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## "I Refuse to Die:" The Poetics of Intergenerational Trauma in the Works of Li-Young Lee, Ocean Vuong, Cathy Park Hong, and Emily Jungmin Yoon

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“I Refuse to Die:” The Poetics of Intergenerational Trauma in the Works of Li-Young

Lee, Ocean Vuong, Cathy Park Hong, and Emily Jungmin Yoon

Senior Project Submitted to

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of Bard College

by Helli Fang

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## Introduction

“You killed my people! Why did you kill my people?” Kiet Thanh Ly, the man who stabbed two white men in Salt Lake City in 2012, screams in this chilling opening of Paisley Rekdal’s *The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime, and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam* (6). In this book-length essay, Rekdal explores the boundaries of intergenerational trauma, investigating difficult yet crucial questions: how could Ly, a Vietnamese refugee who had never experienced the Vietnam War, be so affected by this trauma as to perform such a crime? Or, to ask on a less specific scope: who is affected by war, and for how many generations can this trauma be passed down? These are questions that appear to lack any straightforward answer, yet cases reminiscent to Ly’s still remain prevalent, such as the number of PTSD victims in the wake of events such as 9/11 and the Holocaust, despite distant relations to the actual events themselves.

In an attempt to define these inherited effects of trauma in the context of Asian American immigrants and refugees, Jeffrey Santa Ana writes in his essay "Feeling Ancestral: Memory and Postracial Sensibility in Mixed-Race Asian American Literature:"

...to be mixed heritage or multiracial [in Asian American literature] is to experience and feel *ethnic remembering*: emotions of affiliation and identification with immigrant ancestors that articulate remembering the psychological pains of transnational Asian movement and dislocation. Ethnic remembering not only describes the historical displacement felt and remembered by mixed-heritage and multiracial Asians but also articulates current anxieties about immigration and border crossing under economic processes of globalization.



Ana's use of words such as "affiliation" and "identification" suggests that this emotional trauma is not a memory restricted to direct experience or relation: instead, it is a memory of personal connection and empathy. Additionally, in highlighting "current anxieties about immigration and border crossing under economic processes of globalization," Ana suggests that trauma has the ability to evolve over time; that current events can also contribute to trauma passed down from history. In this essay, I aim to examine this idea of memory that is passed down through generations, particularly the memory of trauma, in Asian American writing and poetry. How—and perhaps more urgently, why—do Asian American writers imagine and explore trauma in their works? Furthermore, are these experiences that they have faced directly, and if not, how are they approached and preserved in this literature?

Within my own experiences, the question of how far trauma can reach is a familiar one. On August 14, 1937, my great-grandmother was killed in a bombing by the Japanese Kanoya Air Group in Hangzhou, China. When my father first told me this, my mind immediately became fixated on certain questions: what was she doing—what was the last thing she saw—what was the last thing she thought—when the bomb landed? Despite never having met my great-grandmother, these imagined scenarios still fill me with an inexplicable sense of grief. On a somewhat closer level, I find myself often thinking about the experiences of my own mother and father, who are immigrants from Shanghai and Hangzhou, respectively. Thinking about their experiences in my own writing, I often imagine them alone and vulnerable in a distant, foreign country. I create images such as my mother spending hours reading the labels on food packaging at the grocery store, afraid of buying the wrong thing, or my father, small and subservient to a

white American boss. These images, too, hurt me. While these scenarios are largely crafted from my own imagination, I still feel they are deeply embedded in the truth of these experiences— that is to say, the emotional impact of them. Whether it be the trauma of my immigrant parents, the trauma of my great-grandmother, the trauma of Chinese civilians during World War II, or the trauma of any violent event in history, remembering their “psychological pain,” as Ana puts it, within the tools and language of my own poetry allows me both to preserve these histories, performing the necessary duty of bringing underrepresented stories to light, as well as to reconcile the inherited pain I feel from these events with the personal experiences I face in the present.

In this essay, I will examine the poetry, essays, novels and interviews of four Asian American writers: Li-Young Lee, Ocean Vuong, Cathy Park Hong, and Emily Jungmin Yoon. These poets represent various degrees of proximity to trauma, as well as different approaches in which they write about this trauma. Li-Young Lee, as a young child, was a war refugee from Indonesia that wandered throughout Asia before settling in America, and reflects this movement and these memories in his poetry. Ocean Vuong experiences memories of the Vietnam War through the symptoms of his mother’s PTSD, and reimagines these experiences through metaphorical and myth-like imagery. Cathy Park Hong was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, to Korean immigrant parents, and crafts fictive languages, settings, and characters in her poetry. Emily Jungmin Yoon emigrated as a young girl from Korea to Canada and the US, yet writes about the experiences of Korean “comfort women,” a history she carries no direct involvement with. The ways in which these writers approach trauma within their writing, within the context of their personal experience, brings up the question of one’s relationship to

trauma, and whether or not it is limited to particular identities or experiences. These texts also give rise to a central question: how does one write about violence in a way that both accurately documents the history of the event, and allows the writer to explore their own emotional trauma?

That being said, can truly anyone feel and imagine trauma, regardless of blood relation or personal connection? Emily Jungmin Yoon, in her foreword to her poetry collection *A Cruelty Special to Our Species*, asserts, “An experience that is not mine is still part of the society and world that I occupy. It is crucial to know, listen, tell, and retell various stories, so we may better theorize and understand our existence. (xi)” Similarly, in a 2018 interview with *The Chautauquan Daily*, poet and scholar Paige Rekdal explains:

We have a tendency to assign subject matters to particular identities, or to assume that only people who have experienced the same thing will be interested in that experience,” she said. When it comes to legacies of war and trauma in America, I think these attitudes subtly reinforce the idea that we can forget about traumatic events if they happen in the past and to relatively small groups of people.

Both Yoon and Rekdal assert the danger of aligning the right to feel trauma or emotional empathy of an event to specific experiences, identities, or relations. In other words, imposing restrictions on who exactly can be affected by traumatic events permits erasure and forgetting. Understanding that violent and harrowing events in history are “part of our world”—the key word being “our”—is imperative to making these very events properly heard and acknowledged.

Through the analysis of the works and backgrounds of these four Asian American writers, I aim to explore the question of the boundaries of both directly and indirectly

experienced trauma: how traumatic events are written and preserved in literary texts, and the intersections between imagined and factual history within the language of poetry and prose. Ultimately, trauma belongs to anyone who feels it. However, there are too many violent and harrowing events in our history that are buried beneath other more well known ones— stories that are equally crucial and necessary to be heard. Having a connected identity, relation, or experience can offer one the tools and intention to forefront these experiences through a platform such as literature. Furthermore, in hearing about these commonly marginalized, misrepresented or forgotten events in our history directly from the voices of those who have these connections can create a powerfully visceral effect on audiences, reminiscent of the phrase “based on a true story” that appears in the opening credits of a movie. Poetry and fiction allow writers to imagine, build, and delve into the deeply personal effects of trauma without being restricted to any obligation of factual or informative history. Writing about these traumatic events in literature, consequently, creates a “remembering,” as Ana calls it— not a fixed, immobile remembering of history, but a remembering that readers, like these poets, can be emotionally moved by, can mold and imagine in the context of their own lives, and can continue to pass on to generations to come.

## Chapter 1

## Wandering Bodies: Finding Voice in the Works of Li-Young Lee

For poet Li-Young Lee, remembering exists not with any specific country or historical event, but rather, the vivid, intimate, and oftentimes violent memories of his childhood. Lee was born in 1957 in Jakarta, Indonesia to Chinese political exiles. In 1958, Lee's father, who had been the personal physician to Mao Zedong, was falsely accused and charged for crimes against Indonesia, and spent nineteen months in prison. After his release, the family fled Indonesia and traveled throughout Southeast Asia for several years, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan, before eventually arriving in America, where Lee's father became a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania (*The Poetry Foundation*). Lee's personal experiences as a political refugee, wandering from country to country as a child, before eventually settling in America, presents a particularly unique Asian American immigrant experience. In his memoir titled *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, Lee ties these experiences to the image of a seed in flight:

A seed, born flying, knowing— nothing else, it flew, and in that persistence resembling praise it took no respite. But its natural course was inevitably radical, away from its birth and into the second day, no frontier, and the seed flew through. And after years of flying over that uninhabitable space— hardly the width of a breath— it eventually exited. Only to begin its longest journey to find its birthplace, that place of eternal unrest. From unrest to unrest it was moving. And without so much as a map to guide it, and without so much as a light. (86)

The description of the seed mirrors the movement of Lee's own life before coming to America, and reflects sentiments such as "unrest," an "uninhabitable" space, as well as a

sense of displacement and aimlessness in the absence of “a map” or “light.” Through this symbolic image of the winged seed, Lee sheds light on his personal trauma as a refugee: how “unrest” arises not from any specific place or experience, but rather the lack of them, especially in the context of this journey in search for a birthplace. Lee’s sense of dislocation and experience as a refugee is especially discernible in his poetry.

“Persimmons,” the opening poem from his debut collection, *Rose*, explores feelings of cultural distance through the themes of language and intimate memory. The poem opens:

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker  
slapped the back of my head  
and made me stand in the corner  
for not knowing the difference  
between *persimmon* and *precision*.  
How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.  
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.  
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one  
will be fragrant. How to eat:  
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.  
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.  
Chew the skin, suck it,  
and swallow. Now, eat  
the meat of the fruit,  
so sweet,  
all of it, to the heart.

The poem begins by telling the story of the speaker’s struggle with language, particularly with similar sounding words such as ‘persimmon’ and ‘precision.’ However, rather than dwell on the error that Mrs. Walker punishes the speaker for, the poem delves

into the world of the speaker's own personal understanding of the word. The stanza break between "How to choose // persimmons. This is precision." serves almost as a boundary between the world of Mrs. Walker, where there is an obvious difference between these two words, and the world of the speaker, where the meaning of these words are closely related to one another. It is not just an enjambment, nor a pause—it is a physical, visible space within the poem itself that sets these two perspectives apart from one another.

The language that follows is very methodical, consisting of short, stark instructions such as "Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one / will be fragrant." However, despite this simple language, there is a sense of tenderness and warmth that unfolds in the lines "How to eat: / put the knife away, lay down the newspaper." Rather than simply instructing the reader to "lay down the newspaper," the addition and specificity of "put the knife away" beforehand not only defies the expected, as fruit is often prepared with knives, but also suggests the needlessness of the knife's blade. This brings forth a feeling of tenderness, which is further displayed in the lines "Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat." There is an emphasis on the absence of any sharpness or violence— replacing it instead with the quiet, sensory process that exists within the speaker's personal memory.

The last few lines of the stanza seem to move at a much faster pace than the beginning of the stanza, with shorter phrases connected by commas that rush the language forward; for example, "Chew the skin, suck it, and swallow" and "so sweet, all of it, to the heart." This effect conveys a sense of hunger; an urgency to savor and devour the sweet fruit all at once. The combination of the methodical simplicity of the language, the absence of violence in the process itself, and the hunger in finally eating it gives this

passage a feeling of intimacy, evoked by qualities that are human in the most primal sense, such as hunger and the focus on the sensory and the tangible. This scene reveals speaker's personal understanding of how the words "persimmon" and "precision" are related, and defies the rules of language that both Mrs. Walker and the reader know to be true. The sense of intimacy that is established within the speaker's voice presents a sense of vulnerability—the speaker is baring a world that holds an emotional significance within his heart, which has the ability to overstep the objective rules of language.

To the speaker, words do not necessarily have clear definitions that set them apart, as Mrs. Walker had been attempting to teach— rather, language is something that is heavily steeped in one's own cultural and personal experiences.

Other words  
 that got me into trouble were  
*fight and fright, wren and yarn.*  
 Fight was what I did when I was frightened,  
 Fright was what I felt when I was fighting.  
 Wrens are small, plain birds,  
 yarn is what one knits with.  
 Wrens are soft as yarn.  
 My mother made birds out of yarn.  
 I loved to watch her tie the stuff;  
 a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.

