants of Trevor’s target practice in the backyard: “With the back blown clean off, only the legs remained on the bench. Four legs, without a body” (117). The bench is an inanimate object, yet consists of “four legs” and a “body,” drawing a fleeting parallel with the moose—except this body is now nearly completely destroyed by Trevor. There is not even a body that can articulate its pain in a human-like voice, but only the unmoving legs that remain like the corpse of an animal, or aftermath of war. Their difference in perspective becomes more apparent by this action, as Trevor and his grandfather Buford are presented as hunters and Little Dog, Ma, and grandmother Lan are placed in the position of the hunted, the targets.

Like the ambiguity of Trevor’s first impression as a “soldier,” however, Trevor as a “hunter” is not a straightforward distinction, nor does it solely indicate power. From his present time of writing, Little Dog observes that Trevor’s relish in guns and hunting had also become a form of confinement: “to be an American boy, and then an American boy with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to another” (116). The “cage” that constrains him to be white, American and violent, takes on a more concrete shape with the

encounter with Trevor's "vodka-soaked old man" (94). Trevor's father, alcoholic and abusive but also weakened with age, holds what pride he has left in having once been "the best seal trainer at SeaWorld": "Your mother was in the stands and I lifted her off her seat with my routine. My Navy Seals, them pups. I was the general of seals" (142). The human mastery over animal bodies, in training the seals to perform tricks for entertainment, is aligned with military discipline, appointing himself a "general" over his metaphorical "Navy Seal" troop. These two aspects are linked to his relationship with Trevor's mother, as an expression of his heterosexual, masculine capability—the powerful man who impresses the woman through his militaristic command over animal bodies. His emphasis on being a "man" thus ties together animal-human hierarchy, patriarchal marriage structure, and military violence.

These parallels further take on a racial note when the father asks Trevor if "[t]hat China boy [is] with you," referring to Little Dog who has by then made a habit of visiting Trevor at his mobile home (142). Well knowing that Little Dog is present, the father proceeds to talk about Trevor's uncle James, who served in the Vietnam War:

"Good man, made of bone, your uncle. Bone and salt. He whooped them in that jungle. He did good for us. He burned them up. You know that, Trev? That's what it is." He went back to being motionless, his lips moved without affecting any part of his face. "He told you yet? How he burned up four of them in a ditch with gasoline? He told me that on his wedding night, can you believe it?" (143)

The first misidentification between Asian ethnicities in calling Little Dog "Chinese," is followed up by an accidentally correct identification by mentioning what James did in the "jungle" in front of Little Dog, a second-

generation Vietnamese refugee. Being a “[g]ood man”—that is, white, American, patriotic and violently masculine—depends not only on his superiority over animals but over racial others as well. The horrifying violence of war that Little Dog’s family has experienced, becomes a heroic tale for Trevor’s father and uncle—which is again linked with heterosexual masculinity, a tale to be boasted on a “wedding night.”

The father’s need for superiority as the figurative military general, master of his animals and presumably his wife, affects his son as well. Little Dog learns that Trevor faced violence from his father since he was young, its most notable mark being the “scar on his neck” that “[h]e got [...] when he was nine; his old man, in a fit of rage, shot a nail gun at the front door and the thing ricocheted” (143). The incident shows how the violence of an American man “with a gun” directed towards animal and racial others, “ricochets” onto the weaker child as well. Trevor’s memory of violence from his father, and subsequent desire to differ from him, is what momentarily distances him from the white American masculinity and allows him to approach [align closer to] the injured animals and suffering human bodies—to Little Dog. His affection for Little Dog, which already “queers” him in terms of sexuality by diverging from the heterosexuality of the “good man,” differentiates him from the father. Partly in defiance to his father, and partly in Little Dog’s defense, Trevor cuts off his rambling anecdote about uncle James.

The father is powerless to respond when Trevor retaliates, goading him to “Go ’head, do something, make me *burn*” (144). He instead resorts to pleading, insisting that he is the one who built Trevor into a “man” stronger

than himself, the ideal man who is “[j]ust like James. [...] You a burner, you gonna burn them up” (144). The father’s emphasis on being American, militaristic and masculine, an expectation placed on Trevor as the almost stereotypically white, masculine figure, conditions their relationship; Trevor’s potential to be a “burner” would still threaten Little Dog within their relationship. Leaving the house, Trevor half-apologizes for his father’s racism, telling Little Dog to “Forget that guy, little man [...] he’s not worth it [...] The drink gets to him” (150). Their vulnerability at home—Little Dog with memories of Ma’s violence, and Trevor still living under an alcoholic father—is a similarity that allows them to build a connection. Yet at this moment, Little Dog finds that the silenced history of the Vietnam War also divides them, as “[s]ome kind of quiet sharpened between us” (150). Trevor breaks this silence by saying: “don’t do that fuckin’ silent thing, man. It’s a fag move” (150). While he seems to regret his words, the slur immediately puts a distance between Little Dog and Trevor, who still believes his own homosexuality is momentary and he is, after all, heterosexual.

Trevor holds the potential to be a hunter and “burner” as much as a lover. In continuing this relationship with him, Little Dog is marked as racially “yellow,” queer and feminine, and once again, “animal.” When Trevor and Little Dog’s relationship eventually shifts into something sexual, Little Dog expects sex to be something that will “breach new ground” away from the “rules” of the world; instead, he discovers that those rules designating race, gender, and sexuality “were already inside us” (120). Exploring “what we had seen in porn” (114), Little Dog and Trevor mimic sex where Little Dog takes on the role of the “bottom”—a term Nguyen Tan

Hoang identifies as designating the “receptive partner in anal sex” in the literal sense, but also harboring “a host of negative associations, including being weak or humiliated” (6). Nguyen observes that the affiliation of femininity with bottomhood turns the term top and bottom into more of “social roles or identities” than flexible positions; coupled with the feminization of Asian American male subjects, the sexual and racial vulnerability further complicates the subjectivity of queer Asian men who play that role (6).

