

‘There Will Be Fire’: (Re)imagining Vietnamese American citizenship through literature

Isabella Nguyễn Tilley
Stanford University
May 22, 2023

Faculty Advisor:

Michelle Dinh

Second Reader:

Roanne Kantor

Comparative Studies in Race & Ethnicity
Senior Honors Thesis

Table of Contents

Table of contents	1
Introduction	2
Writer's Statements	
Bound to Explode: Rage, Revenge, and Model Minority Subject Formation	15
Clovis, California, and Vietnamese American Relationship to Land	21
Love in the Time after War	23
<i>There Will Be Fire, and other short stories</i>	
Dragon Baby	25
There Will Be Fire	30
Leftover: Ashes	37
Acknowledgements	47
Bibliography	49

Introduction

The past is written through the lens of a projected future, so as to open up possibilities for it.

–Eileen Julien, “The Extroverted African Novel”

Culture, as Lisa Lowe tells us, is a crucial site of citizenship formation. She writes, in *Immigrant Acts*, “It is through the terrain of national culture that the individual subject is politically formed as the American citizen” (2). National culture – through “collectively forged” imagery, history, memory, narrative – is what instills in the American citizen an American ethos, an American *feeling*. While law is what formally determines the citizen or non-citizen resident’s relationship to the nation-state, it is the “terrain” of culture that cultivates an investment in country. Culture, just as much as legal and economic systems, plays a role in determining *who* is a citizen, and how. Culture itself is, of course, produced by citizens, and it is complex and multiplicitous, reflecting the divergent interests of its different producers. Systems of dominance ensure the hegemony of certain narratives and imagery, but culture is nevertheless a site where citizenship is contested, negotiated, reimagined, and redefined.

I recognize “citizenship” as “a kind of legal personhood within a polity defined by ... a state” (De Genova, 36), although in this essay its more relevant significance is that abstract notion of membership to a political community – cultural citizenship, if you will. In examining and reimagining Vietnamese American citizenship, I am interested in how culture defines the relationships and responsibilities that Vietnamese Americans feel to nation, place, and other people, citizens and non-citizens. The relevant political community here is the United States, which is both a settler-colony and global empire, but if you believe, as I do, that liberation necessarily entails an end to this settler-colonial nation and empire, then “political community” also signifies something that does not yet exist, something which must be invented and imagined. The crux of this thesis is an inquiry into how Vietnamese Americans fit into our current polity, the United States, and how new inquiry and imagination could help propel us forward, to something beyond these colonial and capitalist structures. The three stories I have written for this project are my nascent attempts to use fiction as a means of challenging dominant discourses of Vietnamese and Asian American citizenship. Asian American political projects, though they range in how radical their demands for change, have typically sought better inclusion within the settler polity of the United States, a goal that has at many times entailed a racist contradistinction to Blackness and which at all times is fundamentally at odds with the project of decolonization¹. By examining Vietnamese American identity from an alternative point-of-view where we are not positioned solely as victims within narratives about war or fraught national belonging, and by raising considerations of Vietnamese American relationships to place and land in the time of

¹ See Tuck, Eve & K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor.”

climate crisis, this thesis seeks to contribute to a reimagination of political community and citizenship for Vietnamese Americans that is liberatory to all.

This thesis is organized into two parts, academic background and short story collection. In the academic background, I begin with an examination of the contested memories of the Vietnam war and the consequences of the dominant memories² of the war on Vietnamese American citizenship as well as American citizenship more broadly. I will then discuss how Vietnamese American literature, as a form of cultural production, interacts with these dominant narratives, before interrogating how this literature participates in a negotiation of citizenship for Vietnamese Americans. After the introduction, I provide context for each of the three short stories. The last section of this thesis is devoted to the short stories themselves.

Winning the war in memory

There's a famous bookstore in Portland, Oregon. It's cherished for some of the stereotypical reasons people love Portland – the reputedly progressive politics and a specific Pacific Northwest cheery dreariness that seems to complement bookstores especially well. The bookstore is huge – multiple floors with a maze of sections and rooms on each floor, replete with an in-store cafe, a shelf set aside for National Hispanic Heritage Month, an even wider shelf dedicated to mushroom foraging, tables set aside advertising books by Black American authors and authors of Korean descent. The first floor, whose entrance/exit is surveilled by a security guard, is busy, but on one of the quieter floors, there's a “Vietnam war” section. You can stand there for a while, hopefully searching for a Vietnamese name as you side-shuffle slowly down the aisle, as I did, but nearly all the books are by white American men. They vary in genre: veteran memoirs and novels, sensational journalistic accounts of the war from the battleground in Vietnam and clean, cool offices in D.C., tell-alls by military and government officials who believe their perspective will offer something new.

“While the United States lost the war in fact, it won the war in memory,” Viet Thanh Nguyen writes on the subject of this lopsided representation of the Vietnam war, speaking not only of literature but also of moviemaking, fine art, and the production of historical archives (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 15). Memory is not fixed or necessarily based in fact and motivated by truth. It shifts throughout time, is revised every time it is revisited. It is the *narrative* that emerges from a selective remembering and forgetting of the past, a way for the past to stay in the present and guide what we do now.

Collective, public memory helps to explain the *why* of a collectivity, be it a nation, a people, a minoritized community. National memory becomes a part of national culture.

² “Dominant,” I would like to distinguish, does not mean or necessarily imply democratic, meaning that “dominant memory” or “dominant narrative” is not simply the memory or narrative that “most people” remember and agree upon, but the memory/narrative espoused by the dominant, governing power in order to manage people. Considering that power usually does try to convince everyone of its narrative, though, there is of course some overlap in the two concepts of dominant and democratic. This could especially be seen in a majority-white, majority-settler nation-state like the United States, where racism in political structures is construed as the legitimate, democratic expression of popular will (Grosfoguel et. al).

Present-day conflict over what the nation should remember and what it should forget – for example, the decades-long struggle over ethnic studies, highlighted this year by Florida’s rejection of an AP African American studies course (Shah) – is a struggle over the terms of citizenship: who the citizens are, where they live, what they are owed by and what they owe to “the nation” and each other.

The modern nation-state, with its technologies of borders and citizenship, is not natural, immutable, or inevitable³; rather, these are products of specific historical circumstances, and one could conceivably imagine that under a very different set of historical circumstances, or in a future that looks quite different from our present moment, political communities could be organized in another fashion. The designation of certain peoples and places as targets of war and other unlivable conditions is historically produced by a colonial system of domination. Legal systems, military force, and economic networks function together to manifest differential living/dying conditions across the globe, and culture – particularly memory and narrative – motivates and rationalizes these legal, military, and economic actions.

Politically, the Vietnam war is frequently remembered by the U.S. public as “the bad war, a syndrome, a quagmire” (V.T. Nguyen, 5), a memory that must be re-remembered and re-negotiated as federal politicians try to secure the support of American “hearts and minds” for empire-building. In the wake of its loss in Vietnam, the U.S. public generally became rather anti-interventionist in its approach to wars and conflicts in the Global South during the Cold War, a phenomenon which came to be known as the “Vietnam syndrome” in the 1970s (Giovannini, 2). According to the Reagan administration, the Vietnam syndrome was a “disease” (Herring, 594) impairing empire-building military endeavors – in the early 1980s, when the U.S. was backing right-wing militants in El Salvador, some were wary of the intervention because of the memory of U.S. failure in Vietnam (Lewis). To garner more support for imperialist interventions, Reagan, as president, took on the task of reconstructing the memory of the Vietnam war. A 1981 *Virginia Quarterly Review* article quotes him as having said that the Vietnam war was “in truth a noble war” in which the U.S. was helping a “small country newly free from colonial rule” defend itself from a “totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest” (Herring, 594). To remember the Vietnam war as one where the U.S. was nobly supporting a former colony, one must forget the U.S.’s own imperial relationship to Vietnam and its colonial role in the world in general. Reagan’s recall to a memory of an anti-colonial U.S. relies also on a public memory of colonialism as a past event for which only Europe is culpable, rather than an ongoing process and structure in which the U.S. is currently a dominant global force.

The Vietnam war has remained a memory for subsequent U.S. presidents to contend with. One 1990 Newsweek article on George H.W. Bush’s Persian Gulf policy wrote that “Vietnam hangs in the collective subconscious like a bad dream, a psychic wound that leaves the patient forever neurotic. It hovers over politicians and policymakers, the past that will not die,” and a 2009 New York Times article wondered in its headline, “Could Afghanistan become Obama’s

³ Border abolitionists such as Harsha Walia make this clear in their work: www.bostonreview.net/articles/there-is-no-migrant-crisis/

Vietnam?” But even if the Vietnam war is remembered as “quagmire, a stinging loss in need of healing and recuperation” (V.T. Nguyen, 5) and its memory is invoked as a “bad dream” or “psychic wound” that threatens the reputation of American presidents, the U.S., in its own memory, did not lose any moral ground in the war. Loss of the Vietnam war did not entail the U.S. admitting it was wrong and relinquishing global power in support of decolonisation. Books, films, and presidential speeches have successfully recuperated the U.S.’s moral standing. In 2007, the younger George Bush invoked “boat people,” “reeducation camps,” and “killing fields” to argue that withdrawing from Vietnam was a mistake and garner support for the empire-building “war on terror” project (Schlund-Vials, 811). Without explanation of how the two events might actually be related, Bush mentions the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia as a consequence of the Vietnam war that could’ve been avoided had the U.S. and South Vietnam won. Bush’s quote “...new terms like ‘boat people,’ ‘reeducation camps,’ and ‘killing fields’” imprecisely mixes terms from the aftermath of the Vietnam war (boat people and reeducation camps) with events from the Khmer Rouge (killing fields) to create an image of a Southeast Asia plunged into chaos and excessive death upon the withdrawal of American military forces. In this version of events, the death and destruction that the U.S. wrought in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the war either did not happen at all, or did happen but were relatively insignificant.⁴

American entertainment media supplements the imperial goals of this presidential rhetoric. Countless films and books have been produced and published on the subject of the Vietnam war from the perspective of white Americans, while very few Vietnamese perspectives ever penetrate the American market.⁵ There are the war movies set in the war (like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*), the novels, short story collections, and memoirs about veterans’ experiences (e.g. Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* or Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*), the tell-all memoirs advertising a new perspective of what was going on in D.C. while U.S. troops and weapons were in Southeast Asia (such as Daniel Ellsberg’s *Secrets*), and then there are the trickles of representation in media that does not explicitly discuss the war (for example, mentions of “Southeast Asia” and the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” in *Dirty Dancing*).