This passage, like the opening stanzas of the poem, expresses the speaker's struggle between the language they were taught in school and the language that they understand from personal experience. Like 'persimmon' and 'precision,' the speaker finds difficulty distinguishing between 'fight' and 'fright,' as well as 'wren' and 'yarn.' However, unlike the beginning, where the poem delves into a specific image from the



speaker's experience, this passage progresses from impersonal to personal much more gradually. The speaker begins by distinguishing 'wren' and 'yarn' with their exact definitions: "Wrens are small, plain birds, / yarn is what one knits with." These lines represent the side of language someone like Mrs. Walker would expect— precise definitions that set words apart from one another. The next line, "Wrens are as soft as yarn," draws a comparison between the two words. This moment serves almost as a transition towards the speaker's perspective, where language is not so divided, by using a simile to bring the words closer together. Finally, the lines "My mother made birds out of yarn. / I loved to watch her tie the stuff; / a bird, a rabbit, a wee man" fully brings the reader into the personal world of the speaker, where it is clear how these two words are linked within the context of the speaker's memories. This development from the world of Mrs. Walker, where there are set rules and boundaries, to the deeply personal world of the speaker once again emphasizes how language encompasses more than its definitions; it is something that belongs closely to each individual.

The last few stanzas of "Persimmons" introduces the speaker's father into the narrative:

Finally understanding  
 he was going blind,  
 my father sat up all one night  
 waiting for a song, a ghost.  
 I gave him the persimmons,  
 swelled, heavy as sadness,  
 and sweet as love.

This passage marks the transition into the introduction of the character of the speaker's father. The sentence structure of "Finally understanding / he was going blind," as the

beginning the stanza presents the feeling of being placed in the midst of a scene, rather than the beginning. By opening the stanza with an action (“understanding”), a sense of motion and immediacy is brought forth, as if the reader had suddenly walked in on the middle of an intimate conversation. Furthermore, the speaker does not actually use the words “my father” until the third line, creating the feeling of ambiguity. This shifts the focus away from the actual subject of the father himself, and instead towards his characteristics and actions. This can also be seen in the heavy presence of verbs within this passage: the father’s understanding of his blindness, sitting up, waiting for the song, and finally the speaker handing him the persimmon.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,  
asks, *Which is this?*

*This is persimmons, Father.*

*Oh, the feel of the wolftail on the silk,  
the strength, the tense  
precision in the wrist.*

*I painted them hundreds of times  
eyes closed. These I painted blind.  
Some things never leave a person:  
scent of the hair of one you love,  
the texture of persimmons,  
in your palm, the ripe weight.*

The voice within this last stanza of the poem is ambiguous; it is left unclear whether the speaker or the father is speaking these words, until the fourth line when the “I” appears as the father. However, the ambiguity immediately returns with the line “Some things never leave a person.” This ambiguity seems to create the effect of the father and the speaker’s

voice molding together into one larger, almost spiritual voice. Furthermore, like the methodical description of how to prepare persimmons in the beginning of the poem, this passage places a heavy emphasis on the sensory— the “feel of the wolftail,” “the strength, the tense / precision of the wrist,” the “scent of the hair,” and lastly “the texture of persimmons...the ripe weight.” Again, the speaker returns to previous themes from earlier on in the poem, mainly the initial confusion of “persimmon” and “precision.” By bringing these words back to the end of the poem, weaving them into this ambiguous voice and image of the speaker’s father, the division between the two words now seems almost arbitrary. The last few lines of the poem mimic the speaker’s sentiment from Mrs. Walker’s classroom: that personal experience and emotions have the ability to surpass objective rules or boundaries. That despite losing something as significant as vision, which physically cuts off a part of one’s connection to reality, the intimacy, warmth, and romanticized feelings associated with one’s personal memories, such as the “scent of the hair of one you love” and “the texture of persimmons,” will still remain.

The intimacy that Lee uses to describe his personal memories and understanding of certain words points to the stark division between what is closely familiar to the speaker, represented by memories such as peeling persimmons and the figure of the father, and what is unfamiliar, represented by Mrs. Walker’s classroom and the difference between similar-sounding words. In addition, the emphasis on sensory details, rather than the informative, illustrates a sense of deep closeness and belonging to these familiar memories. This distance between the personal and the unfamiliar in “Persimmons” captures the feelings of dislocation, displacement, or trauma that an immigrant, or anyone living in a foreign country, might face, particularly in concern to an unfamiliar language.

In contrast to the quiet intimacy of “Persimmons,” the poem “Self-Help for Refugees,” from Lee’s fourth collection *Behind My Eyes*, shifts towards using a different tone to describe Lee’s memories of trauma and displacement. It opens:

If your name  
 suggests a country where bells  
 might have been used for entertainment,  
 or to announce  
 the entrances and exits of the seasons  
 and the birthdays of gods and demons,  
 it's probably best to dress in plain clothes  
 when you arrive in the United States.  
 And try not to talk too loud.

The immediate addressing of “you” asserts the speaker’s presence from the very opening of the poem. The use of imperative, as well as the conversational, almost humorous voice mimics that of a self-help book or instructional manual, which is also reflected in the title of the poem, “Self-Help for Refugees.” This voice is further emphasized in the list-like structure of the opening sentence, as well as the use of imperative in the line “And try not to talk to loud.” However, despite this attention-grabbing voice of the speaker, the use of words such as “probably” and “try” suggest almost a sense of hesitance— that despite the speaker seemingly being in the authority of giving advice, they are not completely sure of the truth of their own suggestions.

If you happen to have watched armed men  
 beat and drag your father  
 out the front door of your house  
 and into the back of an idling truck,  
 before your mother jerked you from the threshold  
 and buried your face in her skirt folds,

try not to judge your mother  
 too harshly. Don't ask her  
 what she thought she was doing,  
 turning a child's eyes away  
 from history  
 and toward that place all human aching starts.

The next stanza of the poem represents a complete contrast to the opening. Whereas in the beginning of the poem, the speaker carries a more informative role, here the voice becomes openly honest and vulnerable. The use of such specific and visceral images, such as armed men beating the father and the mother hiding the child in her skirt folds, suggests that this scene cannot but anything but a personal memory. Furthermore, the vividness in the way these moments are described imply that this experience belongs to the speaker, despite the fact that the “you” pronoun is being used. The “you” from the beginning of the poem had suggested that the speaker was addressing the reader, establishing a distance from the speaker, and also presenting them with a sense of authority. But with this incredibly intimate, almost confessional memory of the speaker, this distance is lost as the “you” becomes blurred together with the speaker of the poem.

Very likely, your ancestors decorated their bells  
 of every shape and size  
 with elaborate calendars and diagrams  
 of distant star systems,  
 but no maps  
 for scattered descendants.

And I bet you can't say  
 what language your father spoke  
 when he shouted to your mother

from the back of the truck, "Let the boy see!"

In this section of the poem, the speaker expresses a sense of being lost and not belonging, despite their ancestors creating a world full of structure and organization— of “bells / of every shape and size,” and “elaborate calendars and diagrams.” Yet, despite this, there is nothing left to lead the “scattered descendants.” The lack of “maps” as well as the use of the word “scattered” illustrates a sense of hopelessness or aimlessness. There is a subtle implication here that turns towards Lee’s own biographical experiences: his family had lived as refugees, wandering from country to country across Asia after fleeing from Lee’s birthplace of Indonesia. In addition, the voice of this stanza is similar to that of the beginning of the poem, returning to the self-assured instruction manual providing advice to the reader through the direct addressing of “you” and the conversational tone.

However, in the next stanza, the world of the poem returns to the scene of the father being taken away, and the mother and child watching from afar. The line “And I bet you can’t say...” continues from the previous conversational voice, yet the images that follow are ones of immense sorrow and tragedy. This contrast makes the confident, nonchalant voice sound almost ironic.

Maybe it wasn't the language you used at home.

Maybe it was a forbidden language.

Or maybe there was too much screaming

and weeping

and the noise of guns in the streets.

It doesn't matter.

What matters is this:

The kingdom of heaven is good.

But heaven on earth is better.

The repetition of the word “maybe” in this next part of the poem suggests a sense of searching and unknowing. As previously mentioned, the identity of “you” becomes ambiguous and encompasses both the reader of the poem as well as the speaker themselves, implying that this specific episode is a memory. The use of “maybe” in this stanza implies that despite the vividness and intensity in the way this memory is described, there are still aspects of it that are incomprehensible to the speaker. The transformation of language into “screaming” and “weeping” and “the noise of guns” implies an act of stripping or baring, from something as abstract as language to the physical sounds of suffering and brutality. Yet, despite this searching for answers, the speaker asserts, “it doesn’t matter.” The sentiment that “heaven on earth is better” reveals a sense of desire or even desperation within the speaker for an improved life, not in “heaven,” but in reality. In this way, the poem begins with an all-knowing, self-assured speaker asserting their knowledge to the reader, and ends on a powerful plea for an end to the violence and tragedy that refugees, and children of refugees, experience.

“Self-Help for Refugees” captures another voice that Lee takes on in describing his experience as a refugee, one that completely differs from that of “Persimmons.” Instead of the quiet, intimate memories that appear in “Persimmons,” this poem embraces a stark and candid portrayal of the brutality of war. Through this contrast, the concept of trauma within immigrant and refugee narratives that exists in both of these poems materialize as multiple voices: one as a quiet remembrance, the other harsh and jarring.

In a 2018 interview with *The Chicago Review of Books*, Lee expresses his desire to continue asking “deeper questions” in his poetry, particularly in the context of human violence, desire, and love. He states: “I want to know— what am I doing here, what are

we doing here? What is the nature of desire and what is the nature of love? Is all human culture underwritten by violence? Which, the answer to that seems to be yes, and I'm curious what that means, what I'm supposed to do with that information." Yet, like many of Lee's works, within these "deeper questions" still lie the remnants of Lee's own experiences and childhood, in the form of vividly described memories and stories. In the same interview, Lee addresses the presence of these themes:

I think the deepest part of me wants to remind myself of my own experience as a refugee and my father's experience as a torture victim who was undocumented. Somehow that experience opened me to 90 percent of the world. For me, it's important that the poet doesn't write from a special case. I think the poet writes from being one with every suffering on the planet. And just reminding myself of that keeps me connected in that way.

In the poem "Our Secret Share," Lee frames his personal experiences of suffering and violence within a humorous and lighthearted voice. In the middle of the poem are several prose passages, the first recalling a childhood memory of the speaker (presumably Lee) visiting his father in prison. He writes:

After nineteen months in prison, eight of those in a leper colony— and he never got leprosy— my father was unrecognizable to me. So when I spied my mother slipping him a bar of soap during our visit, at which time we were allowed to stroll the prison yard together, I thought that strange man had thieved it from her. As the guards were returning him to his cell, I ran after them and snatched the soap out of my father's pocket, exposing my parents' ploy. The guards had a good laugh when they discovered what was happening. Funny thing is, my father later told me, they didn't punish him that time, though in the past he'd been tortured for lesser offenses. The reason was he'd been teaching the prison guards in secret, at their request, to read and write in English, using the King James Bible.



Within this story, the father's ability to read and write is what ultimately saves him. The King James Bible is not used for its religious purpose, but rather for the language within it. The use of the King James Bible is also derivative of Lee's memories of childhood, when his father had required him and his siblings to read the King James Bible aloud, rewarding them with pieces of butterscotch (Chiasson). In this specific scenario, language and education serves as the bridge between the enemy and the victim, and furthermore is what protects Lee's father from the promise of violence. Lee's innocent mistake as a child exists in the cold and harsh setting of a political prison, where his father has been "punish[ed]" and "tortured" in the past. The implications of the setting itself shroud the story within a heavy atmosphere. However, the speaker's use of the phrase "funny thing is" breaks this atmosphere and establishes an air of nonchalance towards the very situation and setting it is speaking of. In this way, the connotations of violence and suffering are pushed away within the speaker's voice, re-framing the story as a lighthearted, fond childhood memory. The phrase "funny thing is" is repeated several times throughout the poem, including the next prose section, where the speaker's brother begins his story:

And my brother says, When I heard the student mob stampeding up the apartment building's stairwell that morning, I jumped out of bed, pulled on my shoes, and crawled out of my bedroom window. Crouched on a ledge, undetected, I saw, through a neighbors' kitchen window, catty-cornered one floor below, their grandmother in a chair surrounded by angry students carrying wooden clubs, metal pipes, and kitchen knives. Dressed in school uniforms, middle- and high-school-aged, they were all shouting at the old woman when one of them hit her across both eyes with his club, not so hard as to knock her out, but hard enough her nose began to bleed, and she cried out, "I can't see! I can't see!" at which those children burst out laughing. Startled, I fell backwards off the ledge into

some trees growing along the hill behind the building. Funny thing is, falling through the treetops saved my life, but plunging through the branches pulled my pajama pants nearly off, and when the old lady started really screaming— I guess by then they must have begun stabbing her, I mean, I heard later that when her son found her, she was full of holes, her body sticky with blood and gaping wounds— anyway, I could hear her howling and begging even as I tumbled down the hill head over heels, one shoe on, one shoe flying in the air, my pants around my knees, and my dick out slapping every which way. I must have rolled for a hundred yards like that before I hit the bottom. When I got back to my feet, I pulled up my pants and raised my eyes to see a crowd of young revolutionaries standing along the ridge of the slope, all of them armed, all of them pointing at me and hurling insults. The hillside was too long and steep for them to follow me, and I bolted with my one shoe. I ran for three days.