A similar association of sexuality and racial identity takes place in Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor, when he is assigned the “feminine” part. Not quite knowing how to have “real” sex, they only imitate penetration first, with Little Dog holding Trevor’s penis in his fist (114); still, this position designates him as the “receptive” role from the beginning. Trevor offers to switch once, when one day, “out of nowhere, [he] asked me to top him, the way we had been doing it” (119). Before they can get to the act, however, Trevor gives up and pushes Little Dog away with the excuse that “I don’t wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can’t, man. I’m sorry, it’s not for me— [...] It’s for you. Right?” (120). Because it is “not for me,” the role becomes something assigned “for” Little Dog, defining him as the “girl” or the “bitch” of the relationship. The word “bitch” literally indicates a female dog, its gendered and animal connotations transforming Little Dog’s queer body into a “monster” one that can be conflated with an animal. Animality, femininity, and race coalesce into something Trevor must reject, being the white, American, supposedly heterosexual man, one who incredulously asks if Little Dog “[will] be really gay, like, forever” when he thinks he will “be good in a

few years” (188). Little Dog, as someone who is Vietnamese, might be “really” gay and plays the part of the bottom—the “bitch,” for Trevor—takes on all of those categories that Trevor denies to become an animal open to being hunted, the girl bound to the man, the “yellow” body that can be, and has been, obliterated by U.S. military forces.

Vulnerable Survival, Surviving Vulnerability

Little Dog is well aware of his own vulnerability within his relationship with Trevor, which reflects and enacts the racial and historical violence he and his family have experienced. Even so, he suggests a possibility that the seemingly negative state of being “hunted” may be regarded as a power in itself. Remembering their mimicked sex, Little Dog describes how, by the second time, Trevor “grabbed my hair” (118). In spite of his initial surprise and pain, Little Dog asks to “[k]eep going [...] to do it harder” instead of telling him to stop (118). The “pain gathered toward a breaking point” is not a sensation commonly associated with sexual pleasure (119); and even Little Dog’s assertion of his agency is based upon the admission that he has become “the animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to be eaten,” willingly subject to pain and violence (118). The historical and racial violence that frames their relationship seems to be now enacted in the direct acts of violence involved in sex. Little Dog not only becomes a “hunted” being, counterpart to Trevor as the white American hunter, but he is an animal who “offers itself” by continuing to have sex with him.

Little Dog’s argument is that his deliberate choice of staying in such vulnerable position is a “rare agency”; acquiescing to the other’s desire for

pleasure can “also [be] a kind of power” (118). Describing oral sex, Little Dog notes that “submission” in sex is a power that “does not require elevation in order to control” (118). Within the act, he is lowered into what seems to be a passive position of “willing[] to make room for him in his body” (118). The passing comment that, in the end, “it is the cocksucker who moves” (118), uses the expletive in both its literal sense and its derogatory connotation targeting homosexual men (*OED*). But this choice of submission and loss of power coexists with the newfound agency to “move.” Trevor, whose position as the “top” seemed to be exclusively associated with masculinity and subjectivity, is in fact passively “follow[ing]” Little Dog’s movement, “his entire body tied to the teetering world of my head” (118).

Little Dog’s affirmation of sex as a kind of agency, however, again returns to the painful sensation that he describes as “obliteration” and “eviscerat[ion]” (119). He revels in getting “to name what was happening to me all my life [...] being fucked up, at last, by choice” (119); but he is still being “fucked”—“ruined,” as he thinks to himself after shaking off Trevor’s attempt to soothe him after sex (119). His agency that submits to pain and humiliation by choice, may be passive at best, repeating and re-enacting the violence that has indeed been happening “all [his] life.” Little Dog’s writing thus continuously oscillates between loss and agency; as passive, uncertain and temporary it may be, he argues for the possibility that violence and pain may be transformed into pleasurable agency, a queer “malleability” he deems “beautiful” (199).

The “agency” discovered in “becom[ing] more than its once-singular self,” moving between pain into pleasure, is what Little Dog cites as his

source of pride “to be the queer yellow faggot that I was and am” (199). Nguyen Tan Hoang similarly traces queer Asian men’s subjectivity in its ambiguity, neither fully recuperating nor denouncing the fraught position of the “bottom.” He cautions against both a recovery of Asian American masculinity that builds itself upon heteronormative hierarchy and exclusion of gay men (6), and a gay masculinity that establishes itself in “collusion with misogynist [...] marginalization of male effeminacy and femininity” (14). Instead, he directs attention to the complexity of “bottomhood” subjectivity that allows for both “pleasure and agency (and, at times, a thrilling surrender of power and agency)” (19). Rather than solely redeeming the vulnerable bottom position as powerful or heroic, or banishing it altogether as merely passive and degrading, queer Asian men’s partaking in that role should be understood as a complex “process of subjectification [...] involving subjugation while enabling negotiation” (195).

Little Dog’s memories of Trevor, containing both painful and pleasurable moments, records such negotiation of his own agency. He refuses to name his “lowering” and figurative transformation into a hunted animal as either becoming a heroic “martyr” or passive “weakling.” If the roles he and Trevor take up are a product of the already-internalized “rules”—echoing the racialized and gendered structure within the U.S. as well as a history of war that precedes them—Little Dog’s particular experience of sexual contact offers him a possibility of agency that has been previously denied to him.

As Nguyen emphasizes, the subjectification through “bottomhood” he argues for cannot be separated from the pain of subjugation it emerges

from. Little Dog's memories of sexual pleasure go hand in hand with what seems to be a deliberate, masochistic choice of pain, resonating Leo Bersani's theorization of sexuality and masochism. Bersani posits that sexuality is inherently masochistic, as a "site for excruciating pleasure" that directs a "self-shattering violence" towards the desiring subject (Dean 388). His approach takes on and redirects damaging psychoanalytic conceptions of homosexuality, which presumes male homosexual desire to be an inherently "narcissistic and destructive" impulse summarized in the "suicidal ecstasy" of anal sex (Dean 389; Bersani, "Rectum" 212). Rather than repudiate such notions and redeem sex as solely pleasurable and enabling, Bersani argues for the "seductive" possibilities such destructive effects may have ("Aggression" 69). Homosexual desire presents "the value of powerlessness" that is erased in phallocentric emphasis on the male power, "a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self" that distances the subject from "all those aggressive projects waged in the name of identity" ("Rectum" 217; Dean 388-89).