Stories of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam during the war have become a popular genre in film and literature, and they usually buttress the U.S.’s designation of Vietnamese people as “non-persons” and thus valid targets of war. The films, with their visual vocabulary of greens, browns, and splashes of red and orange whenever there is fire or blood, often depict Vietnamese people as “walking skeletons that barely utter anything comprehensible, even to the ears of those who speak and grew up with the Vietnamese language” (Do), and they are always viewed through “the hostile imperial gaze” of American soldiers (Do). We hear often that Vietnamese

⁴ Schlund-Vials points out that this “selective, opportunistic recapitulation of Southeast Asian history” also leaves out how the U.S. both backed UN-aid to Khmer Rouge leaders who fled to Thailand after their defeat and initially contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge with the 1969-73 “B-52 Menu bombings” targeting North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, the 1970 U.S. and South Vietnam invasion, and the installation of the Lon Nol government in the early 1970s (812-813).

⁵ Scarlette Nhi Do’s brief essay “‘The War Never Ends’: Films about the Vietnam War” in *Limina* provides a short overview of some Vietnamese films produced about the war. She mostly attributes these films’ lack of popularity to the Vietnamese government’s censorship.

are *the enemy* in these stories, although to me the word “enemy” brings to mind a clearly villainous representation, which is frequently not the case for these stories’ representations of Vietnamese characters (and non-characters). The dehumanization is subtly different; it is simply taken for granted that the Vietnamese are the enemy and are there to be killed, whether they are characterized as overtly wicked or not. This is one of the cultural technologies of war-mongering, to depict the enemy as straddling a boundary between setting and character, land and people, a trope which can also be found in the cinematic genre of the Western, a memory-making project seeking to legitimize genocidal westward U.S. expansion. Tim O’Brien’s short story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” from his collection *The Things They Carried*, interestingly engages with that boundary through the character of Mary Anne, a U.S. soldier’s “blond and innocent” girlfriend (151) who comes to keep her boyfriend company in a remote outpost but eventually transforms into an uncontrollable, barefoot warrior who conducts night ambushes with the Green Berets and wears a necklace of human tongues. Mary Anne stays on the U.S. side and aids the Green Berets – formally, she doesn’t cross any national boundaries. She even has a poster that says “ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK!! FREE SAMPLE KIT!!” (159). Yet, her transformation into someone *animalistic* (155), someone close to nature – she “seemed to flow *like water* through the dark” (166, emphasis added) – is seen by the G.I.s as a way of becoming more Vietnamese, more “native.” The world O’Brien shows in his story is a world of the imagination of the U.S. soldier, one in which a Vietnamese enemy is closely related to animalness and landscape.

There is also the problematic trope of the Vietnamese prostitute, interpreted in different ways by films like Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* or Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg’s stage musical *Miss Saigon*. In the former, an unnamed Vietnamese prostitute invites and encourages the objectifying gaze of the American soldiers, with lines like “me love you long time” and “me so horny” portrayed by Chinese British actress Papillon Soo Soo in one scene. Another scene shows a different prostitute barely saying anything while a male pimp advertises her to a group of soldiers. The scenes are disturbing and unsettling, perhaps even more so because the dynamic they portray, of Vietnamese women acting out desire and accommodation so they can profit from the dehumanizing, oversexualizing gaze of American soldiers, could be realistic. The film encourages viewer identification with the American soldiers, though, and there’s consensus in the YouTube comments of Papillon Soo Soo’s clip that the scene is funny⁶. The systems that create a market of sex work are obscured, and so is the violence of the American men. Kubrick’s depiction of Vietnamese prostitutes cannot be disentangled from “the unwritten policy of the U.S. Military Command to systematically encourage rape” (Davis, 177). At the root of both is the racist belief of Vietnamese people’s inferiority and sub-humanness, a lens through which all Vietnamese women, prostitutes or not, become sexually available, disposable, and worth almost nothing (the soldiers in *Full Metal Jacket* pay between five to ten dollars to have sex with the prostitutes, haggling down from fifteen) to men who are worth more because of their whiteness, Americanness, economic power, and weapons. *Miss Saigon*,

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EKqDCFclck>

meanwhile, obscures the violent context by romanticizing the relationship between the seventeen-year-old Vietnamese bargirl, Kim, and the white American soldier, Chris. The play trades out some of Kim's agency⁷ to secure her character's innocence, depicting her as a tragic character who is reliant on Chris to save her. These depictions of Vietnamese women, especially as one of the *only* depictions of Vietnamese women in dominant U.S. cultural production about the war, continue to have consequences for Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women today, with the phenomenon of "sexual tourism" in Vietnam and Southeast Asia generally, and Vietnamese and Asian American women facing sexual violence related to sexist and racist tropes about Asian women.

There is also a genre of Vietnam war era movie that takes place in the U.S., focusing on the domestic turmoil of Civil Rights and anti-war protests. With protagonists who advocate an end to the war, these films seem like they might offer a better representation of Vietnamese people, or present a challenge to U.S. militarism and empire-building. I find, however, that the genre (which I exemplify with Aaron Sorkin's *The Trial of the Chicago 7* and Steven Spielberg's *The Post*) still erases Vietnamese perspectives, and furthermore clears U.S. soldiers of responsibility for violence. Between Sorkin and Spielberg's two movies, Vietnamese people make one appearance, in the introductory montage of *Trial*. Scored with upbeat instrumentation reminiscent of a *Hairspray* number, the montage mixes archival clips of protests, draft announcements, people grieving the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and a few newscasts from Vietnam with fictional scenes of the film's main characters preparing for the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests. "What we saw were population centers. Schoolhouses, pagodas, women and children," we hear a voice narrate over grainy footage of Vietnamese women and children in a small village (2:32). The camera pulls out to show the same footage on a projector in a dark classroom and the shot switches to a drone's view of a forest on fire, with one of the main characters, Rennie Davis, giving a presentation to rally protesters. "And that's American napalm," he says, punctuating the switch from archival footage to action shot. "Women and children were burned alive. Tom?" The lights turn on and Tom Hayden appears, the camera following him to the center of the classroom as he speaks (2:54). Davis's line "Women and children were burned alive. Tom?" seamlessly transitions the viewer from the space of Vietnam to an American university classroom, but such a smoothness is only possible because the purpose of the archival footage is not to uplift or even listen to a Vietnamese perspective on the war. Rather, it is to contextualize and characterize the two young white men in the American classroom. In that way, even though the archival footage was created in Vietnam, the imagination of the viewer is never actually in the space of Vietnam, but always gazing upon a Vietnamese other from afar. Seeing the archival footage on the classroom projector screen makes this literal. Even with an anti-war, politically progressive bias, the film reproduces invisibilizing representations of Vietnamese people.

The Post, mostly set in Washington, D.C., opens with a scene in Hau Nghia, Vietnam, but never shows Vietnamese people. As the soldiers traipse through the dark forest, it's not they who

⁷ The innocent subject, who is morally pure, also lacks desire, will, intention, or knowledge (Ticktin, 3).

initiate the gunfire but their unshown enemy (“The Post Vietnam Battle Scene,” 1:49). The scene doesn’t show any Vietnamese faces, only unidentifiable bodies and American faces, Black and white, amidst a confusing chaos of bullets flying in both directions. Watching the bodies fall and bullets splash into water and mud, one might get the impression that it is the forest itself that holds the violence of war. That is, rather than war being an *action* (enacted by people), it is a *setting*, a landscape to which young, innocent American men have been sent to be butchered. In this opening scene, American soldiers become victims without any agency, and thus without any culpability for the violence they enacted against Vietnamese people during the war. The real responsibility, the film insists with its focus on the drama in D.C., lies with the older, richer politicians who forced these boys to war in the first place. The draft becomes a convenient tool for neatly assigning innocence and blame. But if only presidents and their advisors are to blame, then who is responsible for the fingers that pulled the triggers, the bodies that raped Vietnamese women? By assigning all culpability to a select, small group of people, we ignore the ways in which the average U.S. citizen, who certainly benefits from the wealth extracted via imperialism, is also implicated in the empire’s wars. Any serious undertaking of liberation would require a much more complicated engagement with agency, responsibility, and innocence than these purportedly anti-war movies offer.

Negotiation and Reimagination

Understanding that the “national project of ‘remembering’ the Vietnam war” is “a crucial site in which the terms of ‘membership’ in the national ‘body’ are contested, policed, and ultimately re-defined” (Lowe, 3-4) – that is, understanding that memories of the Vietnam war have ramifications for Vietnamese American citizenship (and thus personhood) – Vietnamese Americans have produced a great deal of literature, as well as other cultural products ranging from film to art installations, that counters their representation in dominant American narratives about the war. As the corpus of Vietnamese American literature has grown, certain narrative forms and generic conventions have become common, and I will argue later that the dominance of these forms limits our imaginations of Vietnamese American citizenship.

Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, in her book *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, provides a historical overview of this literature, showing us that since even before 1975, Vietnamese Americans have been sharing their perspective on the war and the governments involved. Pelaud identifies common themes of exile, loss, and nostalgia in early (1979-1984) texts, as their authors expressed both how difficult it had been to live in Vietnam after the war and how difficult it was to navigate the United States as racialized refugees. When Vietnamese American literature began to attract attention from large publishers in the mid-1980s (Pelaud, 26), some of the most popular titles were *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985) by Truong Nhu Tang and *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by Le Ly Hayslip, in collaboration with non-Vietnamese author Jay Wurts. Both books are stories about Northern Vietnamese people who worked with the Northern Vietnamese government, but became disillusioned with it for different reasons. A great many more books by Vietnamese American authors have been published since the mid-1980s, many of

them dealing with experiences of the war, displacement and migration, and resettlement in the United States. According to Pelaud, the “Vietnamese American memoir” emerged as a popular genre in the mid-1990s (27), and today some of the most popular stories by Vietnamese Americans are “written by members of the 1.5 generation who combine memories of Viet Nam with discussions of racial and ethnic identity” (36). Generically, these stories are often personal narratives, either told through realistic fiction or memoir.

These stories act as a powerful counter-narrative for dominant narratives of the Vietnam war, importantly passing down memory for Vietnamese Americans themselves. Author Andrew Lam, discussing the question of audience with Los Angeles Review of Books, said this about his literature’s impact:

About 27 years ago, when I began to write seriously, I felt that there was a need to be understood by Americans who knew nothing of the Vietnamese experience. ... And yet ... I am astonished every time a young Vietnamese American approaches me to say how much my writing has given them insight into their own history — and more important, their parents’ mindsets, what they must have gone through, since so many, as they tell me, “Never talked about it.” One young man from college came to me in Denver to tell me that my book Perfume Dreams opened up a conversation with his parents and grandmother about Vietnam and their refugee experience, and he was grateful for it. (Vo)

Mainstream Vietnam war literature remains dominated by white American men, but the success of Vietnamese American literature should not be measured by its integration into the mainstream. Lowe reads Asian American cultural production’s distance from the dominant cultural sphere not as evidence of a “failed integration,” but rather a preservation of “culture as an alternative site” where memories and history can be retrieved (6), which is exactly what Lam’s book did for his young Vietnamese American reader.

Within this countersite, we can see that certain narrative forms and generic conventions have become dominant. Drawing from Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, I argue that within Vietnamese American literature we can locate a dominant *chronotope*, one I’ll call the *ocean-crossing chronotope*. Chronotope, literally meaning space-time, is a concept Bakhtin uses to identify and make sense of the way time and space operate in novels in particular ways that come to “define genre and generic distinctions” (85).⁸ I employ the term “dominant chronotope” as opposed to “dominant narrative” firstly because “dominant narrative” already has a signification different from what I mean by “dominant chronotope.” Analyzing a dominant narrative within Vietnamese American literature would entail an examination of how power is unevenly distributed within Vietnamese America along lines of gender, class, ethnicity, geography, etc. – an interesting project, but here I am concerned instead with narrative form in Vietnamese American literature, and its impacts on political imagination. Second, “narrative”

⁸ He gives as one example the ancient Greek adventure novel: his sketch of the “typical composite schema of this plot” – two lovers of marriageable age go on an improbable number of adventures, and at the end of the novel, consummate their love at the same marriageable age (90) – illustrates how novel-time moves in specific ways that serve the story rather than obeying the same laws of time as us.

would over-generalize these stories in a way I don't intend to. By locating a dominant chronotope within these stories, we can see how narrative form is repeated while the narratives themselves remain different.

There are two points in space-time of significance for Vietnamese American stories with the ocean-crossing chronotope: a pre-ocean-crossing life in Vietnam, and a post-ocean-crossing life in the United States. I have named this the ocean-crossing chronotope not because crossing the ocean takes up a significant amount of plot – quite the opposite, actually – but because even without being a major plot point, and sometimes without even appearing in the plot at all, the physical crossing of the ocean looms large in the lives of the characters. Time does not move linearly in the ocean-crossing chronotope, and space is not discreet: through the process of remembering, the ocean is figuratively crossed again and again, the space-time of pre-migration Vietnam is brought into the space-time of post-migration America and vice versa. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong or *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui provide examples of this; in each book, a fictional-biographical novel and graphic memoir respectively, Vietnamese American characters who came to the U.S. as children look to the past in Vietnam in order to make sense of their places in the U.S. and their families now. Intergenerationality is crucial to this remembrance. Because the authors of these books are typically 1.5 or second generation Vietnamese Americans, they can only access the past through their older family members, those who have more memories of Vietnam. For *Little Dog*, the narrator of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, his grandmother Lan is the storyteller and family history keeper who transports him to Vietnam through her fragmented memories and his imagination while he plucks her white hairs. For Bui, it is her parents' biographies, combined with some historical research. Their accounts of their lives, from childhood to arrival in the U.S., help her make sense of how she, as a Vietnamese American, fits into a larger historical picture of French colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and Vietnamese war and resistance. Without the voices of older generations, there would be no ocean-crossing chronotope, because the books' authors and narrators would not be able to make their figurative return trip across the ocean, to a Vietnam that exists only in memory.

The presence of the past in the ocean-crossing chronotope, the haunting of memory, puts forth a vision of transnational cultural citizenship that does and does not challenge hegemonic U.S. notions of citizenship. Through the experience and memory of Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese history exists in an American present, showing us a citizen who will always bear a connection to another nation, even if legally they are only a U.S. citizen or have never been to Vietnam. Potentially, this presents a challenge to the very notion of borders and nation-states themselves, exposing the fiction of territorial demarcation, the myopia of trying to understand history and identity without looking beyond. The ocean-crossing chronotope offers a vision of citizenship with looser attachment to borders and nationhood, the traumatic rupture of war and displacement showing the futility of such attachment. Certainly, the ocean-crossing chronotope challenges conservative nativist ideas about citizenship. But this notion of transnational or bicultural identity is also easily subsumed by liberal multiculturalism, which provides a way for

immigrants and racial minorities to express their differences – cultural, historical, phenotypic – while remaining united in their identification with U.S. national culture. Stories with the ocean-crossing chronotope, like *The Best We Could Do* or *The Sympathizer*, are often received by a mainstream white American public as “multicultural literature” (Chuh) merely adding to an aesthetic or ethnographic understanding of Vietnamese Americans, putting “a human face” to refugees and immigrants in the United States (Robert) or “giving voice to the previously voiceless” (Caputo). Their value as texts comes from expanding the image of the American citizen, but not for its interrogation of the very concepts of citizenship and nationhood. Reception and interpretation is beyond the control of the works themselves, but this is nonetheless an important dynamic of which to be aware.

Because stories are a way to make meaning and sense of the chaos of history, and the chronotope is something that lends structure and organization to narrative, the chronotope can be thought of as something that lends structure and organization to our complex, messy lives, to the unruliness of history. The chronotope is not just about space and time as setting, but a recognition that space and time are intrinsically connected to plot, characters, genre, and meaning. The dominance of a certain chronotope in Vietnamese American literature limits the creative possibilities for how we imagine and make sense of our experiences and identities, with consequences for citizenship and nationhood.

One trope in the ocean-crossing chronotope is the portrayal of the characters as “regular people” as opposed to historical actors. There is a sense that the characters, regardless of their economic or political position⁹, are nearly completely powerless over anything other than their immediate survival: “We were more like ants, scrambling out of the way of giants, getting just far enough from danger to resume the business of living” (Bui, 186). Bui’s elegant metaphor emphasizes the truth that power is unequally distributed, and some do have control over whether thousands of people will live or die, while others have just enough power to “scramble out of the way.” But if this depiction of Vietnamese people becomes a trope, does it continue to be a truth? The same could be (and has been) said of Vietnamese refugees who were landowners, politicians, government officials, or military officers, but is it as true?

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* complicates this aspect of the ocean-crossing chronotope in some ways, with characters who all insist on their role as historical actors. The (former) South Vietnamese military officers whom the main character, a communist mole, is trying to sabotage, refuse to accept their fate as exiled refugees with undistinguished jobs in the United States, and in the later part of the novel they plan and attempt to execute a coup in Vietnam to reverse the outcome of the war. Their return to Southeast Asia on a military mission drastically contrasts the return to Vietnam in Eric Nguyen’s *Things We Lost to the Water*, another book that typifies the ocean-crossing chronotope. Huong, the mother, returns with her eldest son for the funeral of the husband who stayed behind and remarried. The sense of being an outsider, unable to change things to get what she wants, runs through the chapter. At the home of her

⁹ Many people in the earliest waves of refugees to leave Vietnam had occupied higher economic and/or political status in South Vietnam.

husband's second wife, an alternative life of "polished wood floors" and "bamboo art panels on the walls" (E. Nguyen, 219) is in front of her, but unreachable. As she considers what her life could have been without the war, she expresses a sense of powerlessness: "She was a housewife from a small village. She would have always been a housewife from a small village" (221). Huong can only transform her situation through internal acceptance and processing, but changing anything external to herself is out of reach. The male characters in *The Sympathizer* seem to refuse this sort of resignation, demonstrated by their coup-attempt and the main character's determination to influence the remembrance of history in a face-to-face challenge with the director of *The Hamlet*, the novel's fictional version of *Apocalypse Now*. Ultimately, though, the movie director disregards the main character's suggestions and the coup-attempt ends in capture – the characters of *The Sympathizer* meet the same fate as Bui's scrambling ants, just with more stubbornness and resistance. The novel challenges that quintessential American ideal that anyone can transform their circumstances through pure willpower and grit, pointing us to the political and historical forces – particularly colonialism, white supremacy, and xenophobia – that compromise and reduce autonomy and agency. The crossing of the ocean, unexpected and undesired, epitomizes a lack of autonomy or agency, more often than not leading to stories of characters trying to make sense of this loss of control over their own lives. So, while the scrambling ants framing is not inevitably emergent from the ocean-crossing chronotope, a specific orientation to space-time does seem to relate to a certain way of understanding Vietnamese Americans' power and agency.