In this next passage, the brother's story of the young revolutionaries brutally murdering the old woman is re-framed within a humorous context. The repetition of the phrase "funny thing is," not only establishes a voice that sounds nonchalant and conversational, but also shifts the lens away from one of horror at the woman's murder to one of humor. The brother describes the old woman's screams: "I guess by then they must have begun stabbing her, I mean, I heard later that when her son found her, she was full of holes, her body sticky with blood and gaping wounds— anyway, I could hear her howling and begging even as I tumbled down the hill..." The use of the em dash, alongside the conversational tone of "I guess," "I mean," and "anyway," conveys a tone of nonchalance or indifference, and furthermore suggests that in the brother's telling of this story, the old woman's stabbing and murder is not the main focus of the story. Instead, it turns to the following scene of the brother "tumb[ing] down the hill head over heels, one shoe on, one shoe flying in the air, [his] pants around [his] knees, and [his] dick out slapping every

which way,” presenting a deliberately comedic contrast to the brutality of the previous scene, where tragedy transforms into farce. The movement of this language, where several phrases are connected by commas, creates a linear and drawn-out effect, as if the story is continuously adding more parts onto itself. Furthermore, the images alone— of shoes flying in the air, the brother’s pants down, and his “dick slapping every which way”— are ludicrous and bawdy in themselves, and establishes an atmosphere that resembles slapstick comedy. The humorous language and image of this scene provides a stark contrast to the brutality of the old woman being beaten across the eyes with a club, and stabbed “full of holes.” In this way, similar to Lee’s previous story about his visit to his father in prison, violence and brutality becomes blurred behind voices of lighthearted, almost sarcastic humor.

Despite the large presence of his father and his childhood within Lee’s poetry, in a 1991 interview, Lee describes a desire to move towards “a shedding of [the] influence of my father” (Ingersoll 47). He elaborates: “For me the writing is so personal that I have to get beyond the figure of this all-knowing, all-powerful, fierce, loving, and all-suffering figure. I have to somehow get beyond that in my own life, in order to continue, in order to achieve my own final shapeliness.” In other words, this father figure, which Gerald Stern had described as “god-like” in his foreword of *Rose*, is what Lee feels he needs to move past, not only in his poems, but in his life as well. In the same interview, Lee also describes his feelings towards this transition:

I felt something very strange when I was organizing the book, a grief: while I was moving away from the figure of the father I was also moving away from the last evidence of a life I would never see again— that is, the life of the refugee and the immigrant. [...] And as I put [my father] away, part of me realizes that what I’m

putting away is this vestige of refugee and immigrant life, which has to do, of course, with old coats and rotting shoes and books falling apart and old luggage. I'm putting all of that away so that in away I'm moving into a life that I don't really recognize. [...] The new thing I'm moving into, I don't recognize. When I was putting the book together, it was full of a grief as I was moving into America. I don't know how to be American— although I am, I think, ostensibly very American and assimilated. But there must be a void deep inside of me, still wandering around with his father in Macao and Singapore with all his luggage and stuff. I feel deeply attached to that. (47-48)

The “grief” that Lee felt when moving on from his father represents a step away from a significant part of his life; a part that feels familiar and “recognizable.” In this way, this movement, as well as the “attachment” that lingers, is essential to the concept of Lee's immigrant experience and assimilation into American culture. Lee states, “I feel as if I work hard to stop becoming a refugee. [...] I want to feel at home here in this continent.” However, despite this desire to feel at home in America, there is almost a reluctance to let go of what he feels he must leave behind— not only his father, but Lee's memory of him and of his childhood. Whereas in *Rose* Lee's father represents a looming figure of fascination and even obsession, *The City in Which I Love You* represents Lee's step towards portraying his father as a more vulnerable human figure, as representative of Lee's sentimental childhood and past, and ultimately as something that must be left behind in Lee's journey as a poet and an American.

This movement away from the familiar figure of Lee's father and towards some unrecognizable “new thing” can be seen in his poem “This Hour and What is Dead,” from Lee's second collection, *The City in Which I Love You*. The poem can be roughly

divided into three parts: one describing the speaker's brother, the next describing the speaker's father, and the last describing God. The poem begins:

Tonight my brother, in heavy boots, is walking  
 through bare rooms over my head,  
 opening and closing doors.  
 What could he be looking for in an empty house?  
 What could he possibly need there in heaven?  
 Does he remember his earth, his birthplace set to torches?  
 His love for me feels like spilled water  
 running back to its vessel.

At this hour, what is dead is restless  
 and what is living is burning.

Someone tell him he should sleep now.

The speaker's brother appears as a ghost, as implied in the line "What could he possibly need there in heaven?" The three consecutive questions the speaker asks presents a sense of anxiety within the voice, as they are all asked immediately one after another. In this way, the lines "At this hour, what is dead is restless / and what is living is burning" creates an ambiguity between who is really dead, and who is really living. The brother's ghost is clearly restless, as he is walking around in an "empty house," "opening and closing doors." But at the same time, the speaker himself can also be seen as restless, as heard from the urgency of his voice.

My father keeps a light on by our bed  
 and readies for our journey.  
 He mends ten holes in the knees  
 of five pairs of boy's pants.  
 His love for me is like his sewing:

various colors and too much thread,  
 the stitching uneven. But the needle pierces  
 clean through with each stroke of his hand.

At this hour, what is dead is worried  
 and what is living is fugitive.

Someone tell him he should sleep now.

Repetition presents itself several times throughout the poem; particularly the line “Someone tell him he should sleep now.” The use of the word “someone” suggests a sense of desperation, as it implies the speaker himself somehow cannot communicate with his father or his brother, and is now calling for “someone”— anyone— to “tell [them they] should sleep now.” Furthermore, the speaker’s desperation for both his father and his brother to “sleep now” represents a desire for some kind of rest or closure. Other instances of repetition occur in the pattern “His love for me feels/is like...” as well as “At this hour, what is dead... / and what is living...” In this section, there is again an ambiguity between who is considered “dead” and who is considered “living.” The use of the word “fugitive” feels particularly deliberate, within the context of Lee’s life: born in a family of political exiles and a refugee himself, both he and his father can be considered fugitives.

God, that old furnace, keeps talking  
 with his mouth of teeth,  
 a beard stained at feasts, and his breath  
 of gasoline, airplane, human ash.  
 His love for me feels like fire,  
 feels like doves, feels like river-water.

At this hour, what is dead is helpless, kind  
and helpless. While the Lord lives.

Someone tell the Lord to leave me alone.  
I've had enough of his love  
that feels like burning and flight and running away.

In this portrait of God, the imagery presents a sense of dirtiness, in both the literal and figurative sense. God's beard is "stained at feasts," and his breath is "of gasoline, airplane, human ash," which not only implies literal dirtiness, as in a lack of hygiene, but also suggests traits such as greed and gluttony. While the speaker's brother is "restless" and the father is "worried," God's description here implies that he lacks nothing— with a "mouth of teeth" and the luxury of "feasts" that stain his breath. This creates a dichotomy between God and the previous descriptions of the poem— that the "dead," whether it be the speaker's brother, the speaker's father, or the speaker himself, is suffering in some way, while God simply "lives."

This last section of the poem shifts away from the regular pattern of repetition seen in the previous two sections about the speaker's brother and the speaker's father. However, the section does follow along one pattern of repetition in the lines: "His love for me feels like fire, / feels like doves, feels like river-water." The romantic imagery of fire, doves, and river water contrast sharply against the previous descriptions of God, as a gritty, greedy figure of "gasoline" and "human ash." However, unlike the previous two sections of the poem, this line is referenced and brought back in the very last line of the poem: "I've had enough of his love / that feels like burning and flight and running away." By associating "fire" with "burning," "doves" with "flight," and "river-water" with

“running away,” the previous world of beauty and romance initially associated with God’s love becomes dismantled into a world of flight and destruction.

The pattern of “At this hour, what is dead...” begins similarly to the first two; however, it does not end with “what is living...” Whereas in the previous stanzas, both the dead and living are described to be suffering in some way, whether it be “worried” or “burning,” here the dead is described as “kind / and helpless.” The description of the dead as both kind and helpless brings forth a sense of sympathy or pity. The previous pattern of “what is...” is broken with the line “While the Lord lives.” The shortness of the phrase is a startling contrast against the more flowing, moving language of the previous stanza, which consisted of phrases connected by several commas, such as “gasoline, airplane, human ash” and “feels like fire, / feels like doves, feels like river-water.” This provides a frankness and curtness to the speaker’s voice, and, in addition to defying the expected pattern of the first two sections, this line stands out as sounding alarmingly assertive. “The repetition of “Someone tell him he should sleep now.” is also changed in this section, and has now become “Someone tell the Lord to leave me alone.” The sense of desperation mentioned in the previous sections is still present in the choice of the word “someone” as well as the use of the imperative; however, in this line, there is an additional sense of resentment and bitterness that comes with the phrase “leave me alone.” The combination of God being described through such gritty and dirty imagery, his love being associated with destruction, and the dichotomy created between God, who “lives,” and the dead, who are “kind and helpless,” only further adds to the speaker’s resentment towards God.



Lee's constant return to his childhood, his father, and his experiences as a refugee and immigrant in his poetry ultimately mirrors what Jeffrey Santa Ana had previously described as a type of "remembering." This remembering not only encompasses experiences that Lee has witnessed himself, but those of his father, also a refugee and immigrant, whose trauma in many cases overlaps with Lee's but also extends beyond it, as seen in "Self-Help for Refugees" and "Our Secret Share." In taking on various voices and roles to present these very narratives, Lee establishes an all-encompassing role as a poet, moving from the point of view of Lee as a refugee, Lee as a child, Lee as a father, Lee as a self-help manual, Lee as a voice speaking to himself, among others. In this way, Lee is constantly shifting across these various voices and personas in order to present these experiences through multiple lenses. In a 1996 article by Zhou Xiaojing published in *Melus*, titled "Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee's Poetry," Zhou asserts that "Lee's 'telling' of the Chinese-American immigrants' experiences in his poems involves the processes of self-exploration and self-invention." Perhaps in framing these stories through such continuously shifting voices, Lee is not only presenting these narratives to the reader through various perspectives, but also attempting to explore and examine them himself, mirroring the act itself of grappling with one's identity in the aftermath of political displacement and trauma. Lee's act of circling these poems around these narratives builds a deep, intrinsic rooting of them within his works— a persistent, continuous echo of immigrant and refugee trauma. As Lee once wrote in a letter: "I can't imagine anything else except writing as an outsider."

## Chapter 2

## War Never Dies: Reconstructing History in the Works of Ocean Vuong

The engine starts, the car lurches into a U-turn. As we pull away, from the porch, a boy, no older than I am, points a toy pistol at us. The gun jumps and his mouth makes blasting noises. His father turns to yell at him. He shoots once, two more times. From the window of my helicopter, I look at him. I look at him dead in the eyes and do what you do. I refuse to die. (71)

This passage closes the first section of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the novel by Vietnamese American writer Ocean Vuong. In this particular scene, the main character, Little Dog—written after Vuong himself—witnesses the materialization of his mother's trauma as she storms into a house with a nine-inch machete to retrieve her sister from an abusive boyfriend, only to come to the realization that they had both moved away years prior, now replaced by strangers. The shift in image from Little Dog's mother, bravely and furiously brandishing her machete, into a figure retreating back to the car, a white man pointing his shotgun at her, is a moment of heartbreaking vulnerability and futility for a woman who is not only a mother and a refugee, but also someone suffering from a mental disorder. Despite this apparent shift in power, Vuong still does not allow this scene to represent surrender: the line "I refuse to die" in this passage asserts a resistance of another kind. In Little Dog's refusal to look away and fall victim to the boy's faux-shooting, Vuong assures that trauma will not overtake his story, nor the memory of his mother.