This shattering experience allows for a different, nonviolent relation to form between the self and the other, by dissolving the very boundary by which the two are distinguished (Dean 389). Re-examining the Freudian account of homosexuality, Bersani offers that the ego's search for objects to identify himself with is a search for what he terms "sameness," dissolving the difference between the self and the other that allows him to treat both with desire ("Sociability" 55). Such desire discovers "a new relational mode [...] of the subject losing himself in order to find himself again [...] disseminated among the appearances of the visible world" ("Aggression" 69). There are,

then, two parts to the masochistic “self-shattering” that Bersani associates with sexual experience: first, the self is displaced and dissolved, and second, that same self discovers a different relationality which allows them to “expand[] beyond all boundaries [...] to become a site of correspondences with the world” (“Aggression” 70). This simultaneous dissolution and expansion is what Bersani identifies as particular to queer desire, as an “erotic expression of [...] reaching out toward an other sameness” (81).

Later in *On Earth*, Little Dog recalls the first time he and Trevor had “real” sex, not their “fake fucking” that he has described so far (199, 119). Pain has already been a part of sexual encounter, but it reaches unprecedented intensities in this scene, because neither of them are prepared for anal sex, their only source of information being pornography. Still, Little Dog endures the pain until he feels it “melt[] into a strange ache, a weightless numbness” —a sensation he understands as “the body having no choice but to accommodate pain by dulling it into an impossible, radiating pleasure” (202). Disoriented by this excruciating and “impossible” experience, Little Dog feels the need “to make sure I was still there, still me” in his own body. When he “reach[es] back to touch” and make sure of himself, however, his hand meets Trevor’s body instead: “as if by being inside me, he was this new extension of myself [...] we were two people mining one body, and in doing so, merged, until no corner was left saying *I*” (202). His account of sex merges pain and pleasure into one self-shattering experience that echoes Bersani’s formulation of sexuality; Little Dog feels himself disintegrated through the pain, but that same self simultaneously expands beyond that disintegration so that Trevor becomes part of him, coexisting in the same body. At least

momentarily, the relation between them exceeds that between the hunter and the hunted, one who causes pain and the other who passively receives it—but becomes a relation bound by the boundary-dissolving “sameness” that Bersani proposes is particular to queer desire.

This expansion into sameness that exceeds the negativity of pain, then, presents a perspective from which to reconsider the agency of submission that Little Dog insists on. His description of oral sex frames it as another masochistic act, lowered and humiliated into the degraded position of “cocksucker.” Yet here, similar to the momentary transformation of Trevor as the “new extension of myself” during their first sex, Little Dog observes that by “mak[ing] room for him” within his mouth, Trevor relinquishes control over his body and becomes attached to Little Dog’s own—a kite tied to his head (118). It is notable that this transformation not only occurs through physical contact, but is prompted by Little Dog’s “peer[ing] up at him” (118). On the one hand, the gaze is phrased as another submission, his way of offering his eyes as “a place he [Trevor] might flourish” much like he is offering the rest of his body for his pleasure (118). Yet the gaze is Little Dog’s own, actively seeking out Trevor with his own desire, returning the look that Trevor directed towards Little Dog and made him desirable and “hunted.” He does not seek to “elevate” himself above Trevor as the difference of power between hunter and hunted dictates; instead, he gains a measure of “control” over Trevor as one “look[ing] up at him as if looking at a kite,” letting the kite take flight as he moves it from below, “tied” to a singular, shared body.

This desire for sameness, Bersani argues, differs from narcissism in that it exceeds the subject’s own image to discover the self’s “partial, fugitive,

and mobile extensions or reappearances in the external world” (“Aggression, 69). While queer desire seeks others “that will give [the subject] back to himself as a loved and cared for object,” it does not aim to violate and absorb the other *into* the desiring “self” (“Sociability” 55). Rather, the “object-love [becomes] identical to self-love [...] [a] self-love hospitable to difference” in that the self is entirely erased and replaced by the other object, accommodating its otherness as a discovery of “him- or herself in the world” reformed in continuous correspondence (56). Little Dog considers his desire from a similar perspective, when he recalls a professor’s homophobic suggestion that gay men are inherently narcissistic and seek “a mirror of myself” in other men’s image (*On Earth* 138). Recounting the anger he felt, Little Dog shifts from his initial response to question, “if so—why not?” (138):

Maybe we look into mirrors not merely to seek beauty, regardless how illusive, but to make sure, despite the facts, that we are still here. That the hunted body we move in has not yet been annihilated, scraped out. To see yourself still yourself is a refuge men who have not been denied cannot know.

I read that beauty has historically demanded replication. We make more of anything we find aesthetically pleasing, whether it’s a vase, a chalice, a poem. We reproduce it in order to keep it, extend it through space and time. To gaze at what pleases—[...] a boy, the mole on his jaw—is, in itself, replication—the image prolonged in the eye, making more of it, making it last. Staring into the mirror, I replicate myself into a future where I might not exist. And yes, it was not pizza bagels, all those years ago, that I wanted from Gramoz, but replication. Because his offering extended me into something worthy of generosity, and therefore seen. It was that very moreness that I wanted to prolong, to return to.

[...] I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication. And so what? So what if all I ever made of my life was more of it? (138-39)

In ways that echo Bersani’s theorization, Little Dog suggests that he seeks

“replication” through desire, extending his own body through the other’s desire. Trevor’s gaze that first “fixes” him to the world is now claimed as Little Dog’s own, through which he rediscovers himself as desirable and “worthy”—what Bersani describes as “loved and cared for” (“Sociability” 55). Claiming himself to be “beautiful,” Little Dog draws a connection between this rediscovery of self through desire and Elaine Scarry’s formulation of “beauty.” Scarry defines beauty as a quality that “brings copies of itself into being” by prompting within the observer a desire to replicate—“the simplest manifestation of [which] is the everyday act of staring” (3-5). The “pliancy or elasticity of beauty” that Scarry notes, which “bring[s] things into relation” between the subject and beautiful objects (30, 46), holds a similar effect as a Bersani’s queer desire for “sameness” that simultaneously erases and expands the self into relations with the world. Beauty places the observer in a state of disorientation where “we cease to stand even at the center of our own world[, having] ceded our ground to the thing that stands before us” (Scarry 112). This is the grounds from which beauty makes an ethical claim on the observing object towards “fairness”—an equality in relations that calls for protection and preservation of the beautiful object (114).