Might literature also have a role to play, though, in examining Vietnamese American positionality from other vantage points that emphasize not only our victimization but our own complicity and responsibility in harm? How could reorienting the novel or memoir in space-time also reorient us in thinking through Vietnamese American positionality? Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* is one such divergence from the ocean-crossing chronotope, taking place entirely on the East Coast of the United States. The narration of the protagonist, Linda Hammerick, offers readers careful observation and insight into her family and North Carolina hometown, and gestures toward a white settler genealogy. For the first half of the novel, readers are led to believe Linda is white, until her Vietnamese name is announced at her Yale graduation in the middle of the book. Rather than interrogate Linda's Vietnamese identity with the questions that the ocean-crossing chronotope typically raises about national belonging and the transmission of memory and culture, Truong's focus is on how Linda, as an Asian woman, moves through predominantly white spaces. Suppressing the knowledge of Linda's race for the first half of the novel shifts attention to nuances in her interactions with and observations of upper-class whiteness that might otherwise be overlooked if she were read as Vietnamese. *Bitter in the Mouth* resists a framework of Vietnamese American identity that focuses only on victimhood, prompting questions about when, where, and how Vietnamese Americans may be conditionally included and excluded from whiteness, and what this means for their relationship to other Vietnamese Americans and other racial groups.

Violet Kupersmith's novel *Build Your House Around My Body* also defies the ocean-crossing chronotope, this time by taking place entirely on the other side of the ocean, in Vietnam, and mostly in the present-day. Its supernatural and magical elements also go against the chronotope's norm of realistic fiction. The main protagonist, Winnie, is a lonely, 23-year-old, half-white Vietnamese American, a middle class member of the second generation who hasn't had to contend with conflicts over her legal citizenship or national belonging, or poverty. She struggles with a sense of belonging and community, though, which is why she's escaped her family and moved to Ho Chi Minh City as an English teacher. Her sense of feeling out of place, rather than stemming from an explicit desire to better fit the mold of the "American citizen," comes from an inability to live up to model minority standards, which her siblings have apparently achieved, a self-perceived lack of desirability, and experiences of sexual harassment. Implicitly, the novel shows some of the costs of model minority aspirations on different members of Vietnamese American communities, especially along the lines of gender, and the persistence of gender-based and sexual violence within these communities, but we only learn of this through Winnie's occasional references to or memories of home. There is a web of characters in *Build Your House*, most of them Vietnamese people who never left Vietnam, and though it is mostly set in the present, some scenes take place during French colonization or during the characters' childhoods. Some form of racial, colonial, or gendered violence touches the lives of all the characters, often conveyed in subliminal ways, like landscape (e.g. abandoned rubber plantations, a mysterious sentient smoke in the forest) or emotion. It is the sort of novel that starts off with many mysteries and slowly brings them together and provides clarity as the story goes on. By placing Winnie's experiences within this web of mysteries spanning several decades of Vietnamese history and multiple places in Vietnam, Kupersmith enfolds Vietnamese American communities' power dynamics within a larger and longer history of Vietnam, implicitly commenting on the connections between the experience of colonial rule, present-day Vietnamese American model minority subject formation, and the persistence of gendered violence. Rather than focus on Vietnamese American victimization by white people or exclusion from whiteness, *Build Your House* asks us to examine the ways in which Vietnamese American communities uphold and circulate white supremacist, colonial, and patriarchal violence.



I have provided, in this introduction, an overview of how dominant cultural production and Vietnamese American literature represent, produce, and negotiate citizenship for Vietnamese Americans, through their representations of the Vietnam war, Vietnamese people, and Vietnamese Americans, in order to contextualize the three short stories I have written for this thesis. Implicitly or explicitly, my stories engage with some of the themes I've identified as significant to rethinking Vietnamese American citizenship (again, I use the word "citizenship" in a cultural sense, and as a way to refer to our relationship to land, others, and nation/political

community): themes of imperialism and colonialism, national belonging, memory, patriarchy, complicity and agency and innocence.

None of my stories, which I will contextualize academically in the following section, employ the ocean-crossing chronotope, perhaps as a result of my own position as a second-generation Vietnamese American for whom the memory of Vietnam feels too far and fuzzy to write about, and for whom national belonging is not a fraught subject. I employ the genres of magical realism and speculative fiction to make meaning in the stories. Two out of the three stories also feature biracial white and Vietnamese characters, with Vietnamese mothers and white fathers. I, myself, am a product of one of these interracial relationships, and I'm particularly intrigued by how the politics of white-Asian interracial relationships overlap with the politics of the model minority. The stories explore model minority subject formation, patriarchy, interactions between Asianness and whiteness, mother-daughter relationships, climate crisis, and relationship to land. The latter two topics seem to be uncommon within Vietnamese American literature – indeed, climate is still an uncommon theme in American literature – but they may be the most urgent. Of course, all of these themes are interrelated – as I explain more later, and as I'm sure my readers already know, the climate crisis is a symptom of colonialism and capitalism.

Literature, and narrative generally, has enormous political potential. I do not need to spend too much time explaining the importance of narrative as a tool for understanding and interpreting the past and present, as a site of imagination for the future. As Vietnamese American literature continues to grow, I am excited to see how the corpus shifts and evolves with new voices and new perspectives, hopefully generating powerful new inquiry and imagination around citizenship and nationhood, pushing us closer to a world liberated from colonialism, capitalism, and empire.

Bound to Explode: Rage, Revenge, and Model Minority Subject Formation

Given our early obsessions with seducing and pleasing others to affirm our worth, we lose ourselves in the search to be accepted, included, desired.

–bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*

Rage, when stifled, is bound to explode. This is the plot of “Dragon Baby,” the story of one afternoon’s pool party gone wrong in the wealthy, white neighborhood of Allentown, Pennsylvania. The narrator focalizes Hel, the non-binary (but not out) white and Viet college kid sitting all alone at the edge of a chaise lounge, and readers experience the story through Hel’s eyes and ears as they eavesdrop on and passively participate in a series of problematically gendered and racialized conversations. Exploring model minority subject formation and interactions between Asianness and whiteness, “Dragon Baby” participates in a reimagining of Vietnamese American citizenship by identifying and problematizing some of the ways classed Vietnamese Americans gain inclusion within white privilege.

“Dragon Baby” could be read in conversation with Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, the book I was reading at the time that I wrote the story, with its proprietous heroine Fanny Price. As the daughter of the poorest of three sisters, Fanny is sent to live at Mansfield Park with the wealthiest of the sisters, Lady Bertram, and amidst the cast of young people there, she is relegated to the sidelines of the action (courtship, dinners, balls) for the first part of the novel. Her presence in the narration is felt through her observations, her careful listening, her occasional judgments. As a character, she is reserved, making her remarks based on what she perceives to be socially acceptable according to the estate’s moral values or what the other characters expect and want of her. Then, when she does become seen, it is only as a marriageable object. Her new prettiness gives her economic value in the eyes of her uncle (who governs the estate), her lack of flirtatiousness presents a fun challenge for a family friend. Her options are invisibility or hypervisibility, and in all situations the other residents of Mansfield Park, who have higher social status, overlook Fanny’s own desires, and she often does not push back. Hel occupies a similarly marginal role within the character-system of the pool party they’re attending, listening in on everybody without participating. Something stops them from showing up authentically. Maybe Hel and Fanny don’t even know what it would mean to show up authentically. And for Hel, unlike for Fanny, everything builds inside of them until it explodes.

What rules, norms, and values exist in these spaces to prevent these characters from expressing themselves, and how do they exist so powerfully? Fanny, in *Mansfield Park*, is governed by the value of propriety, which demands restriction, demureness, an attention to

boundaries, adhesion to Protestant Christian values.¹⁰ The rules are cultural, not legal, but violating them could lead to being cast outside the borders of the social circle. At the end of the novel, when Fanny's eldest cousin has an affair and her husband divorces her, she is forbidden from reentering the estate, and must set up home in continental Europe, as punishment for her violation of the moral values of that social space. Throughout the novel, though, many characters are able to transgress the rules without much consequence. It is only Fanny, as an outsider of lower economic status who has been *gifted* a place at Mansfield, who is required to scrupulously adhere to the rules and please her uncle, while her wealthier-born cousins flirt and put on scandalous plays. It is precisely this precarity of socioeconomic positioning that conditions the behavior of Hel, the protagonist of "Dragon Baby," and their mother, the two lone Asian women at this predominantly white pool party (Hel is non-binary, but their assignation to womanhood is highly important to their subject formation).

Drawing from Derrida, Mimi Thi Nguyen writes in *The Gift of Freedom* that "the gift as the transfer of a possession from one to another shapes a relation between giver and recipient that engenders a debt" (7). Power and wealth are asymmetrically distributed, and those with more of it are at liberty to "give" it to obliging "recipients." In *Mansfield Park* and "Dragon Baby," the gift is access to an elite social circle and the material comforts that come with it. In exchange, though, the recipients feel a strict pressure to abide by certain unspoken, restrictive social rules, while those whose presence in the elite spaces are guaranteed – Fanny's cousins in *Mansfield Park*, or the white party guests in "Dragon Baby" – move with comfort, ease, and more authenticity to self. For the Vietnamese American characters of "Dragon Baby," especially Hel's mom and Uncle Joe, who are part of the refugee generation, a debt-relation conditions their orientation to the nation-state more broadly, not just to elite white spaces (though the orientations to each of those are connected).

According to Nguyen, liberal empire defines itself as the normative place of freedom, constructing other places as non-normative and "unfree" (15) based on ideas of race, gender, and coloniality (11) rather than a distinction of free/unfree rooted in reality. U.S. imperialism in so-called "third world" countries during the Cold War was therefore necessary, according to the 'gift of freedom' logic, to "manufacture freedom" (15) in *unfree* places, like Vietnam. Essentially, the production of 'freedom' becomes another avenue through which liberal empire can draw a distinction between itself and the colonial other. This distinction continues to mark colonized subjects even when they enter the domestic borders of the empire; their acceptance into the metropole is another 'gift of freedom' to which they are indebted, for they are being granted the gift of living in a *free* country, of having been saved from their unfree homelands.