Ocean Vuong was born in Saigon, Vietnam, and raised in Hartford, Connecticut, where he immigrated at the age of two. Vuong's grandfather was an American soldier

who fell in love with a Vietnamese farmgirl during the war, a story that is recounted in Vuong's poem "Notebook Fragments." These American roots are what made Vuong's family eligible for Operation Babylift, a mass evacuation project to bring children of American soldiers in South Vietnam to the United States (Armitstead). When Vuong's family arrived to America, his father quickly left, leaving Vuong to be raised by his mother, aunts, and grandmother, a childhood that Vuong describes as follows: "I was raised by women. I was saved by women" (Mathews). As a consequence of Vuong's childhood as a political refugee, he also developed a keen relationship with language, as his entire family is illiterate, and Vuong himself did not learn to read or write fluently until he was eleven. In a 2016 interview with Kaveh Akbar, Vuong explains:

I think what I've learned is that for a lot of the white American gaze, to be illiterate is the equivalent of being unintelligent, of lacking in imagination and critical thinking. I've spent most of my life watching the way people look, with disdain, at my family when they fail to utter the language that permits their visibility, permits them access to the most basic levels of respect. I've seen cashiers literally reach their hands into my mother's purse to count the money for her. At times it seems the crossing of physical borders is easier than that of the linguistic ones. But I've been around the oral tradition of poetry since I was born. Even when I was in my mother's womb poems were spoken to me. And they were very complex, and wild, and imaginative works, replete with rich musical and associative intricacies. Through song and speech, they made a tangible personal and historical lineage that informed the way I think and write.

In this quote, Vuong affirms that literacy and language do not define a person's intelligence, "imagination," or "critical thinking," uprooting the connotations that comes with one's ability to read and write. The fact that Vuong describes these connotations as being related to "the white American gaze" establishes a division between American

culture and his own. Vuong's emphasis on the significance of his family's oral tradition illustrates how, even when placed in a stereotypically disadvantaged or weaker position, such as lacking the ability to read or write, memory and tradition will still persist, just as the speaker's memories in Li-Young Lee's "Persimmons" persisted within the world of Mrs. Walker's classroom.

In speaking about memory and family, much of Vuong's work is centered around the figure of his mother, particularly the effect of her trauma on Vuong's childhood. Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* was published in 2019 and is written in the form of a letter from a Vietnamese American boy named Little Dog to his mother, Rose, an illiterate refugee of the Vietnam War. Throughout the novel, Vuong explores the effects of the trauma on his mother, who suffers from PTSD after her schoolhouse collapsed during an American napalm raid, and his grandmother, a former prostitute who married a white American soldier during the war. In one passage, Vuong juxtaposes fond memories of Little Dog's mother alongside the shocking memories of her physical abuse, a symptom of her PTSD:

The time with a gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone,  
then a steady white rain on the kitchen tiles.

The time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me  
because I was too scared to do it alone. How you threw up for hours afterward,  
your whole head in the garbage can. How, in my screeching delight, I forgot to  
say *Thank you*.

The time we went to Goodwill and piled the cart with items that had a  
yellow tag, because on that day a yellow tag meant an additional fifty percent off.  
I pushed the cart and leaped on the back bar, gliding, feeling rich with our bounty  
of discarded treasures. It was your birthday. We were splurging. "Do I look like a  
real American?" you asked, pressing a white dress to your length. It was slightly

too formal for you to have any occasion to wear, yet casual enough to hold a *possibility* of use. A chance. I nodded, grinning. The cart was so full by then I no longer saw what was ahead of me.

The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying, “Get out. Get out.” And I ran out the door, down the black summer streets. I ran until I forgot I was ten, until my heartbeat was all I could hear of myself. (9)

In this passage, both worlds of love and hurt are evident. Vuong’s repetition of “the time...” to begin each of these images creates a list-like effect, establishing the expectation that all of these memories share something in common. However, within the frame of this expectation, the dichotomy between the scene of a mother and son at Six Flags, and the scene of a mother threatening her son with a kitchen knife, feels all the more jarring. In addition, on the surface, these scenes are not unusual memories of a typical child— riding roller coasters at Six Flags, forgetting to “say thank you” to one’s mother, shopping at Goodwill, and “splurging” for one’s birthday. Yet, despite this atmosphere of familiarity, these scenes are rooted within a world that only refugees and immigrants could possibly experience, condensed within the question, “Do I look like a real American?” The inclusion of the word “real” within this question, rather than simply asking, “Do I look like an American?,” suggests a deeper conflict with Vuong’s mother’s American identity— that, even if one feels that they are “American,” there remains the larger question of whether or not they truly exist as one. This divide between a “normal” childhood experience, and one marked by the experience of a war refugee and immigrant, is one that is prominent throughout the entire novel. Another example of this occurs later in the chapter, when the scene of Little Dog and his mother at Goodwill returns as a heartbreaking display of his mother’s illness:

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, to say that to possess a heartbeat is not as simple as the heart's task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body./

I don't know.

What I do know is that, back at Goodwill, you handed me the white dress, your eyes glazed and wide. "Can you read this," you said, "and tell me if it's fireproof?" I searched the hem, looked at the print on the tag and, not yet able to read myself, said, "Yeah." Said it anyway. "Yeah," I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. "It's fireproof."

...

"That's so good to know, baby." you said, staring off, stone-faced, over my shoulder, the dress held to your chest. "That's so good." (13-14)

In this scene, Vuong's mother's concerns with the white dress at Goodwill range from "Do I look like a real American?" and, now, "Can you... tell me if it's fireproof?" These two questions illustrate the primary concerns of someone who is both an immigrant and a war refugee— concerns that a non-refugee or non-immigrant would likely never consider. Furthermore, framing these concerns of violence and identity within as mundane and common of an action such as shopping for a dress creates a heartbreaking contrast, and suggests that these experiences are ones that have the capability of affecting one's daily life and routine. In the first paragraph of this passage, Vuong ponders the reasons for his mother's abusive tendencies, and suggests that they are possibly tied to her PTSD. Whereas on one side, Vuong's mother's experiences of war and being an immigrant has affected the smaller, daily aspects of her life, on the other side, they create more serious and heavier consequences. Yet, what makes Vuong's essay all the more powerful is that despite his suffering as a child, he never frames his mother within a

directly negative light: “Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war, to say that to possess a heartbeat is not as simple as the heart’s task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body.” Rather, Vuong paints a portrait of his mother as a victim of her experiences—as a damaged human being who is merely tugged by the wake of her own violent and traumatic past.

In a 2011 interview for *PANK Magazine*, Vuong was asked the question: “How much personal narrative is at play [in Vuong’s chapbook *Burnings*] and how much is history being retold through generations?” Vuong recounts a memory of when he first arrived to America in 1990, where, after dinner every night, he and his family would gather around his grandmother and tell stories. He continues:

When I started to write poems, I wanted to honor these memories. And when my grandmother died, this pledge was even stronger. Because I am the only literate person in my family (the war interrupted everyone’s educations), I write their history as a way of keeping these stories alive. But I do take some liberties as a poet. My Vietnam is transgressive, it is not concerned with specifics or accuracy. It is the Vietnam that rears its hideous head again and again throughout our human history; it is the Vietnam of the Middle East, the one in our streets, our homes, and our hearts.

To Vuong, the accuracies and “specifics” of history are less important to him as a poet than the memories of it— what he calls “human history.” Furthermore, the word choice of “honor” and “pledge” implies that Vuong carries almost a sense of obligation or duty towards preserving these memories in his poetry, for both himself, and for his family, who were not given the privilege of learning how to read and write. Vuong’s use of the possessive “my” to describe Vietnam illustrates how the Vietnam of Vuong’s poetry is not necessarily concerned with the historical accuracies or factual details— rather, it is

driven by personal experience and memory, which lies “in our streets, in our homes, and our hearts.” In this way, for Vuong, Vietnamese culture and history within his poetry are deeply embedded in the world of the personal.

One way in which Vuong preserves Vietnam and his family’s history within his poem is by framing elements of violence and war within a contrasting or shifted lens. In the poem “Kissing in Vietnamese,” Vuong contrasts images of brutal war against images of love and comfort. The poem begins:

My grandmother kisses  
as if bombs are bursting in the backyard,  
where mint and jasmine lace their perfumes  
through the kitchen window,  
as if somewhere, a body is falling apart  
and flames are making their way back  
through the intricacies of a young boy’s thigh,  
as if to walk out the door, your torso  
would dance from exit wounds.

The poem immediately begins with contradicting images— the first line presents an image of the grandmother kissing, suggesting a feeling of love or tenderness. However, the next line portrays bombs “bursting in the backyard,” creating a completely contrasting image of violence and chaos. The enjambment of the first line, which leaves off after the word “kisses,” builds a tension towards the next line, further adding to this contrast. In addition, the alliteration of “bombs,” “bursting,” and “backyard” almost accentuates the image it is conveying, as the consonant “b” carries an articulated, punch-like sound. This contrast between images of romance and softness against images of violence continues after these first lines. The next image, “mint and jasmine lace their



perfumes / through the kitchen window,” suggests comfort and domesticity, as the setting of a kitchen is a familiar one, and the scents of “mint” and “jasmine,” in addition to the word “perfumes,” add a rich sensory aspect to the image. The word choice of the verb “lace” also presents a sense of delicateness. These images not only contrast the previous line, where “bombs are bursting in the backyard,” but also the following lines, where “a body is falling apart” and “flames” are moving “through the intricacies of a young boy’s thigh.” The final line of this passage, “your torso / would dance from exit wounds” also ends on a contradiction, as the use of the word “dance” to describe a body’s reaction to being wounded shifts the image away from its expected violence and instead towards a romanticized version of it. It is also significant to note that all of these contradictions previously mentioned occur within a single sentence. The density and the close proximity of these contrasting images create a world of many complexities and fleeting moments. In this way, the speaker’s grandmother’s “kissing” encompasses so much: from the violence of bombs and fire to the romance of scent and touch. The poem continues:

When my grandmother kisses, there would be  
 no flashy smooching, no western music  
 of pursed lips, she kisses as if to breathe  
 you inside her, nose pressed to cheek  
 so that your scent is relearned  
 and your sweat pearls into drops of gold  
 inside her lungs, as if while she holds you  
 death also, is clutching your wrist.  
 My grandmother kisses as if history  
 never ended, as if somewhere  
 a body is still  
 falling apart.

This final section of the poem begins a new sentence, reiterating the initial sentiment of the grandmother's kissing. However, here the speaker begins by describing it by what it is not. The phrases "flashy smooching" and "pursed lips" almost frame this type of kissing within a negative light, as the word "flashy" implies connotations of being excessive. The comparison to it as "western music" ultimately ties this version of "kissing" to Western culture—in other words, the grandmother's kissing is characterized by its lack of Western-ness. The following images are extremely physical, and phrases such as "breathing you inside her," "nose pressed to cheek," and "your sweat pearls...inside her lungs" suggest a physical closeness between the grandmother and the "you"—to the point where the two bodies almost appear to merge with one another, as implied in the repetition of the word "inside." Rather than simply conveying the intimacy and comfort that comes with physical touch, the fact that the "grandmother kisses" to the point of "you" going "inside her" raises the stakes of this image, shifting it more towards one of desperation and urgency. The poem ends with the repetition of the image of "a body...falling apart." The addition of the word "still" serves as a chronological continuation of the same image that had appeared earlier in the poem. However, the enjambment that occurs after the word "still" isolates the phrase "a body is still," presenting the possibility of another meaning for the word: "still" as in "unmoving." In this definition, the image of a "body" being unmoving is reminiscent of the image of "death" mentioned a few lines before.