Little Dog earlier narrates “the day [he] first found [him]self beautiful” (107), several months into his relationship with Trevor. He is “daydreaming, thinking about the day before, of Trevor and me” when he discovers “the boy before the mirror” (107)—momentarily displaced by his daydream and seeing his own reflection through the eyes of “another, a boy a few feet away” (108). Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor, through which he feels disoriented and at the same time, rediscovered and extended through the

other's body, places him "outside" of himself from which he can discover himself as beautiful: "the thing about beauty is that it's only beautiful outside of itself" (108). Evoking this scene in the passage quoted above and asking whether "we look into mirrors [...] merely to seek beauty," Little Dog suggests that his desire is not directed toward a simple image of himself in another man, or even his own reflection "made" beautiful. What he desires and discovers is a relationship that enables the self to persist beyond that self-erasing violence, extending the ethical claim that Scarry identifies with beauty to his own body, redefined through desire and allowed to live "more."

This kind of revelation signals a certain internalization of Trevor's gaze, seeing himself as a body "that was wanted, that was sought and found" by Trevor's desire, which has been part of what makes him vulnerable to violence (107). Little Dog recognizes that desiring and being desired by Trevor "mean[s] you are the hunted, a hurt he can't refuse" (156). When Little Dog speaks of his desire as a way of affirming that "we are still here," it is weighted by the knowledge of historical and racial violence that has threatened to "annihilate" his family throughout the war, their refugee passage, and their new life in Hartford as Vietnamese American immigrants. What makes his body a "hunted" one, he is reminded, is not simply his choice to take up that position in sex, but also the larger history of war that has defined him, Ma, and Lan as such, a history he has aimed to contend with from the beginning of *On Earth*. Little Dog's negotiation stands between desirable "beauty" as a way of survival, and his experience that discovers "beauty" as a vulnerability and risk.

Anne Anlin Cheng, in her analysis of *Flower Drum Song*, observes

that not only is “beauty” within the film structured in racial and gendered terms but, by producing a character who performs such beauty despite being Asian American, it “continuously provokes the negotiation of the distance between ideal and self [...] a demand for approximation that enunciates the simultaneity of desire and impossibility” (55). While Little Dog’s invocation of beauty is not initially defined in racialized, gendered terms, the simultaneous desire and impossibility are what Little Dog’s gaze discovers as well; even as he finds himself beautiful for the first time, he recognizes that beauty is “illusive.” It is a quality that is defined by and conditions the vulnerable state Little Dog is placed in: “some things are hunted because we have deemed them beautiful [...] To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted” (238). His own experience seems to contradict the ethical claim beauty supposedly has on the onlooker, when being seen as beautiful is being at risk of violence and he has been “taught, by [Ma,] to be invisible in order to be safe” (96)—he is “already Vietnamese” and therefore excluded from, and endangered within, the visible realm of beauty (219). The very name he is known by throughout the book, “Little Dog,” indicates this deliberate stripping of visibility, an old custom of protecting a weak child from “evil spirits, roaming the land for healthy, beautiful children” by giving them an ugly name (18). Claiming his own beauty by looking into the reflection in the mirror is both a desired ideal and a risk.

Cheng observes that the character of Linda Low in *Flower Drum Song* does not remain a racialized, gendered “lack” who only approximates white, feminine beauty—but performs a “self-pleasure” on screen that assumes those multiple gazes placed on her, [turns them around] to become

“the beauty to be seen *and* [...] the beauty that *sees*” (56). Looking into a three-sided mirror, Linda’s gaze toward her multiple selves performing stereotypes of Western beauty may signal “internalized [...] ideal whiteness as well as femininity” (52). Yet the joy she takes in those images “turns this scene [into] multiplication, plenitude, and potential agency” (52), when Linda’s gaze into the mirror expands to “*be* the other, [...] assume numerous points of view” outside of herself to gaze at her own image with desire (56). Her performance “exceeds [her] subjection” that defines her as a racialized and gendered object, to reveal “pleasure and source of self-identification: *I enjoy being*” (57).

Little Dog’s gaze into the mirror, which echoes Trevor’s gaze that first “found” him, simultaneously recognizes himself as vulnerable and surviving that vulnerability, threatened by violence and deserving protection. In ways similar to Cheng’s observation, his gaze partially internalizes Trevor’s that makes him the passive and racialized object, but also becomes an active gaze that seeks out Trevor and even himself with newfound desire. This pleasure in both seeing and being seen presents a different agency out of violence, one that diverges from Bersani’s masochistic dissolution of the self. Affirmation of powerlessness and erasure, for the marginalized subject already constituted by racialized and gendered humiliation, risks furthering the subjugation the subject had set out to oppose (Nguyen TH 19); similarly, Little Dog’s insistence on “beauty” is a constant reminder of the racial and historical vulnerability to violence that is presupposed in its discovery. Little Dog’s decision to still “look into mirrors” is taking a risk of re-enacting the violence that is made possible by being seen—but at the same time, it

becomes a “performance” that harnesses the same gaze to establish himself as desired, beautiful and alive. Finding and taking pleasure within his vulnerability to violence, and further, gazing at that moment of pleasure to “extend it through space and time,” Little Dog redefines beauty itself as “being alive.”

Little Dog’s gaze towards Trevor presents the agency that transforms the pain of vulnerability into a way of survival, in discovering both of them as “beautiful” and seeking to extend their being; that transformation and preservation is attempted through his own writing. The section that ties together Little Dog’s adolescent memories with Trevor diverges from the letter form so far; his address of “you” is directed towards himself instead of Ma, as another “boy” outside of himself (54)—the condition for the self to be seen as beautiful (108). A prose poem than a narrative, scenes and memories are jumbled together in this final chapter, blurring the distinction between one point in time and another into a simultaneous occurrence. Line breaks do not necessarily coincide with punctuations, giving each sentence an impression of running onto each other without ending, piling detail over detail. And it is here in this prose poem that another animal image emerges to metaphorize the shared vulnerability between the animal figure, Little Dog, and Trevor:

Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck, not
a pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy. Trevor meateater
but not
veal. *Never veal. Fuck that, never again* after his daddy told him the
story when he was seven, at the table, veal roasted with rosemary.
How the difference between veal and beef is the children. The veal are
the children

of cows, are calves. They are locked in boxes the size of themselves. A body-box, like a coffin, but alive, like a home. [...]