I've observed in my own Vietnamese family that assimilation and economic success are seen as ways of repaying the debt of the 'gift of freedom'. In one interview I did with my grandmother for a project in high school, she told me that she felt that assimilating to American culture, by learning the language and earning enough money to be self-sufficient, was part of her

¹⁰ Part of the reason I find *Mansfield Park* interesting in conversation with "Dragon Baby" is that I believe these 19th century, British middle and noble class values are relevant to the genealogy of contemporary American middle- and upper-class values in predominantly white spaces.

responsibility as an immigrant, and she felt compelled to do it because she was thankful to be here. Fear of what could've happened to her family members had they stayed after the end of the war seemingly corroborated the U.S.'s imperial narrative of itself as a "free" country and Vietnam as "unfree." The process of repaying your own debt comes with a desire for others to repay it as well; my mom has often expressed a racist disapproval for the Latinx immigrants who don't master English and ask for Spanish language materials, decrying it as unfair because *she* learned English without bilingual Vietnamese-English instruction. The underlying issue is that the U.S. enforces English monolingualism as part of the "co-naturalization of language and race" (Rosa, 2), but the gifter-debtor relationship between nation-state and refugee prevents critical structural analysis of the nation-state. The nature of a *gift* is that the receiver cannot criticize it or profess any feelings except gratitude. Thus, my mother comes to see English language learning as the rightful responsibility of refugees and immigrants, and questions neither why there was no one to help her and her brothers learn English or why English is (often violently) enforced as the nation-state's sole language. Engendering a sense of indebtedness within refugees effectively prevents them from both criticizing their own challenges *and* from building solidarities with other minoritized people. This formation of the refugee as debtor to the nation-state works in tandem with the model minority paradigm, which Asian American studies scholarship commonly recognizes as a myth that perpetuates narratives of "good" and "bad" racial minorities to evade structural critiques of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Drawing from erin Khuê Ninh's theorization of the model minority paradigm not only as *myth* but as *subject formation*, I argue that the 'gift of freedom' and the model minority myth work in tandem for Vietnamese American citizenship formation. Engendering refugee indebtedness produces model minority subjects, citizens who will efficiently produce capital and uphold the hierarchies and systems of exploitation inherent to the United States.

The second generation experiences these 'gift of freedom' and model minority pressures differently. Born in the U.S. and a generation removed from the experience of being a refugee, the children and grandchildren of Vietnamese American refugees do not grow up with the same precarious relationship to citizenship and nationhood as their parents and grandparents, who had to establish their belonging within the United States. With automatic American legal citizenship and no firsthand experience of life in Vietnam during or after the war, the second generation Vietnamese American citizen is not positioned as a debtor in the gifter-debtor relationship between nation-state and refugee in the same way as the first and 1.5 generation. But family is a site of subject formation, and these notions of Vietnamese American citizenship are passed down from first or 1.5 generation parents to the second generation. Ninh, in her book *Ingratitude*, analyzes the Asian immigrant nuclear family as a production unit, a "special form of capitalist enterprise" (2), seeking to produce a model minority subject/child: someone who is "dutiful and grateful to family and nation both" (17), fulfilling duty through the efficient production of capital and expressing gratitude through a lack of resistance to power. She locates a debtor-creditor relationship between parent and child as a crucial technique for instilling this sense of duty and gratitude, and posits that the debt is "structural, a matter of position rather than payment,"

because the “child-debtor ... can never repay the debt of her own inception and rearing” (16). Because “the conviction reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the [descendants] *exist*,” the debt is constantly cumulative (Ninh, quoting Nietzsche, 33). So long as younger generations experience better material conditions than their forebears, they will always be indebted to their parents’ and grandparents’ suffering. Thus, the fact that second-generation Vietnamese Americans cannot share the traumatic experiences of the first and 1.5 generations may be leveraged by first- and 1.5-generation parents to produce model minority second-generation children, especially when the family has experienced upward mobility. The ‘gift of freedom’ is liable to becoming part of the narrative of *why* the refugee parent’s children owe them duty and gratitude.

In terms of the everyday, what are the consequences of these subject formation processes for the Vietnamese American citizen? What “Dragon Baby” illustrates is a person who is completely self-restrictive in the social space of the pool party because they are navigating social interaction with an attention to rules and boundaries as their compass. It has probably not even occurred to this college-aged protagonist that parties could be places of genuine social connection, that small talk with others could be spaces of joy, so much is their “algorithm for all things ... to identify and meet the standards set by others” (Ninh, ‘Without Enhancements,’ 8-9). Gendered expectations of accommodationism (a trait exemplified by Hel’s constant politeness) intersect with similar racialized expectations to condition someone into a state of not knowing themselves. At the less serious end of the spectrum, this state of not knowing oneself invites disingenuous and uncomfortable social interaction – fake laughs, pretending to agree with people, etc. – but one of its grave consequences is susceptibility to rape and sexual violence. Ninh argues, and I agree, that Asian American women’s vulnerability to sexual violence is not *only* a function of perpetrators’ racist and sexist ideas about Asian women, but a consequence of Asian American women’s own participation in a white supremacist, patriarchal script; that agency does not lie only with perpetrators acting upon a victimized body but that the subject formation of Asian American women seeks to produce “docile bodies of heterosexual norms” even before “the fateful assault that transforms women into victims or survivors” (Ninh, ‘Without Enhancements,’ 7).

Techniques of subject formation do not completely override a person’s own sense of being, though, and ‘model minority’ is, by design, impossible to perfectly fulfill. Hel, in college, is at the beginning stages of a process of individuation from family. The early parts of this process have illuminated, but not fully clarified, their own desires and impulses, and they are beginning to chafe against family and societal expectations. New distance from their mother (because they are in college) has given them space to consider their racial and gender identity in ways that are different from Deborah’s, leading to a generational tension that may be recognizable to other second-generation Asian Americans. Benefitting from a less troubled sense of national belonging,¹¹ Hel may be less interested in cultural assimilation than their refugee

¹¹ As briefly mentioned in the Introduction, national belonging has repercussions for one’s *legal personhood* and is not merely an issue of the psyche.

family members, like Deborah, and more likely to critique the United States. With a different political education than their parents and grandparents, Hel might also see their family history of war and migration as imbricated within a longer history of colonialism, holding the U.S. responsible for atrocities rather than viewing it as a savior or gift-giver. The conflict that arises over these political differences, however, is not a simple disagreement. If we understand the family to be a site of subject formation for the children, then we know that generational conflicts over national belonging or social and economic positions are not inevitable growing pains but expressions of subjects' resistance to power.

Hel's whiteness (from their dad's side) adds another dimension to the generational conflict over assimilation. Hel is literally closer to whiteness than Deborah, but a variety of factors – perhaps more secure national belonging, different political educations, or even the fact itself of their whiteness – cause Hel to desire this inclusion within whiteness less than Deborah does. Within informal discourse, the racial and cultural politics of desire that inform interracial relationships with white people are well-recognized. Asian American literature certainly recognizes this dynamic, with authors like Jhumpa Lahiri (in her short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*) or Chang-Rae Lee (in his novel *Native Speaker*) writing Asian American characters whose desire for their white romantic/sexual interests is twisted up in angst over racial and cultural belonging. Within the formal discipline of Asian American studies, the topic seems to be under-theorized, even though Asian-white interracial relationships have been common for decades. Of the Asian Americans who wedded in 1980 and 2008, 40 percent of the U.S.-born and foreign-born women and just under 40 percent of the U.S.-born men entered marriages with white people (Qian and Lichter, 1072). The mixed-race children born from these relationships warrant theorization that goes beyond framing their mixedness as a literalized metaphor for the diasporic angst of being 'caught between two worlds: *Asian* and *American*.' (In *The Sympathizer*, for example, the protagonist's mixedness – French and Vietnamese – is used to represent his perpetual outsiderhood as he crosses political and national borders.) If we understand these white-Asian relationships to be sites of uneven power distributions, where desire is not a purely natural impulse but a field through which anxieties over racial, cultural, and national belonging are negotiated, then what are the consequences for how power circulates through the interracial white and Asian family, or for the subject formation of the children? How does this complicate or add to our understanding of the Asian immigrant family as a site of model minority subject formation?

Lastly, I want to emphasize that everything I have discussed so far as the operable analyses for "Dragon Baby" – power's circulation within the Asian immigrant family, model minority aspirations, marginalization within middle- and upper-class white spaces – should be considered within the context of what I have *not* discussed yet and what "Dragon Baby" does not show. As a reader, your attention to what is at the margins of the text, or what is entirely left out, can be supplemented with your own historical knowledge. There is one other significant parallel between *Mansfield Park* and "Dragon Baby," which is that the elite spaces the protagonists find themselves navigating with difficulty are small, confined spaces, and even if the protagonists

experience exclusion or alienation, they are still benefiting from larger global networks of power and property. Edward Said, in his contrapuntal reading of Austen's text, is interested in how the ideologies of the colonial elite manifest across oceans, in materially very different spaces, finding that "the values [at Mansfield Park] associated with such higher things as ordination, law, and propriety" are "grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory [in Antigua]" (Said, 87). In both *Mansfield Park* and "Dragon Baby," I am interested in how these values and social norms, articulated through social interactions, linguistic expression, styles of dress, taste, opinion, etc., come to act as borders for these elite social spaces. In *Mansfield Park*, "ordination, law, and propriety" are implicitly valorized against the apparent unruliness and chaos of Fanny's working-class hometown of Portsmouth, and when she returns home to visit her family, she feels a distance from her parents and siblings because of their differing comportments. Even when sharing the same physical space, values and norms act as a border separating the family members by class. In the world of "Dragon Baby," a contemporary, 'post-racial' United States where exclusion based solely on skin color or phenotype is considered unacceptable, values and norms become an important way to maintain racialized borders between social groups. Hel, Deborah, and Uncle Joe's tenuous inclusion within the classed white space of "Dragon Baby" represents a broader contestation over the racial meanings of whiteness and Asian Americanness. The contested inclusion of Asian Americans within whiteness or forms of white privilege strategically obscures white hegemony while materially benefitting Asian Americans (Koshy), and always happens vis-à-vis the racialization of other groups. Uncle Joe's claim in "Dragon Baby" that Asian Americans don't need affirmative action is part of the larger project of distinguishing Asian Americans as "good" minorities on the basis of perceived qualities such as productivity or law-abidingness, enforcing stereotypes of Black, Latinx, and Native American people as lazy and criminal. The question of who is left out of the social space entirely in "Dragon Baby" is just as crucial as the question of how the Asian characters navigate the space.