Similar to this re-framing of violence and war, in several of his poems, Vuong illustrates scenes from the Vietnam War—a war Vuong had not fully experienced—

through contrasting voices and images. The poem “Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds,” from Vuong’s first full-length collection of poems *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, begins:

Instead, let it be the echo to every footstep  
 drowned out by rain, cripple the air like a name  
 flung onto a sinking boat, splash the kapok’s bark  
 through rot & iron of a city trying to forget  
 the bones beneath its sidewalks, then through  
 the refugee camp sick with smoke & half-sung  
 hymns, a shack rusted black & lit with Bà Ngoai’s  
 last candle, the hogs’ faces we held in our hands  
 & mistook for brothers...

The poem begins immediately with a sense of already being in motion, with the phrase “instead, let it be...” The word “instead” is asserted with no context at all, and begs the question: instead of what? In addition, the pronoun “it” establishes a sense of ambiguity or unknowing towards the identity of the subject being addressed. Despite this ambiguity, the speaker’s voice carries a confident assurance through the use of the imperative. In this way, the lack of context and specificity, combined with the speaker’s assertive voice, creates the feeling that the world of this poem has already been set in motion, and that the opening of this poem occurs somewhere in the midst of it. The images that follow in this passage paint a picture of Vietnam struck in the violence and tragedies of war. Vuong uses personification to illustrate this war— describing a city “trying to forget / the bones beneath its sidewalks” and a refugee camp “sick with smoke.” In addition, much like the poem “Kissing in Vietnamese,” the poem juggles images of explicit violence with brutality and images that display vulnerability or human emotion, such as love and sadness. For example, the refugee camp is “sick with smoke” but also “half-sung hymns.”

The singing of “hymns” within a refugee camp represents a glimmer of solace within a time of suffering; yet, the addition of “half-sung” reveals a heartbreaking gesture towards the death that had ultimately occurred. In addition, the “shack” in the following image is not only “rusted black,” but is “lit with Bà Ngoại’s (trans. “Grandmother’s”) / last candle.” There is a sense of hope established between the contrast of the “black” of the shack and the image of a candle lighting it— yet, in the same way as the refugee camp, the word “last” implies a tragic ending.

...let it enter a room illuminated  
 with snow, furnished only with laughter, Wonder Bread  
 & mayonnaise raised to cracked lips as testament  
 to a triumph no one recalls, let it brush the newborn’s  
 flushed cheek as he’s lifted in his father’s arms, wreathed  
 with fishgut & Marlboros, everyone cheering as another  
 brown gook crumbles under John Wayne’s M16, Vietnam  
 burning on the screen, let it slide through their ears,  
 clean, like a promise, before piercing the poster  
 of Michael Jackson glistening over the couch,

This next section of the poem is littered with phrases that reference familiar American tokens or symbols, such as “Wonder Bread / & mayonnaise,” “Marlboros,” “John Wayne,” and “Michael Jackson.” The fact that the poet does not simply use the word “bread” or “cigarettes,” instead naming specific brand names and people, illustrates a deliberate choice to define what is “American.” These objects are characterized within the frame of the war and violence of Vietnam— the “Wonder Bread” represents “a triumph no one recalls,” the father smells of not only “Marlboros,” but “fishgut,” “Vietnam / burn[s] on the screen” while “everyone cheer[s],” and the poster of Michael Jackson is “pierc[ed].” The juxtaposition of images of violence alongside these iconic

American objects suggests the speaker's resentment towards America, particularly within the context and period of the Vietnam War. In this way, these images portray America as a country of false triumph and reverence—a place where, in the midst of all of its apparent glory, Vietnam continues to lie in the background, “burning” and suffering.

...let it hit his jaw like a kiss  
 we've forgotten how to give one another, hissing  
 back to '68, Ha Long Bay: the sky replaced  
 with fire, the sky only the dead  
 look up to, may it reach the grandfather fucking  
 the pregnant farmgirl in the back of his army jeep,  
 his blond hair flickering in napalm-blasted wind, let it pin  
 him down to dust where his future daughters rise,  
 fingers blistered with salt & Agent Orange, let them  
 tear open his olive fatigues, clutch that name hanging  
 from his neck, that name they press to their tongues  
 to relearn the word *live, live, live*—but if  
 for nothing else, let me weave this deathbeam  
 the way a blind woman stitches a flap of skin back  
 to her daughter's ribs.

This passage references Vuong's own personal lineage, beginning when his grandfather, an American soldier, met a Vietnamese farmgirl, Vuong's grandmother, during the war. The grandfather's hair is described as being “blonde,” deliberately pointing the reader towards the fact that this man is not Vietnamese. The descriptions of the “army jeep,” “olive fatigues,” and mention of dog tags “hanging / from his neck” further imply that he is an American soldier. However, the elements of this love story are tainted with the brutality of the Vietnam War. Even nature, which is often expected to be described for its beauty and scenery, is shifted towards the lens of the war— for example, the sky is

“replaced / with fire,” and becomes a place “only the dead / look up to.” The grandfather and the girl follow this pattern as well. The use of the word “fucking” is almost shocking in its explicit candidness. The enjambment adds a breath after the word, further isolating it and adding an even more powerful emphasis. Moreover, the image of this sex occurring “in the back of his army jeep” presents a gritty urgency to the portrayal of this relationship. The following imagery continues to be laced with images of the war, as the hair is “flickering” not simply in wind, but “napalm-blasted wind,” and the grandfather’s fingers are “blistered with salt & Agent Orange.” These are not just violent images of any war; they are images that belong specifically to the Vietnam War, as the speaker specifies details such as “Agent Orange” and the year “’68.” These details of the war are deliberately planted within images of banality or familiarity, such as the sky, hair blowing through wind, or two people having sex. Through this framework, the reader is told not only the events of the war itself, but what it causes Vietnam to lose— creating a heartbreakingly emotional image of Vietnam, and how the war affected every aspect of the setting, from its people, to its sky, to one’s fingers, to how one understands the word “*live*.” The poem ends:

Yes—let me believe I was born  
to cock back this rifle, smooth & slick, like a true  
Charlie, like the footsteps of ghosts misted through rain  
as I lower myself between the sights—& pray  
that nothing moves.

This last sentence circles back to the beginning of the poem, as the “echo to every footstep / drowned out by rain” now becomes “the footsteps of ghosts misted through rain.” However, despite this cyclical closure, the place of the speaker has now shifted.

The “echo” of footsteps in the opening, alongside images of a “boat” and a “city trying to forget,” implies escape or refuge from the violence of the war. However, here the speaker takes the place of “a true / Charlie” (Charlie was shorthand for the Viet Cong during the war), and is now holding a “rifle.” In this image, the speaker is now a part of the violence and war, rather than the victim of it. These “footsteps” becoming “ghosts” further illustrates the speaker’s distance from the role of the victim. Despite this reversal of roles, the last line— “& pray / that nothing moves”— creates an ambiguity of the speaker’s purpose as a “Charlie.” On one hand, a target that does not move is one that is easier to shoot, aligning with the expected hopes of a soldier— but on the other side, the use of the word “nothing” could possibly imply the speaker’s wish for “nothing,” as in the absence of anything, to appear, let alone move. In this reading, the speaker, even in this position of power as a Viet Cong soldier, is ultimately one who still resists the violence and suffering of war that had been so harrowingly described.

Vuong also uses language and metaphor to reimagine his parents’ experiences. In his poem “My Father Writes From Prison,” from his poetry collection *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, Vuong takes on the perspective of his father in prison writing a letter to his mother. The poem begins:

Lan oi,  
 Em khoe khong? Gio em dang o dau? Anh nho em va con qua. Hon nua &  
 there are things / I can say only in the dark / how one spring / I crushed a  
 monarch midflight / just to know how it felt / to have something change /  
 in my hands / here are those hands / some nights they waken when  
 touched / by music or rather the drops of rain / memory erases into  
 music...

The poem opens in Vietnamese, Vuong's father's native language. The language roughly translates to: "How are you? Where are you now? I miss you and me more though." However, almost immediately, the poem moves to English with the line "Hon nua & there are things..." The ampersand acts almost as a bridge between the two languages. It not only represents the actual word "and," which in itself carries the definition of connecting, but also serves as a concrete, physical symbol that visually appears to stand between the two languages— an effect that would not be present had Vuong simply spelled out the word "and." In addition to this transition, Vuong's choice to use English, despite the fact that he is taking on the role of his father in this poem, is particularly significant in the context of Vuong's biography. Vuong has stated in an interview that his entire family is illiterate in English, as their educations were interrupted due to the Vietnam War. Therefore, the fact that Vuong writes a poem that is taking on the voice, and reliving the experiences, of his father in English— a language that his father has never spoken— illustrates Vuong's deliberate choice to stray from the truth of this experience. At the same time, Vuong is not writing of an experience that is completely crafted, either— he still begins the poem in Vietnamese, a voice that rings true to his father's. Furthermore, the contrast between the simple, conversational language of the Vietnamese, such as "How are you?" to the more poetic and vivid language of the English, such as "memory erases into music," suggests that the author of the letter can express his emotions more explicitly and distinctively in English than in Vietnamese. Therefore, in deliberately transitioning the language of the poem into English, Vuong takes on a persona of his father that is not a portrait of his actual father, but rather Vuong's own version and portrayal of him.



In addition to his use of language, Vuong also uses metaphor to reimagine his parents' experiences. In his poem "Immigrant Haibun," Vuong tells the story of his parents as immigrants, framing it as a love story. The poem begins:

Then, as if breathing, the sea swelled beneath us. If you must know anything, know that the hardest task is to live only once. That a woman on a sinking ship becomes a life raft— no matter how soft her skin. While I slept, he burned his last violin to keep my feet warm. He lay beside me and placed a word on the nape of my neck, where it melted into a bead of whiskey. Gold rust down my back. We had been sailing for months. Salt in our sentences. We had been sailing— but the edge of the world was nowhere in sight.

The poem begins in the first person, similar to Yang's narration. The reader can interpret that the "we" and "us" in this poem refers to Vuong's parents, from a line later in the poem: "*I will name our son after this water. I will learn to love a monster.*" As mentioned in an article in *The Last Magazine*, Vuong's mother had named him after the ocean she had crossed to come to America. However, the comparison of the "water" to "a monster" implies a sense of resentment towards the ocean— which, when viewed in this context, mirrors the ocean that is crossed when emigrating from one's home country to America. The imagery in this passage is also extremely vivid. Images such as a word "melt[ing] into a bead of whiskey," "salt in...sentences," and a woman becoming "a life raft" establish a world that surreal, metaphoric, and removed from the material reality we know. At the same time, the images create an atmosphere of desperation and hopelessness, implied in the lines "the hardest task is to live only once" and "the edge of the world was nowhere in sight." This sense of desolation, however, is juxtaposed to the intimate romance of the two lovers, as seen in the line "he burned his last violin to keep

my feet warm,” where the father sacrifices something for the sake of the mother. The use of the word “last” suggests that other violins has been burned before this, and brings forth a sense of finality and loss.

Despite this descriptive, rich, and visceral imagery of the opening passage, which is typical of many haibun poems, the narrative faces a plot twist in its second half:

And here's the kicker: there's a cork where the sunset should be. It was always there. There's a ship made from toothpicks and superglue. There's a ship in a wine bottle on the mantel in the middle of a Christmas party—eggnog spilling from red Solo cups. But we keep sailing anyway. We keep standing at the bow. A wedding cake couple encased in glass. The water so still now. The water, like air, like hours. Everyone's shouting or singing and he can't tell whether the song is for him— or the burning rooms he mistook for childhood. Everyone's dancing while a tiny man and woman are stuck inside a green bottle thinking someone is waiting at the end of their lives to say *Hey! You didn't have to go this far. Why did you go so far?* Just as a baseball bat crashes through the world.

In this passage, the narrative of the poem comes to a heartbreaking realization that all the imagery that had been previously described exists within a much smaller scale than initially implied— the entire world of the poem is amounted to a ship in a bottle on top of someone’s “mantel.” The use of words such as “toothpicks” and “superglue” suggest a sense of a faux or constructed reality. Furthermore, the image of the bottle on “the mantel in the middle of a Christmas party,” with “eggnog spilling from red Solo cups” and everyone “shouting or singing” sets the scene of a much larger, chaotic world that exists beyond that of the ship in the bottle. Through this metaphor, the world of the two lovers becomes incredibly small and insignificant in its scale. This portrayal of Vuong’s parents’ immigrant experience as a metaphor, and furthermore a metaphor that is so

surreal and removed from the world we know, distances this experience from the possibility of being history.