We love eatin' what's soft, his father said, looking dead

into Trevor's eyes. Trevor who would never eat a child. Trevor the child with the scar on his neck like a comma. A comma you now put your mouth to. (155-56)

The series of names Little Dog first associates with Trevor refers to him as the “hunter,” “carnivore” and “redneck”—names that have connected Trevor with masculinity, whiteness, and violence on animals. But when a line break interrupts “not” and “pansy,” the word “pansy” is placed alongside “shotgunner, sharpshooter” as a name *for* Trevor, in spite of his denial that he is “not fruit or fairy.” This repeated “not” that first signalled Trevor’s rejection of “queer” names—“iterations of monster” that Little Dog has already been called by (14)—begins to lose its meaning and transforms through its very repetition. “Trevor meateater but not / veal” may appear to deny softness in Trevor, whom Little Dog sees as tough “all-American beef” than something tender (158). Yet the statement is revealed to be a rejection of *eating* veal, as Trevor’s own voice enters Little Dog’s text: “*Never veal. Fuck that, never again.*”

This refusal to eat veal introduces one of Trevor’s own stories, of the time his father told him that veal comes from the “children.” The line break deliberately delays the clarification that by children he means those “of cows, are calves,” blurring the difference between the young animal and the human child eating it and rendering the act more horrifying. Trevor’s conscious decision to not repeat that violence not only marks his difference from his father, but also transforms Trevor into a child again as “Trevor the child”—closer to the children of cows at risk of being turned into veal. This tenderness

and vulnerability are part of what drives Little Dog's desire for Trevor, "put[ting] his mouth to" the scar on his body. Trevor, the calf, and Little Dog himself are momentarily tied by their vulnerability—a desire sparked by "sameness" that goes beyond the denial of the repeated word "not."

A calf in a box, waiting. [...] a calf
shuffling inside, hoofs soft as erasers, the bell on its neck ringing
and ringing. The shadow of a man growing up to it. The man with his
keys, the commas of doors. Your head on Trevor's chest. The calf being
led by a string, how it stops
to inhale, nose pulsing with dizzying sassafras. Trevor asleep
beside you. Steady breaths. Rain. Warmth welling through his plaid
shirt like steam issuing from the calf's flanks as you listen to the bell
[...]
[...] The sound buried deep in Trevor's chest and you listen.
That ringing. You listen like an animal
learning how to speak. (159-160)

Through becoming a vulnerable child or calf, what the text implicitly hints at is Trevor's own oncoming death; the next part of the novel will begin with the news that Trevor has overdosed and passed away. "The calf being led by a string" is only let out of its cage to head towards death; Little Dog later returns to the image of the calf to note that it is "most free when the cage opens and it's led to the truck for slaughter" (216). When Little Dog envisions a "shadow of a man growing up to" the calf's body, the shadow is presumably that of the man approaching the cage to take the animal to the slaughterhouse. But in Little Dog's choice of the word "growing," the shadow also becomes Trevor, who "grow[s] up to" the calf's body and becomes merged with it in Little Dog's imagined scene. Little Dog's description of Trevor with his gun as progressing "from one end of a cage to

another" (116) becomes more significant in retrospect; a "caged" American boy, Trevor's sleeping form is overlapped further with the calf's, emitting warmth "like steam issuing from the calf's flanks." The ringing of the bell as the calf shuffles within the cage, then walks away from it only to head towards slaughter, becomes the sound of the heartbeat "buried deep in Trevor's chest," a proof of living transformed into a signal of oncoming death.

Let out of its cage and walking through the fields for the first time, the calf takes in the "dizzying" moment of freedom, a freedom which Little Dog understands as merely "relative [...] simply the cage widening far away from you, the bars abstracted from distance but still there" (216). It is from this vulnerable and temporary life, shared between the calf and Trevor, that Little Dog declares he is "learning how to speak" (160). Between the cage and the slaughterhouse, the calf is surely heading towards death; yet Little Dog's imagined scene concludes where the animal briefly "stops / to inhale," textually prolonging that short moment where the calf is "most free." His recognition of beauty is well aware of the violence that produces and conditions it—the "cage" of the calf remains in place, in spite of what Little Dog imagines for himself—but the way he structures the scene allows that life to linger, survive a little further within the text. In this way, beauty is preserved within Little Dog's textual performance, when what seems to be a repetition of violence finds pleasure that exceeds and survives the threat; his sexual encounters with Trevor allows him to feel that, "[f]or a few delirious moments [...] the cage around me became invisible, even if I knew it was never gone" (216).

If "beauty" is discovered in each repeated encounter with Trevor,

Little Dog's retelling preserves that momentary pleasure and freedom by returning and extending those moments through time, "replicating [him]self into a future where [he] might not exist." In the future, Trevor will in fact cease to exist; not unlike how the calf is already on its way to slaughter, Trevor is already suffering from worsening drug addiction which will eventually cause his overdose. Little Dog's prose poem is also a way of mourning him that collects and replicates moments that reveal Trevor as something more than the all-American man, but a tender and vulnerable being. His remembrance in writing becomes an act of extending what is beautiful, returning to the past to mourn and remember but further, taking "memory [as] a second chance" (159) of life, reanimating those already lost.

Little Dog's remembrance in writing discovers beauty in vulnerability, and aims to preserve it by "making more of it, making it last" in his text beyond death. This attempt, however, returns us to Little Dog's self-doubt when "mourning" Ma, where he admits that "by writing, [he is to] change, embellish, and preserve you all at once" (85). The "physical fact" of another's body has complicated that preservation (85); and the most physical fact of the body that challenges Little Dog in the third and final part of the novel, is actual death. Trevor has overdosed, as had many of Little Dog's friends from Hartford, where poverty is prevalent and drugs are easy to come by (169). Lan is diagnosed with cancer and, because her condition has deteriorated beyond treatment possible at a hospital, is sent home and passes away there.