"Dragon Baby" contributes to a reimagining of Vietnamese American citizenship by criticizing Vietnamese and Asian American political projects that seek to garner inclusion within whiteness as a means of receiving "justice." In the process of seeking material gain and upgrade in status, we harm others and ourselves, and lose some of our own humanity along the way. Turning down increased political power or capital may seem like a risky sacrifice, but it's the path that opens onto more possibilities for *being human* – that state of aliveness, of in-touchness with yourself and the world around you, that we're all discouraged from experiencing under capitalism and colonialism, in some way or another. Literature, which has never shied away from a frank engagement with questions of feeling and spirituality, is well-suited for the task of exploring those possibilities.

Clovis, California, and Vietnamese American Relationship to Land

“There Will Be Fire” brings questions (and no sufficient answers) about settler responsibility and relationship to land and place to the topic of Vietnamese American citizenship. As refugees who become settlers (Tuck & Wang), how do we, how *should* we, navigate our relationship with the land that we’re currently on? What, if any, is our responsibility to the land that *our* ancestors lived on?

The story, which is about a grandmother, a mother, and two daughters living in Clovis, California, in the 2060s, didn’t start out as an exploration of those themes. I wrote the first draft while I was living in Clovis with a few friends, for several months at the end of 2020. Clovis is a suburb of Fresno, an agricultural city with about half a million people in the San Joaquin Valley (the southern part of California’s Central Valley). I had moved to Clovis in mid-September, about a week or so after a record-breaking fire season began. The sky was gray everyday for weeks, the AQI was in the 200s (a healthy AQI is under 50), it smelled like smoke outside, and we rarely ever ran into people. The neighborhood we were living in, which is also the neighborhood where the Nguyen family lives in “There Will Be Fire,” was one of those recent developments with repeated variations of the same few cheaply built homes, situated at the northeastern most corner of Clovis. To the north and east sides of the neighborhood were vast farmlands – mostly empty-looking fields for cows, or citrus and almond orchards, although those were more to the west and south. The feeling I felt all around me, and the feeling I set out to capture in the first draft of “There Will Be Fire,” was death, the sense of a landscape so thoroughly exploited to destruction, its rivers and aquifers squeezed to drought, its air so thick with pollution that you can’t see the mountains clearly until it rains heavily.¹²

No place just *naturally* becomes such a bad place to be, of course. Anglo-American colonization in the 19th century brought with it disastrous consequences for the peoples and ecosystems of the Californian interior (Spanish colonization arrived to California much earlier than that, but mostly kept to the coast). There was first the period known as the “Gold Rush,” better referred to as the California Genocide because of then-governor Peter Burnett’s organization of what he called a “war of extermination” against the Indigenous peoples of California (Hurtado, 134). Genocide through military offensives and ecologically-destructive gold mining were accompanied by violent “land reclamation” policies in the 1860s and 1870s. These policies were a mechanism by which the state took land from Indigenous peoples – either through genocide or forced removal to rancherias – and then sold it to settlers for cheap, so long as they could turn this *terra nullius*, i.e. land *they* saw as empty and useless, into *terra economica*, i.e. land fit for capitalist agriculture (Claire & Surprise, 5). Water management has been a crucial part of establishing settler society on Native land since the beginning of California

¹² I found out a year ago that the San Joaquin Valley actually has the most polluted air in North America (Schwartz).

colonization, with disastrous effects for Native peoples, land, and non-human beings, and increased technological capabilities in the 20th century led to the huge water-management infrastructure we see today. California went into a dam-building frenzy, with the Central Valley Project in the 1930s and the State Water Project in the 1960s, and today every major river in the state, except one, is dammed (Reisner).

There's an implicit recognition by the characters that the landscape they see around them is the result of settler-colonialism, that if it weren't for the centuries of violence wrought onto the Valley then they would still be able to see the mountains even when it doesn't rain, or the arroyo by their house would fill every winter. Lan, the grandmother, and Cai, the mother, differ in how they want to respond to this knowledge. The fact that the mountains are there, just obscured by air pollution, is important to Lan, because she believes so strongly in the possibility of restoring the world around her, and feels responsible for doing so. Cai may feel a similar sense of responsibility, and if she does, she seems to struggle with it, experiencing it as an obligation that she's beholden to by guilt, not a source of joy. Lan wants to stay, and Cai wants to go.

Many Vietnamese American stories, and perhaps many diaspora stories in general, articulate a longing for an ancestral homeland, somewhere we imagine we'd belong more, a place we might even feel we have a national *right* to, because our belonging is fraught in the place we currently live. Such a focus on a colonized elsewhere, though, is sometimes a "move to innocence" (Tuck & Wang) that obscures the ways our membership to *this* nation, even if tenuous and conditional, depends on settler-colonial violence against Indigenous peoples in the United States. For Asian Americans, then, what sort of citizenship, what sort of relationship to land and political community, can we imagine for ourselves if we wish to see an end to this settler-colonial empire?

Rather than looking back to Vietnam, Lan finds homeland in Clovis itself. Her sense of belonging, of rootedness, doesn't come from a nationalist sense of citizenship that encourages her to take ownership of the land, but a spiritual connection with the land that recognizes its sentience. It is the spiritual connection that motivates her sense of responsibility. This way of being in relationship with land is one that I've learned over the years from so many community members and friends, and by countering the colonial dynamics of ownership and domination over land, it also counters constructions of citizenship and national belonging that are rooted in domination, offering instead something more loving and reciprocal.

Love in the Time after War

*It's just that I fell in love with a war
 Nobody told me it ended
 And it left a pearl in my head
 And I roll it around every night
 Just to watch it glow
 Every night, baby, that's where I go
 –Mitski, “A Pearl”*

The final story in my collection, “Leftover: Ashes,” is less engaged with a consideration of Vietnamese American citizenship than “Dragon Baby” or “There Will Be Fire.” It is a story about intergenerational trauma and a mother-daughter relationship, two themes that are certainly not broaching any unexplored territory within Asian American or diasporic literature. It is also the most difficult one for me to translate into unemotional, distant academic analysis, because it is a deep, visceral exploration of love.

The world of “Leftover: Ashes” is almost perfectly mundane – a middle-class family in San Francisco, with a 1.5 generation Vietnamese mom, a white dad, and two twenty-something year-old daughters – except that the mom breathes fire. Not intentionally; it comes in episodes where she’s overwhelmed with emotion, and loses control. Other than that, she’s brisk and emotionally closed off. The story takes place over the course of a weekend when the older daughter Julia comes back home to help her mom pack up the house, because her dad has left her. Julia, while also processing her parents’ split, is going through her own breakup.

As Julia helps her mother pack, she deals with anxieties about memory and questions about the way her relationship with her mom has shaped the way she loves. Love in the world of “Leftover: Ashes” – maybe just love in the world, period – is fraught, challenging, heartbreaking. It is not easy to give, not easy to get, because a whole lot of shit (like war, and patriarchy, to name a couple examples) has collectively fucked us up. Who are we to blame, for all that hurt? Who should Julia blame, for the ways her mother’s uncontrollable, fire-breathing episodes have damaged her psyche? Is blame even the right question, is responsibility the same as blame? And then, where does forgiveness fit into all this? Julia is navigating a complicated terrain of compassion, forgiveness, agency, innocence, and responsibility in her relationship with her mother, the same terrain many of us navigate as we struggle with intergenerational relationships that both sustain us and drain us.

But there are also moments in “Leftover: Ashes” where love is healing, where the characters are trying their best to be tender and kind. The most significant contribution of “Leftover: Ashes” to the reimagination of Vietnamese American citizenship is a rootedness in those tender, healing moments of love. “Leftover: Ashes” and its inclusion in this thesis is a commitment to love as a powerful, political “transformational force” (hooks, xviii), without which we will never be free.

*There Will Be Fire,
and
other short stories*

Dragon Baby

At the very edge of a chaise lounge meant for reclining with your chest to the sky with a cocktail on the little table next to you, Hel sat with the posture of a snail shell, elbows on their knees and chin in their hands, and a full champagne flute at their feet. It wasn't hot out at all—the only people in the pool were five and seven, plus the babysitter's feet—but a layer of sweat was beginning to make the back of Hel's neck itch.

A few yards away, to Hel's left, their mom was listening to Mandy, the mother of the five- and seven-year-olds, tell a group of women about her incompetent husband. "So I came home, and it was like, 8:30, right, so the kids *should*'ve been upstairs already?" Mandy was the youngest in the group—only in her 40s—and had not yet given up a commitment to the beauty standards of her youth. She, with big eyes, long copper hair, fake tan, and shorts, and Hel's mother, with black hair and a natural tan she tried to avoid, stood out in the group of fifty- and sixty-something year old white women with short haircuts wearing capris and long dresses. "But I come home, and the kids are still at the kitchen table with Gregory, so I'm kinda like, hey Gregory, what the fuck..."

Hel's attention drifted to the group across the pool, three boys about Hel's age telling a girl, also the same age, about their friend. "Andrew—have you met Andrew, Sarah? I think you have—" Hel sat up a little. They knew an Andrew from the neighborhood.