Through these descriptions of the Vietnam War, the choice to write in his parents' voices, the presence of the Vietnamese language, and the use of myth-like metaphors, Vuong deliberately distances the world of his poems from a believable reality. Through these methods of storytelling, Vuong does write with the purpose of staying true to the facts and evidence of the actual history itself. Rather, he deliberately makes artistic choices, such as narrative and metaphor, to distance these stories from reality and retell them through his own unique voice. What is the purpose, then, of retelling these experiences as one's own? One answer is that in doing so, Vuong is searching for a way to understand and grapple with his own culture, heritage, and roots. Although the specific information of the stories may be distanced from reality, the emotional suffering, pain, and loss of the experiences of being an immigrant and refugee are poignantly discernable. In this way, reimagining the experiences of one's parents— and furthermore the emotions they felt—within the language of poetry allows one to stir a sense of strength and belonging within one's sense of identity.

## Chapter 3

## Sounds of Grief: Invention and Identity in the Works of Cathy Park Hong

If Ocean Vuong's poetry, in its surreal metaphors and mythical images, deliberately strays from the facts of traumatic events, Cathy Park Hong's work invents entirely new ones. As *The Rumpus* writes in a review of Hong's poetry collection, *Engine Empire*: "Hong's role as artist is also a dual one of both synthesis of the existing ideas and history of a place-time and then creation of new narratives on top of this history."

Cathy Park Hong is a poet born to Korean parents in 1976, and raised in Los Angeles, California (*Academy of American Poets*). *Engine Empire* contains three sections; the first is titled "Ballad of Our Jim," and follows a band of outlaw fortune seekers who travel to a California boomtown in the 1800s. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Hong explains: "The boomtown isn't real; it's full of strange, violent, sometimes surreal happenings. It's my own way of mythologizing California, which is where I'm from." When asked about how she views the myth of the Western world, specifically the American West, Hong replied that *Engine Empire* seeks to explore "the colonialist and capitalist implications" of the frontier, particularly ideas such as Manifest Destiny. She describes the frontier as "lawless," and centered around the obsession of "remaking" oneself and building a "new world" within a new territory. Yet, she points out that new territories do not truly exist, as there are always previous cultures and societies that have taken up that space already—in this way, violence is inevitable. Hong's idea of the Western frontier is one that aligns with its conventional portrayal as a lawless world carrying hope for fostering new lives—yet at the same time, beneath this fantasy lies the

darker implications of spilled blood, and furthermore the destruction of civilizations and their cultures.

The first section of the collection begins with a series of poems titled “Fort Ballads.” Some of these ballads follow a more linear narrative, centered around a character referred to as “Our Jim,” who Hong describes as a “typical iconic Western guy,” reminiscent of Billy the Kid and Huckleberry Finn— “an orphan, a cipher, a boy trapped between identities, both innocent and vengeful.” Jim is first introduced in the second poem of the section, “Ballad of Fort Mann,” which opens:

Come to a fort of ragged cedar posts,  
rigged together by rodent sinews of prairie dogs.  
We holler and little boys peek from above,  
their faces seared by blast wind.

:Who you be? What you want? They shout thinly.  
Boys in rags and twine suspenders hold Winchesters  
much too big for them. They aim at us.

:Where all yer pops?

The poem begins with the imperative “come,” in addition to a description of the “fort,” which is presumably Fort Mann. The speaker’s voice exists as a “we” pronoun instead of “I,” presenting a sense of company and solidarity within a group rather than an individual. The setting of the Western frontier in this poem is prominently violent, which is apparent in the phrases “rodent sinews of prairie dogs” and the later image of being “axed in the head.” In addition, there is an implication of poverty or decrepitude, which can be seen in the “ragged cedar posts” and the “rags and twine suspenders.” Furthermore, the language of the dialogue, and the speaker’s voice itself, is casual,

conversational, and directed by a slang-filled drawl. This can be seen in the dialogue of the “little boys” saying “Who you be? What you want?,” “Where all yer pops?,” in addition to the speaker’s voice, which states later in the poem, “But our...boy’s head done turned.” Through the imagery and physical descriptions of the setting, as well as the voices and the language of the characters and speaker, the poem opens with a very clear picture of a typical Western frontier. The poem continues:

We lost a brother, axed in the head by a rancid trapper,  
 so we pluck one boy from the litter,  
 lure him out with hen fruit and fresh violet marrow.  
 We pounce him. Christen him Jim.

But our adapter boy’s head done turned.  
 All he does is sing, his throat a tender lode of tern flutes  
 disturbing our herd, singing of malaria,  
 his murderous, lime-corroded Ma.

In these last two stanzas, the first arrival of Jim occurs within a very unconventional description, marked by its candid and brutal violence, as well as its word choice. Jim’s character is almost objectified, as he is simply plucked from “the litter” by the speaker as a replacement for the lost “brother.” The words “pluck,” “lure,” and “pounce,” in addition to the image of the speaker using food to draw Jim out of the litter, characterize Jim as a weaker and more vulnerable prey. Furthermore, the fact that he is called “our Jim” throughout the ballads implies possession or ownership over him. However, in the next stanza, this quickly changes, as the speaker states: “our adapter boy’s head done turned.” Yet, instead of bursting out in an act of defiance or even violence as one might possibly expect, he sings— his voice described by the speaker as “a tender lode of tern

flutes.” Yet, in spite of this surprising moment of tenderness and sweetness, the poem quickly turns back to “malaria” and a “murderous, lime-corroded Ma.” In this section, there is wordplay involved within the words “malaria” and “Ma,” as well as “turned” and “tern” earlier on in the stanza. With this addition of sonic wordplay, the poem almost transforms into a musical and lyrical structure of language by its end, rather than simply being a story or narrative poem.

In addition to crafting fictive settings, worlds, and characters within the worlds of her poems, Hong also places an emphasis on language. The first poem of *Translating Mo'um*, Hong's debut poetry collection, titled “Zoo,” explores and experiments with the idea of language— not only referring the languages of specific countries, but also the physical qualities of language, such as how it sounds, how it moves, and how it appears.

The poem begins:

*Ga*        The fishy consonant,  
*Na*        The monkey vowel.  
*Da*        The immigrant's tongue  
              as shrill or guttural.

Overture of my voice like the flash of bats.  
The hyena babble and apish libretto.

Piscine skin, unblinking eyes.  
Sideshow invites foreigner with the animal hide.

The poem begins immediately with the first three letters of the Korean alphabet: *ga*, *na*, and *da*. The descending appearance of these syllables, in addition to the blank, white space separating them from the lines in English, creates a physical and distinctly visible estrangement between the two languages of Korean and English. In addition to this

physical separation, the combination of animal images, such as “fishy,” “monkey,” “bats,” “hyena,” and “apish,” are placed alongside words that reference sound or language, such as “consonant,” “vowel,” “tongue,” “voice,” “babble,” and “libretto.” This juxtaposition suggests the characterization of language, specifically the Korean words presented at the beginning of the poem, as animalistic and almost primal. This also relates to the appearance of words such as “immigrant” and “foreigner.” In this way, the physical separation of the Korean syllables from the English mirrors the isolated figure of a foreigner. However, with the addition of these similes and references to animals, an implication lies that this figure of Korean language is not only separated in terms of physical space, but also socially, as it is defined by its animal and beastly nature.

Park also plays with sound throughout the poem. In the next line, she writes: “Alveolar *tt*, sibilant *ss*, and glottal *hh*.” These very sounds, including other doubled letters such as *ll* and *gg*, are abundant within other parts of the poem, in words such as “libretto,” “shrill,” “guttural,” “rugged,” among others. This creates a heightened attention towards the sonic effect and articulation of the words, particularly within the scope of the content of the poem itself, which concerns themes of language, words, and phonetics. The poem continues:

<i>shi:</i>	poem
<i>kkatchi:</i>	maggie
<i>ayi:</i>	child

In this next section of the poem, the same format from the opening of the poem reappears, where the Korean words create a column on the left side, followed by a column of blank space, followed by a column of English on the right side. However, unlike the beginning, where the Korean side consisted of consonants from the Hangul



alphabet, and the English lines were full phrases, here the Korean strays from the alphabet and the English consists of a single word. Furthermore, these words are literal, direct translations of the Korean terms to their left. In this change, the poem moves its portrayal of Korean language from its most basic, skeletal attributes— its alphabet— towards actual meaning. In addition, the act of directly translating the poem from Korean to English suggests a bridging together between the two languages.

However, later on in the poem, this format of Korean language being placed next to, and isolated from, English language returns to that of the beginning:

*La*      the word  
*Ma*      speaks  
*Ba*      without you

as well as:

*Sa*      glossary  
*Ah*      din  
*Ja*      impossible word

In this return to the Korean alphabet, and non-literal English translations, the previous bridging together of the two languages is distanced once again, as the Korean words return to their most basic form, and the English has no immediately direct relationship to the Korean words it follows. Similarly, the content of the English phrases themselves point towards feelings or distance or foreignness in the idea of language, such as “the word / speaks / without you,” and the last phrase, “impossible word.”

In addition to the themes of language and words, the speaker also refers to their own personal life. There are implications that the speaker is a descendant of immigrants, as the poem states: “Mother and Father obsessed with hygiene: / as if to rid themselves of

their old third world smell.” In addition to the term “third world,” which suggests a country foreign to America, the action of cleaning themselves to “rid...of their old third world smell,” implies a negative attitude or a desire to separate themselves from this foreign country. Similarly, later on in the poem, the speaker recalls a past memory: “I dreamed a Korean verse, a past conversation / with Mother when they said I was blathering unintelligibly / in my sleep.” The relationship between the speaker’s Korean heritage is undeniably tied to its language and words— the speaker’s dream is not visual or imagistic, as many dreams tend to be, but instead consists of “verse.” Furthermore, the dream causes the speaker to “[blather] unintelligibly” in their sleep, which is reminiscent of the “hyena babble” mentioned earlier in the poem. The poem ends:

Macaws turned into camouflaged moths.  
 The sky was overcast, the ocean a slate gray  
  
 along the wolf-hued sand. I dived into the ocean  
 swam across channels to islands without flags;  
  
 replaced the jingoist’s linotype with my yellowing  
 canines and shrilled against the anemic angel who  
  
 cradled the bells that dictated time and lucid breath.

In these last lines of the poem, the speaker establishes a world that had been absent from the poem until now: a world of an “ocean,” “sky,” and “islands.” Despite the fact that these images often imply calmness or beauty of nature, there are hints of the brutality and tension that are present throughout the rest of the poem. For example, the sky is described as “overcast,” the sand is “wolf-hued,” and the islands have no “flags.” In addition, there are many references towards the idea of foreignness, as the images of ocean and islands

subtly suggests the journey of an immigrant, and a “jingoist” is someone who practices patriotism in the form of aggressiveness or violence towards foreigners or foreign countries. With this in mind, these images, as well as the speaker’s actions, can be seen as a resistance against this very aversion to foreigners. Furthermore, the use of the word “shrilled” is reminiscent of the line from the beginning of the poem, “The immigrant’s tongue / as shrill or guttural.” Through this, the speaker steps into the role of “the immigrant” and reclaims this identity through the medium of words and language, which is apparent in the presence of “linotype” (a machine that produces letters as strips of metals for typesetting) as well as the mouth-related imagery of “canines” and “breath.” In the beginning, the poem’s constant referencing to words and language, placed alongside imagery of animals and brutality, paints a portrait of the foreigner as a figure of isolation and “impossible words,” where the references to animals in phrases such as “monkey vowels” and “apish libretto” are used in an almost mocking and negative light. However, by this ending, this foreigner figure is transformed into one that uses language as a weapon, using the animal imagery of “yellowing / canines,” to resist against the “jingoists.”

While many of the poems of *Engine Empire* follow a more linear and direct narrative, such as in “Ballad of Fort Mann,” some of the poems consist mostly of sound-based language, in addition what Hong herself once described as “kitschy Western vernacular.” This is especially evident in the last ballad of “Fort Ballads,” titled “Ballad in O:”

O Boomtown’s got lots of sordor:  
 odd horrors of throwdowns,  
 bold cowboys lock horns,

forlorn hobos plot to rob

pots of gold, loco mobs  
 drool for blood, howl or hoot,  
 for cottonwood blooms, throng  
 to hood crooks to strong wood posts.