Little Dog's text merges the figurative mourning of Ma and their trauma, into a mourning in the more conventional sense that must be carried out regarding Trevor and Lan's deaths. Shaken by their loss, Little Dog's

insistence on beauty and preservation of beauty is put to the test. Lan and her storytelling—which is also his way of telling stories in text—seems to lose what force it had and becomes merely “denial, fabrication” when faced with the reality of cancer (197). The last part of the novel introduces yet another animal image alongside these deaths: a herd of buffaloes “run[ning] off a cliff, a whole steaming row of them thundering off the mountain” (179). Little Dog first sees them on a nature documentary on TV; to Lan’s bewildered question as to why they behave that way, he makes up an answer on the spot, that “[t]hey’re just following their family” (179). Little Dog later brings up the same question to Trevor, who does not have a clear answer either but replies that they “don’t got no choice about it. It’s just the law of nature” (237). The buffaloes and their stampede seem to represent death as an inevitability, whose reality imagination alone cannot deny or escape. It is here that Little Dog attempts to return to his first “hopeful” image of monarch butterflies:

It’s like when all you’ve been seeing before you is a cliff and then this bright bridge appears out of nowhere, and you run fast across it knowing, sooner or later, there’ll be another cliff on the other side. What if my sadness is actually my most brutal teacher? And the lesson is always this: You don’t have to be like the buffaloes. You can stop. (181-82)

Maybe in the next life we’ll meet each other for the first time—believing in everything but the harm we’re capable of. Maybe we’ll be the opposite of buffaloes. We’ll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home. Green Apple. (192)

Seeing himself—and by extension, his family—as figurative buffaloes, Little Dog recognizes that their vulnerability always places them “before [...] a cliff.” Yet the occasional “bright bridge” appears in the form of joy so strong it overshadows sadness, found in even the smallest memories of a

pizza dinner or a full moon, to become “[his] most faithful and feeble beacon” (181). Little Dog knows that ultimately, elation is momentary and “there’ll be another cliff on the other side.” In this respect, the buffaloes that have miraculously survived one cliff but heading straight towards another, coincide with the image of the calf that lives a vulnerable, temporary existence between its cage and death.

Little Dog’s imagination simultaneously cites the animal image as a metaphor of human vulnerability, and argues that those very vulnerable humans “don’t have to be like the buffaloes,” separating the two sides that he himself has drawn a parallel between (182). His fantasy rejects the buffaloes in favor of their “opposite,” the monarch butterflies that are able to take flight rather than plummet at the edge of a cliff. Yet this rejection and reliance on a “next life” forcefully forgets “the harm we’re capable of”—both the violence he experienced from Ma, and the “marring” that occurs in his own retelling of Ma’s story. Concluding the “maybe” of Little Dog’s fantasy is a dissonant phrase, “Green Apple.” These two words repeat throughout the section, when after Trevor’s death, Little Dog finds from his pocket a green-apple-flavored Jolly Rancher “from Trevor’s truck” (190). Little Dog briefly imagines that “memory of our voices is inside it,” and tasting it would “tell [him] what [the candy] knows[s]” (190); he seeks something out of their experience that will bring Trevor back in his mind, “till he appears again—young and warm and enough” (184). Interrupting Little Dog’s metamorphosis from buffaloes to butterflies, however, is a taste that signifies Trevor’s voice, only present as “Green Apple” and impossible to grasp. The “generation of monarchs, heading home” in fantastic flight are followed by this impossible distance

from the past that Little Dog still feels, where he is viscerally reminded of Trevor's loss yet fails to decipher his voice other than "green apple."

Little Dog's mourning thus returns to the paradox of otherness that should be preserved despite its seeming impossibility. What makes fantasy, or fabrication, valuable is not its capacity to completely transform grief into joy, as in Little Dog's hopeful image of monarch butterflies taking flight. Rather, what is significant is the repeated attempt at discovering momentary joy, which begins again despite failure, despite knowing that there is always another metaphorical cliff of joy giving way to pain and grief. Several months after Lan's death, Little Dog and Ma "head[] home" in the literal sense, flying back to Go Cong in Vietnam where they bury Lan's ashes at her hometown. Back in Saigon after Lan's funeral, Little Dog wakes in the middle of the night to odd noises outside. He walks out into what seems to be a festival, only to discover that it is a makeshift public mourning, apparently a "common scene" in Saigon as he would later learn (225). Should someone pass away at a time when city coroners are not available, "trapp[ing]" the neglected corpse within its unmourned death (226), the neighbors of the dead "hire a troupe of drag performers for what was called 'delaying sadness'" (226).

Where "proper," official procedures of mourning fail and the loss in the form of a dead body remains "in the open," visible yet unintelligible, the people create a "surreal" response of deliberately forming an "extravagant spectacle" where the mourning family are surrounded by performers on stage and playing children (226). Little Dog witnesses the drag performance as an "attempt[] to heal" through "presumed, reliable fraudulence"—fraudulent in the sense that their stage performance crosses conventional boundaries of

gender, attempts to transform grief into festivity and joy but remains only a small-scale event, limited to “a single block” within the entire city and until “the dead lie in the open” (226). The drag queens do not forget that, despite this chance to perform, they are living “in a society where to be queer is still a sin” (226). This very performance of beauty and reparation is also a repudiated performance, a display of their vulnerability. Yet the “explosive” and “overdrawn” extravagance of the queens’ joy still carries a powerful affect that is found “beautiful” by Little Dog and the onlooking mourners; their living presence “delay” the grief of loss and extend the memories of the living, while they themselves are allowed a stage to exist and be seen without condemnation.

The drag queens’ performance opens up a different way of mourning for Little Dog, who hears “not the song in the drag singer’s throat, but the one inside my own” (230); Trevor’s voice is heard again as Little Dog’s memories of singing with him overlap with the scene in Saigon in front of him. This is how Trevor’s voice is momentarily revived into the present, in a mourning of loss that remains unresolved but performed with such joy, that not only coexist with grief and further connect with and soothe other losses that come into contact with that performance. Little Dog is mistaken for one of the mourners on that street as he cries for Lan and Trevor, a middle-aged man offering him condolences in Vietnamese, saying “You’ll see her again” (228). While the dead on that Saigon street for whom the drag performance was organized is entirely unknown and unknowable to Little Dog, and Little Dog’s own loss unknown to the man consoling him, there emerges a shared emotion, a connection which Little Dog recognizes as “pour[ing] their

strength into you” (228).