"What does he look like?" The girl, Sarah, asked.

"Like, tall, dirty blonde, low key looks like Ansel Elgort..." "Or Mark Zuckerberg!" The other boys laughed. "Yeah, but that one's meaner, don't say that to his face..."

Hel tensed. Yes, this was the Andrew they knew. From last summer when they were visiting their aunt and uncle. The Andrew whose face and voice now rattled around in their head incessantly, making them feel like they wanted to die.

"...but they were eating these little white, doughy rolls. I was like, excuse me, what on earth are you feeding my kids?"

"...so Andrew's thing that he does at bars, is that nonconsensually—"

"Oh no," Sarah groaned laughingly.

"I know." "—he flips girls." "Flips girls?" "Yeah, like, flips them." "Like, flips them off or something?" "No, like, physically flips them. Within thirty seconds of meeting a girl he'll just pick her up and flip her." The boy telling the story said this all with laughter, but then there was a short silence because Sarah didn't laugh enough, so one of the other boys jumped in. "It's, like, very polarizing, too. Some girls *hate* it—" "The girl's *friends* always hate it." "Yeah like God forbid people have a little fun, you know?" "But there will be like, twenty percent of girls who absolutely *love* it..."

"*Apparently*, Gregory, my genius husband, thought that we just bought the wrong spring rolls, and that's why they weren't crispy and brown! But it was because he only cooked them for five minutes!"

“...so the girls at *that* bar were already the type to love that shit, but he did it with this one girl, and it was just like, this switch just flipped. I mean, within like, twenty minutes they were basically fucking.” Everyone in the group laughed, including Sarah. Hel wanted to say something. They imagined walking over to them, or yelling from across the pool, to let them know that Andrew was a horrible person, they were all horrible people for thinking that was okay, and then they imagined how blank and surprised their faces would be, just for a moment. And then they would laugh at Hel and call them a pill.

“Why’s my niece all alone, looking so stressed?”

Hel whipped their head around, away from the boys and Sarah and towards their Uncle Joe, who was now standing in front of them with a bottle of champagne. “Oh, hey Uncle Joe,” they said softly. They undid their snail posture and attempted to lean back casually in the chaise lounge. “Um, I’m actually non-binary and use they/them pronouns now, so, instead of calling me your niece—”

“What’s that? Sorry Helena, you’re gonna have to speak up. You’re kind of mumbling.”

Hel cleared their throat. “Never mind. What’s up?”

Uncle Joe shrugged jovially. “Just hangin out, enjoying this party, trying to make sure my niece is doing the same!”

Hel smiled. “Yep, I’m having a good time.” They fiddled with the hem of their shirt. Before the party they’d gotten into a fight with their mom over what to wear, Hel’s mom being of the opinion that Hel’s chosen outfit was ‘sloppy’.

“Need some more champagne?”

Hel lifted their still-full champagne glass in response. “I’m all good, thanks.”

Uncle Joe laughed. “You gotta finish that faster! Loosen up, honey.” He walked away, leaving Hel to revert back to the shape of a snail shell. The shade had moved, the sky had become cloudless, and they were now in direct sunlight.

Andrew’s friends jumped into the pool, much to the delight of Emerson and Hidalgo, who had, until then, been the pool’s lone occupants. Their babysitter, who seemed about seventeen, also looked pleased. She jumped in, and asked the kids if they wanted to play a game with her.

“You must be so proud of your daughter,” one of the other guests, a blonde woman in her 50s, was telling Hel’s mom. “It’s not easy to get into Yale these days! I mean, it’s never been easy, but—” she pretended to drop her voice “—Annalise, Kim’s daughter, she was an *amazing* student, I mean, just stellar, straight As, athlete, debate captain, 1520 SAT, and even she couldn’t get in.” She raised her voice to a normal level again. “But, she’s at Wesleyan now, and she’s very happy there. She tells me she likes it a lot more than she would’ve liked Yale. I think it’s less rigid there, less strictly academic. They *live* a little more there, you know?”

Hel watched their mom perform her fake laugh. “Yes, we’re definitely proud of Helena, but we always tell her, you know, you’re not special, you’re not more special than anyone else just because you go to Yale. It’s not special just to get good grades!” She performed another laugh. The blonde woman nodded slowly, with a furrowed brow and the sincerest look in her eyes. “Yes, yes. I suppose that it’s part of your culture, isn’t it.”

“You must be Deborah’s daughter!” Another white lady, one who had embraced her natural gray and who Hel vaguely recognized as their aunt and uncle’s neighbor, appeared in front of them. Back over by Mandy and their mom, Hel thought they heard their Uncle Joe say that it most definitely *was* a part of their culture, and that’s why we Asians don’t need affirmative action. They lifted their elbows off their knees again and tried to look relaxed. “Yes,” they affirmed.

“You look just like her!” said the woman, tearing into a piece of shrimp. “Carrie, doesn’t she look just like her mom?” Another woman to their left—apparently Carrie—turned around to look at the first woman, and then at Hel. “Who’s her mom?” “Deborah, over there.” The first lady, with her plate just below her chin and another shrimp in hand, nodded towards the small group of women of which Deborah was a part. Carrie narrowed her eyes, unable to figure it out. “Joe’s sister,” the first one said meaningfully. A look of recognition flashed across Carrie’s face. “Oh!” She examined Hel’s face. “Oh, yes, of course. I see it now.” Hel gave a small laugh and looked to the side, avoiding eye contact while muttering a small ‘thank you’. “It’s not a bad thing!” said the first one. “Oh, no, not a bad thing at all,” agreed Carrie. “Asian women are very beautiful.” Carrie widened her eyes and nodded deliberately as she said this. Hel smiled again, gave another laugh. The first one, whose mouth had been full of shrimp for the duration of this conversation, flicked a tail onto the ground. “Oops!” She raised her eyebrows at Hel mischievously. “It’s okay, Bruiser will get it.” Bruiser, Hel’s aunt’s elderly chihuahua, was laying languidly in the sun a few feet away, his only movement an ear twitch here and there as mosquitos circled his head. “Yeah,” Hel laughed, and then waited for both of them to join Mandy and Deborah before picking up the shrimp tail and plopping it in their champagne flute.

A gentle wind and some clouds provided momentary relief, and for the instant it seemed like nobody else was going to come talk to Hel. They resumed their snail shell posture. Their attention drifted back to the people in the pool. Andrew’s friends and Sarah were standing in the water and talking, and the babysitter was trying to contain Emerson and Hidalgo’s play area to the shallow end so that she’d be included in the conversation.

“What’s your type, Sarah?” one of them asked. Emerson and Hidalgo came up with a game involving diving, and the babysitter reluctantly followed them to the deep end, watching forlornly as Hel’s peers discussed sex and love on the other side. Sarah laughed. “I don’t know. My boyfriend is Asian.” “Oh, so is he like, kinda, nerdy then?” “Oh my god, Connor! That is literally so racist!” she chided laughingly. “No, he’s not like that at all. He’s very bro-y. I know this sounds bad, but like, he’s kind of just like a white guy, with an Asian guy’s body.” They all laughed. “You know who else likes Asian people? Andrew.” “Oh my god, stop.” “No like, I know I could get canceled for saying this, but he definitely has a fetish.” “Asian girls love him, bro.” Hel stood up decisively. The sun had come back out, and their skin felt like it was burning.

It was a few degrees cooler when Hel returned outside. The sun had moved and the pool was in the shade again. The social groups had rearranged themselves. Hel’s mom was talking to

Carrie and the shrimp lady, and when Hel stepped onto the patio she meaningfully made eye contact with them, gesturing with her head that they needed to join a conversation and be more social. Hel replied with a lame, mouth-only smile and ignored her. Uncle Joe was still meandering from group to group, Sarah was talking to the babysitter, two of Andrew's friends were by the food, and the third looked to be thoughtfully listening to something Hel's dad was saying. The bad feeling in Hel's stomach became unignorable. Unable and unwilling to pacify themselves anymore, they took off to the garden behind the house. Their stomach hurt, maybe they needed to cry but couldn't, they felt like laying down and going to sleep, but they also wanted to hurl hard, medium-heavy things at those boys—and Sarah, too; they wanted to rip their fucking skin off like a wet bathing suit.

“Shit!” A loose stone in the walkway had tripped them. They close-mouth screamed and kicked the stone again on purpose and swung at the empty air. Tears finally began to form in their eyes, they felt their nose become warm and wet with snot, and at last they started to cry. They sank into a squat, holding themselves as they sobbed until the sobs turned into dry heaves, and then they kneeled over a patch of empty mulch and tried to puke. There was something inside of them that needed to get out, they felt it. They coughed and coughed, but nothing was coming out except hot air and spittle. They squeezed with their core, trying to push it – whatever *it* was – out. Finally they stuck a sticky, unclean finger to the back of their mouth, and gagged.

They yanked their finger out with a small yelp and shook it in the air, trying to cool it off. The bile had burned. Sucking on their finger, they looked down in astonishment at the now-glowing pieces of mulch. They moved their fingers safely out of the way and tried again. It was less effort this time, like a deep breath that they had to bring out with their diaphragm more than a gag or a heave. They watched as the flames latched onto the wood, curling around the little pieces and making a crinkly sound as it rose into the air. They smiled, a genuine, peaceful smile this time.

Carrie sniffed. “Do you smell that?”

“Smell what?” asked the shrimp lady.

Deborah straightened up. “Burning,” she said.

“Probably just someone else throwing a barbeque,” shrugged the shrimp lady.

“Odd. Smells like cedar,” replied Carrie.

Deborah tried to hide her alarm. “Excuse me, I’m gonna go use the restroom.”

A hand wrapped around Hel's bicep and yanked them away from their fire. “Hey! Get off—”

“Helena!” Deborah hissed. “What on Earth are you doing?”

Hel looked down into their mother's worried, angry face, and smirked. “Breathing fire.”