From the title itself, the reader can deduct that there is some significance placed on the letter “O,” which is asserted from the very opening of the poem, “O Boomtown...” Furthermore, throughout the entire poem, every single word contains the letter “o.” There is an abundant variety in how the “o” themselves function sonically, such as the long “oo” in “drool” and “blooms,” the softer “oo” in “wood” and “hood,” the even softer “oo” in “blood,” the round “o” in “hobos” and “gold,” the shorter “o” in “odd” and “lots,” among many others. With this variety of sound, the high presence of “o”s within the poem flows like that of typical language, particularly when read aloud. Visually, on the other hand, the poem appears to be saturated with the roundness and openness of the letter “o,” making it appear almost as if it is full of holes. In terms of content, the phrases are still very much set in the Western world of Fort Mann, as implied in the combination and choice of words. For example, the phrases “forlorn hobos,” “loco mobs,” and “hood crooks” paint a picture of figures who are rebellious outcasts—aligning with Hong’s previous description of the West as “lawless.”

So don’t confront hotbloods,  
 don’t show off, go to blows or rows,  
 don’t sob for gold lost to trollops,  
 don’t drown sorrows on shots of grog.

Work morn to mood.

Know how to comb bottom pools,  
 spot dots of gold to spoon pots of gold.  
 Vow to do good.

In this last section of the poem, the imperative of “don’t...” is repeated several times. The word “don’t” carries an elongated “o” sound, and with this repetition, the sonic presence of the “o” becomes much more conspicuous in comparison to the previous two stanzas, where there was much more variety in how the “o” sounded. This particular poem has a lack of the pronoun “we,” or the presence of any characters in general, in comparison to its previous ballads. Instead, the speaker almost seems to be addressing the reader, which is especially clear in the imperatives in these last two stanzas. In this way, “Ballad in O” functions less as a narrative poem within “Fort Ballads,” and more as a sound poem. Through the liberal and varying presence of the letter “o”, Hong paints a picture of the myth of the Western frontier that is marked not only by the visceral and imagistic descriptions of its setting, but also by its language, and how it performs both sonically and visually within the poem.

Language takes on a completely new form in *Dance Dance Revolution*, Hong’s second collection of poetry. The two main characters of this collection are the Historian and the Guide. The Historian is a young Korean American woman who occupies the position of recording, translating, and piecing together the historical events that occur within the collection. Her mother had passed away when the Historian was three years old, and her father, a physician, was a part of the Gwangju Uprising, a 1980 massacre of student and pro-democracy protesters by the American-backed South Korean dictatorship of Chu Doo-hwan. As the Historian writes, “I am a historian, you see, but history has always been stingy to me” (21). The guide, on the other hand, is a refugee that fled from

South Korea, after the Gwangju Uprising, to the Desert, a fictional world reminiscent of Las Vegas, with its “state-of-the-art hotels modeled after the world’s greatest cities” (20). Most recognizably, while the Historian speaks and writes Standard English, the guide speaks in the language of the Desert. In the foreword of the collection, the Historian attempts to explain how to understand and translate the Desert language:

In the Desert, the language spoken is an amalgam of some 300 languages and dialects imported into this city, a rapidly evolving lingua franca. The language, while borrowing the inner structures of English grammar, also borrows from existing and extinct English dialects. Here, new faces pour in and civilian accents morph so quickly that their accents betray who they talked to that day rather than their cultural roots. Fluency is also a matter of opinion. There is no tuning fork to one’s twang. Still, dialects differ greatly depending on region. (19)

In this description, the language of the Desert is not restricted to cultural heritage or background, but rather is continuously and “rapidly evolving.” Furthermore, despite the fact that the language itself is fictional, the Desert language is a fusion of existing languages, combining Caribbean with Shakespearean English, Hawaiian pidgin, Spanish, Latin, Korean, among others. Scholar Timothy Yu, in his essay titled “Asian American Poetry in the First Decade of the 2000s,” asserts that in this shift from historical reality to an alternate, fictive world— in addition to blending various languages— Hong “provides an ingenious means of exploring Asian Americans’ complexly mediated relationship with their history.”

While the Historian is described as having attended boarding schools throughout London, Hong Kong, and Connecticut, the guide’s background is tied to a history of political violence and unrest. “Kwangju Replayed” is a poem that, in its description of the

political uprising of Gwangju, exhibits the Desert language's ability to convey its historical complications.

... Metal scrolled ova stores, nu'tting open...  
 ran inside bus as centipede lashed ova Gumnamro...  
 ... arms, de flute rust tarms... stamen up heliotropes  
 shot dead... seismic flute shrilled fo citron tanked throng...  
 ... Sah burn in de gri corona or was it mine...  
 mine fault? ...

mine fault  
 me light der color of *bokum*... arms,  
 Sah de last throng I held...  
 Before I sunk...

The language, as it stands, carries an incredible amount of emotional weight, resisting the need for a line-by-line translation. An example of this is the recurrence of images and voices that echo throughout the poem, such as the repetition of “arms” in the above passage, as well as the recurring question of “want some tea? some pelehoo?” earlier in the poem (which also refers back to the opening of the entire collection). These repeated images and voices are often ones of comfort and tenderness— the embrace of “arms,” and the generous, almost maternal offering of the tea— which, within the violent and chaotic setting of “shots,” “blood marshes,” and “batons,” become heartbreakingly distant moments of warmth. The separation of the phrases and images with ellipses further adds to this effect of fragmented scenes or memories. This effect, therefore, builds a textural landscape of language, rather than a linear narrative. It is a language that does not solely rely on content and meaning, but rather, on the combination of sounds, punctuation, repetition, and fragmented images. Furthermore, in writing in a hybrid

language, the reader is distanced from the speaker's story, only able to pick up words and phrases that can be translated and understood. In a way, this speaks to how the identity, history, and trauma of the guide exist within an isolated and alienated space. As Yu describes:

Without engaging an Asian language directly, Hong creates a sense of linguistic foreignness that powerfully allegorizes the Asian American perspective on language, from the accented speech of the immigrant to the alienated relationship of American-born Asians to their parents' language. (835–836)

Cathy Park Hong's invention and hybridization of settings, characters, and languages in her poetry point towards, as Yu writes, the struggles and grief that come with the Asian American identity. Hong's construction of fictive settings such as the Western boomtown in *Engine Empire*, and the Desert in *Dance Dance Revolution* allows her to craft new narratives that examine certain characteristics within the Asian American identity; for example, colonialism and capitalism, and the violence that inevitably occurs. Moreover, in fixating on the universal aspects of language, such as its visual and sonic qualities, as well as blending together existing languages and dialects, Hong mirrors the confusion and sense of alienation that exists in the Asian American experience of searching for an identity in the midst of inherited trauma, displacement, and isolation. Ultimately, Hong's method of invention in her poetry allows her to craft a parallel narrative of Asian American perspectives and experiences without being restricted to delineate or recount actual historical events.



## Chapter 4

## Raising Water: Inherited Trauma in Emily Jungmin Yoon's

*A Cruelty Special to Our Species*

And yes, so perhaps the world will end in water, taking with it  
all loving things. And yes, in grace. Only song, only buoyancy. You rise now

whispering *murollida, murollida*. Meaning literally, *to raise water*,  
but really meaning *to bring water to a boil*.

And so closes Emily Jungmin Yoon's collection of poetry, *A Cruelty Special to Our Species*, which is centered on the horrors suffered by Korean "comfort women" during Japan's invasion of Korea before and during World War II. This final poem, "Time, in Whales" is written in the voice of these "comfort women" and directed to, presumably, Yoon herself ("Summer of years past: your father across the same ocean to bring you / to America, where you would grow up speaking a language / different from mine."). This poem, in its nostalgic reminiscence, implication of passing time (You will not be called by that name the next day / and years will pass by"), and intimate, urgent voice powerfully speaks to survival and resistance, particularly in context of the rest of the collection, which is filled with the disturbing, tragic, and gruesome history of these "comfort women." The difference between "raising water" and "bringing water to a boil" is that this resistance does not merely lift water; rather, it is a fierce and restless movement that is born from within. I open this chapter with this particular poem to echo the sentiment that despite the world ending in tragedy and destruction— despite the loss of "all loving things"— these victims, and their stories, rise.

In a review of *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* published in *The New York Times*, Bk Fisher writes: “Retelling the testimonies of the ‘comfort women’ forced into prostitution for the Japanese Imperial Army, Yoon takes up the charge of amplifying the voices of an often-overlooked history.” The *Pacific Standard Magazine* describes Yoon’s writing a “mourning,” though not a passive one— “[Yoon] investigates the political, historical, and human conditions that have led to these sorrows, a poetic practice that opens avenues for reparation and resistance.” But the question that arises from these various press reviews is, in writing this collection of poems about the history of “comfort women,” what truly is Yoon’s approach? Are these poems more of a direct retelling of this history, or are they more of a personal response that comes from this “sorrow?” The answer seems to be both: *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* mixes historical accounts with poetic ones (as seen in “Testimonies” and “An Ordinary Misfortune”), violence with tenderness (“My Grandmother Reminisces with Peaches”), and stories of the past with stories of the present (“Hello Miss Pretty Bitch”). In choosing to include these approaches, Yoon builds a narrative that seeks to both make the brutal history of “comfort women” known, and to communicate her own personal response, emotions, and experiences in the wake of this historical event.

Yoon was born in Busan, Korea, before moving to Canada as a girl, then to the United States to earn her undergraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania (Stoner). In her author’s note, Yoon describes her connection and position in writing about these events: in 1991, the year of Yoon’s birth, Kim Hak-Sun became the first former “comfort woman” to offer public testimony of her life as a sex slave. Yoon writes, “As more and more “comfort women”... began to share their testimonies, it was clear:

they were speaking from within, not for, a community.” Yoon goes on to clarify that in her poetry, she does not intend to speak for anyone, but rather to amplify and make these stories known.

Emerging from Yoon’s position comes the term “inherited trauma.” In the world of genetics and biology, the notion of hereditary trauma, described by *Science Daily* as “behavioral disorders [induced by traumatic experiences] that are passed down from one generation to the next,” has been of much debate over recent years. However, in the case of *Cruelty Special to Our Species*, this inherited trauma seems to encompass experiences unrestricted by genetic lineage or relation. When asked where she heard about the history of “comfort women” in a 2019 interview with *The Paris Review*, Yoon responded, “I’ve known it as long as I can remember. It is very much present in our collective memory. In Korea, it is something very immediate and urgent.” In using the term “collective memory,” in addition to the first person plural pronoun “our,” Yoon suggests that inheriting this trauma is not tied to any directly biological constraints, but rather, is concerned with identity. Yoon’s “immigrant, ESL, Korea, and womanly experiences” that exist within her own sense of being is a part of what allows her the capability to suffer, imagine, and respond to this particular event in history.

In the same interview with *The Paris Review*, Yoon further discusses this notion of “inherited trauma.” Kane asks: “How do you balance... factual history and trying to think about the person as an individual with an emotional landscape?” Yoon explains:

I understand that I can never really be in their emotional or psychological state because this is an experience I’m never going to have. I have to approach the poem with the awareness of my privileged knowledge, looking back at their story. And there’s a comfort in doing that. [...] The people who went through the

colonial period and the Korean War and everything that came after, the bloody history of Korea, they're all still alive and their stories are still being found. I'm the one who inherited them. Thinking about what that inherited trauma is and how I'm going to go back to talk about their history, it's always a complicated question. I'm always going to wonder what the best way for me to talk about them is. I think the poems were kind of born out of that struggle. I do believe that every poem is a question rather than a solution. That's how I'm feeling at the moment.

In realizing that “this an experience [she is] never going to have,” Yoon emphasizes the significance of being aware of her own place of privilege as she looks back on these historical events. In highlighting this awareness, Yoon moves these poems away from the category of a documented history, as she makes it clear that they are not coming from someone who had experienced them first-hand. Rather, these poems act as a search—a “question,” as Yoon says—to shed light on both the experiences of these “comfort women” as well as the position of Yoon herself as a poet and a Korean immigrant. In other words, the poems of “inherited trauma” in *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* are not necessarily ones of truthful, informative history—they are poems that attempt to uncover and understand it.