The funeral scene at Saigon finally leads Little Dog to a different memory, when Ma taught him to “Remember [...] You’re already Vietnamese” (230). What is meant as a warning to remain “invisible,” because “already” being a racial minority turns them into vulnerable targets, takes on a different meaning when Little Dog repeats and alters the phrase: “You’re already. You’re all ready. / Already gone” (230). Being Vietnamese American, the history of the war that makes him and Ma “already” Vietnamese before American, is also something that is “already gone” and unreachable for Little Dog. But this disappearance that is a given, is countered by Little Dog’s repeated sentences that begin with “I remember” (230). Declaring that he remembers, Little Dog narrates how, when he was much younger, “a trail of blood [appeared] ahead of us” as he and Ma walked through their neighborhood (230). Ma tells him to “look up” from the blood, and distracts him by making up beautifully colored birds through her words: “Do you see the birds in the trees? [...] Don’t you see the nest of yellow chicks, the green mother feeding them worms?” (231). Little Dog distinctly remembers it being February, the trees “black and bare” against the winter sky, but he also remembers how he actually “saw [the birds,] All of them. How they flourished [...] the words wouldn’t stop coloring the trees” (231). This is where Little Dog finds that Lan, Ma, and himself share their way of surviving through telling stories, even if they cannot speak for each other’s story. Lan’s storytelling, beginning from her self-given name which “claimed herself beautiful [and] that beauty into something worth keeping” (231), is passed onto Ma’s imagined colorful birds, so they can keep on going through the

violent American landscape despite being “already Vietnamese.” Little Dog’s own writing that is “making up” stories as a way of remembering the two women’s history, as well as other vulnerable people in his life, is what finally reconnects him to Ma.

Conclusion

Little Dog's text attempts to account for a traumatic past at the same time that it argues for the value of "beauty," transformed pleasure out of painful experience that may be fantastic or imaginary yet still makes survival possible. The difficulty of navigating both sides of this argument is already found in the novel's very title—the beauty Little Dog insists upon is only "brief," and may soon give way to the reality of continued violence, impossible to reach nor overcome through the "performance" of writing them anew. There seems to be no definite resolution to Little Dog's endeavor, and what vulnerable agency he finds from beauty is always at a precipice, only "exist[ing] on the verge of its own disappearing" (*On Earth* 238). An imagined resolution, while affectively powerful within *On Earth*'s narrative, seems inconsequential at best when this dissonance still remains between fantasized pleasure in the present and pain of the past.

The animal "figures" have been brought into the novel to metaphorize these two sides that Little Dog attempts to bridge. The actual animal bodies—whose hunted, killed and butchered bodies he witnesses—give way to become "images" for human stories, history of the Vietnam War and refugee survival within America. On the other hand, those same animal images were also called upon to signal an imaginative possibility in linking them with the human stories, finding a way of survival within the pain and violence they embody. This thesis has necessarily limited its scope to the "image" of animals Little Dog involves to memorialize his family history and build a strategy of agency within his vulnerable position; here, however, I would like

to briefly touch upon the divide between the actual animals and Little Dog's metaphorical use of them.

The closing image of *On Earth* that this thesis has chosen to begin from, the series of metamorphoses as fantasized by Little Dog, is placed alongside the recognition that the “actual” animal does not exist within his text. More than any other part of the novel, this final chapter is a fantasy. Little Dog is transported back in time in a dream-like scene, where he discovers that he is “fifteen again” on the tobacco farm with Trevor asleep beside him, still alive (235). On hearing a “low wail” outside, Little Dog assumes that the sound must be from “an animal [...] always it is an animal whose pain is this articulate, this clear” (235). He is soon convinced that the cry must be that of a calf being separated from its mother, knowing how the farmers sell their calves at the break of dawn before the mother wakes. Little Dog follows the source of the wail, thinking he would come face-to-face with this heifer, but arriving at “the small clearing where she is” (239), he only discovers that “nothing’s here”: “The heifer, the farm, the boy, the wreck, the war—had I made it all up, in a dream, only to wake up with it fused to my skin?” (240).

Despite the sound Little Dog hears so clearly, he cannot reach the actual animal he believes is there. After all, those animals he has brought into the text, buffaloes, monkeys, monarch butterflies and calves are those that he “made [...] all up,” images conjured in order to speak for his family’s, as well as his own, history. Yet the sound of pain that first pulls Little Dog to follow it maintains an almost physical presence; Little Dog “hear[s] her huge lungs working for air,” the sound capable of “part[ing] the stalks and [making]

the leaves shiver” even if the body is not visible (239). The animal bodies he has cited and their painful, violent history are as real as the human stories of Vietnam War and immigrant experience, if made secondary within Little Dog’s narrative. But when Little Dog reaches the clearing where he expects the calf to be, “waiting for the sound to make me true” (240), he is met with silence. In spite of their figurative force that have accompanied Little Dog’s writing, the animals remain unreachable. The actual animal whose pain he expects to witness, and whose pain he associates with his own to make his experiences “true,” is somewhere else—impossible to completely absorb into the human story.

Rather than finding the actual heifer, Little Dog textually “step[s] forward” into another memory of himself and Ma; the scene suddenly shifts from the tobacco field to his family home, where a younger Little Dog asks Ma to “Tell me the story again,” the one about the hunted, “real-life” monkeys (239). While this scene and the subsequent connection between Ma and the monkey has been discussed in an earlier chapter, it is worth noting that Ma’s response of “I’m a monkey” (239) is immediately followed by an older Little Dog’s discovery that “nothing’s here,” and a question directed towards his own writing, wondering if “[Ma] made it this far in this letter—or if you’ve made it here at all” (240). He well knows that Ma cannot read English; she is not a “monkey,” nor is their story that of actual “animals.” Wondering if Ma “made it here” also belies his doubt that this story can place Ma’s history on the page in full; the condition of “mourning” dictates that there are silenced stories that cannot be translated and articulated by another.