Scattered among the four sections of *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* are nine separate poems, all titled “An Ordinary Misfortune.” These poems are placed in a seemingly sporadic manner throughout the collection, at times occurring one after another, at times distanced further apart. This unpredictable placement mimics the effect of these “ordinary misfortunes” themselves: how these episodes of horror and violence committed against Korean women were entirely ubiquitous and sporadic acts. Additionally, in giving each of these poems the same title, the very nature of these misfortunes are reflected onto the poem itself, suggesting that these events that are so

ordinary, so ubiquitous, they are nearly indistinguishable from one another on the surface.

The first “An Ordinary Misfortune” opens the entire collection. In this particular poem, multiple settings are woven together, most distinguishably, the setting of a train during the war, and the setting of a bar. The poem opens: “Mine is the jam-packed train. The too-weak cocktail.” The juxtaposition of the hyphenated compound words “jam-packed” and “too-weak” creates a rhythmic echo across these opening sentences, pairing the nouns “train” and “cocktail” together to exist within the same setting. This existence is further solidified in the next few sentences, where a scene takes place at “the bar,” yet themes of the war are discernable, such as the interactions between the US, Canada, Japan, and Korea, the mentions of “comfort stations,” “soldiers,” and so on. Later on in the poem, the weaving of these two settings becomes much closer in proximity: “Say, *Drink this soup made of human blood. Say, / The Korean race should be erased from this earth.* Tops down. Bottoms up.” “Bottoms up” refers to the informal saying often used to encourage someone to finish their drink, usually liquor. However, when preceded by the graphic dialogue of “human blood” and the sexually suggestive phrase “tops down,” the familiar, casual saying of “bottoms up” shifts into a gruesome reminder of the sexual assault on Korean women that occurred during the war.

In addition to these stitched-together settings, the poem moves to repeat a specific sentence structure, where a colon connects two separate words, phrases, or sentences.

This structure is executed throughout the entirety of the poem:

This statement by

an American man at the bar: *Your life in Korea would have been a whole lot different without the US.* Meaning: be thankful. This question by a Canadian

girl, a friend: *Why don't you guys just get along?* The guys: Japan and Korea.  
 Meaning: move on. How do I answer that? Move on, move on, girls on the  
 train. Destination: comfort stations. Things a soldier can do: mount you  
 before another soldier is done. [...] Things  
 erased: your name, your child, your history. Your new name: Fumiko, Hanako,  
 Yoshiko. Name of the condom: Charge Number One. Name of the needle:  
 Compound 666. Salvarsan means, an arsenic to save. Ratio 291: 29 soldiers  
 per girl. Actual count: lost. Lost: all. Shot, shot, shot, everybody. Give thanks.

In this particular sentence structure, the colon functions not only as a connection between the two parts of the sentence, but it also creates a tangible pause, establishing a fragmented quality to the speaker's voice. At times, the colon lies in the middle of a longer sentence, such as "This statement by / an American man at the bar: *Your life in Korea would have been a whole lot / different without the US,*" while at other moments in the poem, the colon connects much shorter words or phrases, such as "Destination: comfort stations," and "Lost: all." This irregularity in sentence length develops an unsteady rhythm with these pauses, where the momentum is propelled forward with the shorter sentences and slowed down with the longer ones, further adding to this fragmented, almost mechanical voice. Furthermore, this particular tone is almost reminiscent of a dictionary or encyclopedia, as the sentence structure also suggests a collection of meanings and definitions. But this is no ordinary dictionary, as it is riddled with horrifying accounts of these comfort women's experiences, from the invasion of the Japanese into Korea—"Your new name: Fumiko, Hanako, / Yoshiko," "The guys: Japan and Korea,"—to the rape committed by the soldiers—"Things a soldier can do: mount you / before another soldier is done," "Ratio 291: 29 soldiers / per girl."

The poem ends with the command “Shot, shot, shot, everybody. Give thanks,” another melding together of the worlds of the bar and the war. Whereas the line “Move on, move on, girls on the / train” earlier on in the poem is more clearly part of the comfort women narrative, this last line shifts into a deliberate ambiguity between the two settings that exist within the poem, where the word “shot” implies both shots of liquor and shots from a gun. In doing this, the horrors and trauma of the war are almost masked by the casual, easygoing setting of the bar and its accompanying language. While at moments during the poem, brutality and violence are chillingly explicit, this ending almost serves as a reminder that despite the horrific nature of these events, they were, in the end, seen as entirely ordinary.

The second section of *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* is dedicated to the testimonial accounts of Korean “comfort women,” written in their voices and from their perspectives. Yoon is likely referring to these accounts in her author’s note, where she states that she does not write with the intention to speak for anyone, but rather to make their stories heard. In the same 2019 interview with *The Paris Review* mentioned previously, Yoon says: “We can be manipulated into something, manipulated into creating memories that weren’t there. At a certain point, in certain situations, maybe it doesn’t matter. For me, these memories, whether they happened or not, are very real in how I preserve [them] in my life.” In this quotation, Yoon builds on the concept of inherited trauma by suggesting that imagined memories that are passed down, despite likely not being factually true, are still incredibly powerful and legitimate. In this way, we can view the poems of “Testimonies” as a joining together of historical accounts and imagined accounts from Yoon.

The poems of “Testimonies” are intimately confessional in tone. However, these speakers do not purely speak from a depositional standpoint: at times, the voices of these poems break into lapses in narrative and sentence structure, reflecting the intense emotional suffering of these events. For example, in the poem “Kim Soon-duk,” the speaker begins speaking of her experience as a testimony, recounting her experience to the reader through phrases such as “I wanted...”, “He told me...” and “That night...”, which establish a sense of story-telling or narrative chronology. However, midway through the poem, the speaker moves away from this linear sense of narrative:

My mother was needed at home Mother

Mother I decided to go

they promised a job as a military nurse in Japan

Mother a man gathered us near the county office

and took us to Pusan to Nagasaki

In the first line of this passage, Yoon breaks the line after the word “Mother,” placing emphasis on the word in the pause this enjambment creates. The line also begins with “My mother” and ends with “Mother,” creating almost a bookend effect in this specific line, where the speaker visibly shifts from telling this story to the reader to telling this story to her mother. In this shift, the speaker moves away from the position of someone solely giving a testimony of a historical event, and instead sheds light on the fact that she is also a victim of these events— someone who has faced, and likely is still facing, an immense amount of emotional trauma in its aftermath. The speaker’s direct address to her “Mother,” in addition to the repetition, lack of punctuation, and enjambment builds towards a vulnerable, pleading tone that re-frames this story from an account of historical



events to one of pain and loss. “but Mother, the hardest time was when I was dreaming of suicide / while soldiers were standing in line to satisfy their lust...”

On the other side of these displays of heartbreaking vulnerability, the poems of “Testimonies” are also marked by a voice of candid directness, particularly in describing the horrific violence and crimes that unfolded. In the poem titled “Kim Yoon-shim,” Yoon writes:

One by one they raped all  
 night long      with filthy worldless bodies  
                     my child’s body  
 they impregnated girls and still forced sex  
 When a child was born  
                     a blue-uniformed woman put the body  
                     in a sack      and carried it away  
 soldiers used the “sack”: *saku*  
                     reused condoms      girls got sick  
                     When a girl got too sick  
                     a guard wrapped her body  
                     in a blanket      and carried her away  
 Such was our life  
                     look at my fingers  
                     when I ran away the police smashed my hands  
 weaving a stiff pen between my fingers  
                     like this.  
 Another year passed  
                     like this.

Like all of the poems in “Testimonies,” this poem utilizes the visual space on the page to construct a fragmented narrative of events. The poem’s spacing incorporates physical white space around the borders and in the middle of the text, almost reminiscent of a torn

scrap of paper. Not only does this spacing create the visual effect of a scattered and disjointed form, but the voice of the poem also becomes uneven, erratic, and full of breath. Furthermore, the content and narration of events almost mirrors its fragmented structure, as the speaker shifts topics and scenes sharply and suddenly throughout the poem. An example of this is the use of what is almost word association that occurs in this passage, similar to how the meaning of the word “shot” shifts in the poem “An Ordinary Misfortune,” as mentioned previously. However rather than shifting the definitions of words, in this passage, the same words are used to introduce various scenes and images. For example, the word “sack” exists as multiple images within this poem, from the image of of “a blue-uniformed woman [putting] the body / in a sack” to “reused condoms” to “a guard [wrapping] her body / in a blanket.” The impregnation of the “girls” also reflects an image of the word “sack,” and also acts as a parallel to the scenes of the dead and sick bodies being wrapped. The visual space of the poem is also used simply to isolate and bring attention to certain phrases or lines. An example of this is the parallel indentation of the lines “like this” at the end of the passage. In indenting these two lines and not the line “Another year passed” that lies in between them, the poem’s spacing emphasizes its repetition and consequently its meaning, creating the echo of a haunted memory.

Something that cannot be discounted in reading the poems of *A Cruelty Special to our Species* is Yoon’s unhesitant explicitness in describing the details of this execrable course of events in Korean history. Grotesque images of reused condoms, endless rapes, diseases and miscarriages, tragic deaths, thoughts of suicide and depression, and more are densely packed within the language of this collection, and are in no way adulterated or censored. As the poem “Don’t Touch Me” puts it: “I’m being as honest as a woman can.”

What is the effect of describing these traumatic events within a language of such explicitness? Yoon writes in her author's note, "Poetry is not just relief; poetry is tension. Poetry is departure. Poetry is return. Poetry is memory. (xi)." In other words, one possible answer to this question is that in writing about an event filled with unfathomable violence, the most powerful way to write about such a gruesome history is to simply tell it as it happened.

Yoon's retelling of the experiences of Korean "comfort women" in *A Cruelty Special to Our Species*, in its contrast between moments of tender vulnerability and gruesome explicitness, paints a harrowing illustration of not only what happened, but the impact it left behind, reaching those of distant generations such as Yoon herself. The poems titled "An Ordinary Misfortune" and the poems of "Testimonies" grapple both the informative side of this history as well as its immeasurable mark of suffering. Furthermore, Yoon's fixation on homonyms, translations, and definitions builds a world where, like the speaker in Li-Young Lee's "Persimmons," language is shaped by experience rather than objective rules or facts. In this way, this collection, as Yoon says, becomes "a space in which I conceive disasters, failures and traumas, lending them my own perspective, dimension and articulation" (xi).

## Epilogue

The works of Li-Young Lee, Ocean Vuong, Cathy Park Hong, and Emily Jungmin Yoon undertake multiple approaches in preserving intergenerational and inherited trauma, building both a remembrance of these historic events as well as allowing these writers to embody their personal emotions, experiences, and identity. Li-Young Lee's constantly evolving voice and narrative style in describing his own experiences as well as those of his father's— from the quiet simplicity of "Persimmons" to the lewd and explicit humor of "Our Secret Share"— embodies the act itself of exploring and grappling with these histories. Ocean Vuong depicts his family's trauma by deliberately straying from the informative and factual truth of their experiences, such as his use of myth-like, surrealistic metaphors, seen in the image of his parents immigrating to America suddenly morphing into a tiny, wooden ship in a bottle. Cathy Park Hong invents entirely new worlds and languages, hybridizing references and roots from various sources and implementing visual and sonic experimentation to craft alternate realities. In doing this, Hong constructs a language and world that mirrors characteristics of the Asian American identity. Lastly, Emily Jungmin Yoon, in her debut collection takes on the role of a historian by retelling the experiences of Korean "comfort women" during WWII. Ultimately, I argue that these works are written not solely with the intention to remain truthful to the informative or factual history of these inherited traumatic events, but rather, to preserve and shed light on the emotional impact of them through structural, narrative, and poetic techniques.

I chose to examine the works of Lee, Vuong, Hong, and Yoon in this project primarily because they were crucial to my own search for my identity as a second generation Chinese American, child of immigrants, and someone whose family history was affected by war. The reality, however, is that there is an innumerable amount of stories that have yet to be told, and yet to be known. As a conclusion to this project, I will re-emphasize the necessity of forefronting the stories of marginalized and forgotten events in history, particularly those of minorities, immigrants, and refugees. From the large-scale massacre of Nanjing to the murder of writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, our world's history is brimming with largely forgotten and misleadingly recorded violent events. In memorializing, rebuilding, and complicating these stories in literature, these writers are— as Ocean Vuong puts it— refusing to allow our past to die.

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