Little Dog’s strategy thus hinges on a very frail “maybe” (240), the

hope that the letters will approach Ma somehow, the fleeting possibility that he can imagine himself running through the tobacco field alongside a herd of animals “somewhere” (241)—which lets him imagine of a different future where none of those vulnerable lives need drop away to death, “[their] cliff [...] never written into this story” (241). Little Dog turns around mid-run, thinking that he has “finally broken out of [his] body” and ready “to forgive him, at last, for trying and failing to be good” (240). Yet even this is only a fantasy; there is no one behind him because he still occupies his own body, which would also mean that he is still continuing to “try[] and fail[] to be good” in his writing. If Little Dog has tried throughout *On Earth* to present “beautiful,” “good” moments within and despite a painful history, the failure points to the rift that seems to remain unmended between reality and fantasy, Ma’s history and his retelling, the actual “ruined lives of animals” and the imagined animals surviving through metamorphoses.

But throwing this fantasy “ahead of me,” Little Dog realizes that “what I left behind becomes exactly what I’m running toward—like I’m part of a family” (242). What the text finally reaches through his running forward to an ideal future, is in fact a continuation of his past memory, Ma’s answer to his question of how “they [didn’t] get you” (242). Telling him that she is like “some monkeys” that are too fast to be captured, Ma “look[s] at [Little Dog], the way a mother looks at anything—for too long” (242). The look that *On Earth* leaves off with is not Little Dog’s but Ma’s, her gaze and laugh “for no reason” inexplicable to a young Little Dog (242). There may be plausible reasons that could be given to explain her sudden laughter, but as it is, Ma’s response and her experience that motivates it remain wholly her own,

impossible for Little Dog to fully grasp. Yet the look echoes what Little Dog himself would discover through the course of his relationship with Trevor; that to gaze “too long” at what is beautiful is an act that preserves and extends its vulnerable being. With Ma gazing back out from the text towards Little Dog, a mirror image of Little Dog’s beginning of his letters that bid Ma to “look” (14), Little Dog has come closest to Ma despite knowing that reaching her is impossible.

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국문 초록

본 논문은 오션 브영의 2019년 소설, 『지상에서 우리는 잠시 매혹적이다』에 있어 반복적으로 등장하는 무수한 동물의 이미지를 베트남계 미국인이자 퀴어한 화자와의 관계에서 읽고자 한다. 『지상에서』는 화자 “나,” “리틀 독”이 어머니에게 전하는 편지들로 구성되어 있으며, 이는 어머니가 리틀 독에게 가한 가정폭력과, 그 이면에 존재하는 그녀가 경험한 베트남 전쟁의 트라우마를 기록하고 기억하려는 노력이다. 그러한 기억 속 사냥당하고, 다치거나 죽임당하는 동물들은 베트남 전쟁의 상실과 베트남계 미국인 가족의 인종화된 위치, 그리고 성정체성으로 인해 소외된 리틀 독의 위치를 은유한다. 그러나 리틀 독의 글에 등장하는 동물들은 다만 인간의 이야기의 일부, 폭력과 고통의 상징으로 머무는 것이 아니라, 폭력과 소외에도 불구하고 이어지는 생존을 가리키게 된다. 리틀 독의 상상에서 동물은 과거의 상실을 기억함으로써, 그리고 현재에 재구성함으로써 새로운 주체성의 가능성을 발견한다. 소설이 “아름답다” 칭하는, 위태롭고 일시적이지만 상실과 생존이 공존하는 상태를 리틀 독은 글로써 보존하고, 지속하고자 한다.

논문의 첫 장에서는 소설의 전반, 동물들이 베트남 전쟁의 트라우마로서 유령과 같은 존재로 등장하는 양상을 살펴본다. 폭력에의 노출을 은유하는 동물의 이미지는 인간의 몸과 혼동될 가능성을 제기함으로써 전쟁의 지속되는 폭력과 비인간화를 은유한다. 그럼에도 『지상에서』는 인간과 동물이 겹쳐지는 “괴물”성이 리틀 독과 어머니의 모자 관계에서 분리될 수 없음을 강조한다. 오히려 그러한 “괴물”의 하나인 제왕 나비의 이미지를 통하여 상실의 역사를 애도하면서 이를 현재로 되살려 재구성하는 것이 생존의 한 방식이 될 수 있음을 텍스트는 역설한다.

두 번째 장은 직전 중점적으로 다룬 베트남계 미국 난민의 역사와, 리틀 독의 성정체성이 교차하는 지점에 주목한다. 리틀 독과 그의 애인 트레버와의 관계는 이미 그들을 규정하는 인종, 성별과 성정체성의 규범의

영향 아래 놓여 있다. 그럼에도 리틀 독은 고통스런 경험을 꽤로 전환할 수 있음을, 성적 관계 안에서 자신의 취약함이 하나의 주체성과 트레버와의 연결점을 찾는 관계의 방식이 될 수 있음을 주장한다. 트레버와의 기억에서 등장하는 송아지의 이미지는 곧 트레버와의 관계를 규정하는 것처럼 보이는 힘의 차이를 깨뜨리는 작은, 아름다운 순간을 기억하고, 이러한 순간의 기억을 자신의 글 안에 보존하고 재현함으로써 트레버의 존재를 죽음 너머로 연장시키려는 노력의 상징이 된다.

마무리로서 논문은 은유적 “이미지”로서 동물의 소환이 은유적 이미지와 실제 동물 사이, 리틀 독의 재구성한 이야기와 그가 온전히 아는 것이 불가능한 어머니의 실제 경험 사이, 그리고 상상해낸 생존과 현실의 폭력 사이의 간극을 메우지는 못함을 짚는다. 다만 일시적인 것처럼 보이는 환상과, 현실에서 이미 일어난 또는 일어날 실패에도 불구하고, 리틀 독의 글쓰기는 어머니 자신의 기억을 그의 것으로 포섭하거나 지우지 않으면서도 그녀가 휘두른 폭력, 또한 그녀가 경험한 폭력을 넘어 리틀 독이 어머니에게 다가갈 수 있는 하나의 길을 열어주게 된다.

주요어: 오션 브영, 동물, 애도, 베트남 전쟁, 난민 연구, 퀴어

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