“Why are those wood chips on fire?”

“I just told you, Mom. God, you're a terrible listener.” They yanked their arm out of Deborah's grip. “Watch this.”

Hel turned around and crouched by the small fire, which was beginning to go out. The shakiness they had felt before, the crawling all over their skin, it was gone now—transformed into a focused electricity that rhythmically pulsed their muscles. They breathed, and this time a bigger flame, continuous for a few seconds, came out of their mouth. They turned back toward their mom with a grin.

“Helena,” she said, carefully and slowly, as if tiptoeing, “You need to get this under control.”

“Under control?” The electricity pulsed stronger for a beat. Hel clenched their fists. Deborah stared. Her child’s hands were turning green, their skin was hardening. Green-blue scales were beginning to form, on their back, too; they were growing in size, their body lengthening, their arms growing muscular.

“Hey guys, what’s going on back here?” Hel’s dad, in a short sleeve polo that was too big for him and brown velcro sandals, had wandered to the back garden looking for them. His blue eyes, behind slightly askew glasses, widened as he caught sight of Hel. “Oh! I’ll leave you two to it,” and awkwardly returned to the side yard where the pool was.

Mother and dragon-child refocused their attention on each other. Deborah continued to stage-whisper. “Helena! Get it together! This is not the time or the place!”

“Then when is the time or the place, Mom?” Hel said in a normal volume, as their fingernails turned into claws and they continued to elongate. It felt good to swell and to harden, to metamorphosize for the task of revenge.

“Why are you raising your voice at me?”

“I am not raising my voice!” Hel snapped back, louder this time. The peach fuzz at the corners of their mouth had grown into long green-blue whiskers, about a foot in length, and their nose was turning into a snout.

Deborah looked nervously toward the pool area, then back up at Hel, who had now grown to the height of ten feet. “Your aunt and uncle’s neighbors,” she hissed, “are going to see this.”

The transformation was complete. Hel was no longer standing, but hovering. They flicked their tail, slithered their tongue. Their clothes lay ripped in a pile below them. They roared at the sky, letting out a stream of fire a foot in diameter and six feet in length, before looking back down at their mom, who seemed so small to them now. They laughed. “See this? Of course they’re going to see this,” they said. And then, moving like an eel through water, they descended on the party, obliterating it all with one big breath.

There Will Be Fire

“Fire is coming,” said Lan. Evie nodded. Phoebe watched. She didn’t say anything, never said anything. Five years old and still not even the word “mee-maw.”

“Did you see smoke?” asked Cai, sitting down at the dinner table with them.

Lan shook her head.

“Then how do you know?”

“There’s always fires this time of year, Mom,” said Evie.

“I know that, Evie,” Cai replied, irritated. “We all know that.”

“This time is going to be different, Cai,” said Lan.

“What do you mean, different.” Cai pulled Phoebe’s plate over and cut the prickly pear into small bites, the back-n-forth of the teeth of the knife making a sound like a zipper.

“It’s coming to us.”

The metal made a *clink* as it touched down softly on the ceramic. “So we need to leave,” Cai said.

“No,” said Lan. “There’s FireStay, remember?”

“Does that actually work?”

“It’s been working. I saw it on the news. Last year in some of the coastal towns. The residents didn’t even have to leave. Woodside or something. Look it up. All the hills burned around them but they were fine. They interviewed this one family, they had just stayed in their house, and they were fine! The tree in their front lawn didn’t look too good but the house didn’t have a scratch.”

“All those neighborhoods in the hills by the ocean are rich, Ma. They don’t do that stuff in Clovis. Not anywhere in the Valley.”

Lan sighed. “We should still try.”

“By we you mean me,” muttered Cai, picking up her knife and fork. *Zip zip, zip zip.*

*

The next day Evie and Phoebe went for a walk along the creek. *Dry Creek*, it was called, because it only fills in the winter, although Evie had only ever seen Dry Creek get wet one time in her life, which was this past winter. Floods and even snow had broken the perpetual drought. The only rainy season she’d ever experienced. In strange rubber boots and giant plastic ponchos that seemed to be at least forty years old and came from the depths of Lan’s closet, and against the warnings of the girls’ mother, Phoebe and Evie and Lan had stood on the bank of Dry Creek, and watched as the brown and white river carried tree branches, dead animals, and chunks of concrete downstream at the speed of a moderately-slow moving car. Evie had been transfixed by the river, not just its rushing but its pulsing, the way its actions—expanding at parts, whirlpooling at others—were only moments in time, moments in space.

Phoebe had been focused on the sound. The downpour of the rain around them, the deafening roar of gods playing non-stop rattles, closing her eyes to try to make it a little quieter, make it less angry at her. A week after the rain stopped, all that was left was an unassuming trickle.

Now, in the oppressive heat of mid-September, the creek was dry again, unless you counted the steamy muck mixed with plastic and algae at the bottom of the cement canal. It smelled of something dead. Evie felt an itch as sweat beaded at the nape of her neck. Phoebe coughed. The sky looked dirty. Evie looked east, remembering the first time she had seen the Sierra Nevadas from Clovis when the first onslaughts of rain brought all the pollution down with it and cleared the air.

“Remember when we could see mountains from here, Phoebe?”

Phoebe looked in the same direction as Evie.

“Bà told me that you used to be able to see the mountains every winter and spring, when it used to rain more often.” She focused hard on the horizon line, as if by just looking harder she might make the mountain range appear again. Today you couldn’t even see the small hills that were five miles away. Phoebe coughed again. “Okay, c’mon. Let’s go home.”

*

About ten miles away, Cai was speeding her 2041 Honda Odyssey down one of the dusty roads, slowing down only very slightly at the intersections where there used to be working stop lights. *Nobody lives here anymore, Miss Nugent.* Cai gritted her teeth, the police chief’s voice still stuck in her head from that morning. *You think we have FireStay money? And even if we did, fuck if we used it on Harlan Ranch for some crackheads and a family of rice-eaters.* The police station was grand but unpleasant, its blanched, clinical decor—or complete lack thereof—stuck in the style of late 2020s minimalism. The foyer, where the secretary had greeted her, had high-vaulted ceilings and hard floors that made the squeak of her shoes echo, but here and there Cai had seen evidence of things falling apart: chipped tile where the floor met the wall, thick layers of dust on the frames of former police chiefs’ portraits, piles of tiny trash in the corners—lint balls, rubber bands, plastic wrappers.

“My mom really wants to stay,” Cai had said. She was guiltily aware of the lack of passion in her voice. “We’d all like to stay. We have a life there, my mom has a garden, she has plans for how things could be in the future—”

“Miss Nugent—”

“Nguyễn,” she corrected.

“Miss Wing,” he acquiesced with the trace of an eye-roll, “if you happen to have a couple hundred thousand dollars just lying around, feel free to use it to buy yourself some FireStay.”

“A couple hundred? The chemicals they use are cheap, it should be less than fifty!”

The police chief just shrugged. “Labor costs.”

The van squealed to a halt like the sound of a school bus (it was an old car, older than Evie). “Fuck!” Cai slapped the steering wheel with both hands before getting out of the car. Without the wind from driving, it was oppressively hot outside. She walked over to the reason she’d had to stop the car, a big hunk of plastic in the middle of the road. Probably some old farming equipment that had gotten carried into the road by the flooding that winter. She picked it up, and with a scream that came from deep in her diaphragm, flung the plastic into the abandoned farm field. It didn’t get very far and broke upon impact. Dissatisfied, Cai chased after it, picked up one of the pieces, held it above her head with both arms and arched her back, and flung harder. It landed thirty feet away, kicking up a small cloud of dust. After all the rain that winter, grasses and other weeds had sprung up where there used to be rows of tomato plants and cereals, but now everything was brown and dead. Fields of kindling.

She picked up another piece and flung it in the same direction, creating another cloud of dust five feet to the right of the first one. There were four pieces left. She picked them all up the same way, using both arms to lift above her head and putting her whole body into the throw. A piece for the police chief, a piece for Clovis and its abandoned fields of dust and dead almond trees, a piece because the police chief was right and she did want to leave, and a piece for her mom, for making her and her kids stay behind in this hell-hole of a metropolitan area.

The last one landed a mere ten feet away. Her arms were tired, she’d nearly hurt her back. Out of breath, she crumpled into a squat and sobbed. “I’m sorry,” she cried out, to no one but the mountains that she couldn’t see.

*

On the front steps of their house, Lan was sipping a glass of prickly pear juice. It was good, although she did miss lemonade a little bit. But oh well. The prickly pear came from her garden, and for that she was amazed and grateful. She’d started the garden three decades ago, the same year she and Huy had bought the house, a few years before Cai was born. She’d always wanted a garden of her own—had admittedly romanticized the idea, fresh vegetables and native plants with a patch to grow Vietnamese herbs.

But now the garden was a necessity. After a huge flood—followed by the huge fires—in the late thirties, Fresno’s development trend had begun to reverse. The cheap neighborhoods they put up during the pandemic began to empty after only a couple decades of occupation. The farmers had finally sucked the reservoirs for all they were worth and left their fields to die and crisp into kindling. Grocery stores began to close, and the Walmart that was left had almost no fresh food, just an overwhelming availability of fifteen-year-old canned goods engineered to never go bad.

It was too hot at midday to be in the garden, so Lan was taking a break in the shade of her make-shift front porch. It was a simple structure, built with a few dead almond trees from a nearby orchard, a little out of place attached to the front of their Spanish colonial McMansion. Lan remembered her parents’ delight when she and Huy had first bought the house, in this semi-gated community, with cul-de-sacs, a periphery wall, and cheap replicas of all sorts of

European architecture styles. On the corner of their block, one house was even outfitted with a small turret, a detail that impressed her mother but that Lan had always found funny for California.

The air just above the pavement wavered in the heat. Lan took another sip of her prickly pear juice, imagining the abandoned front yards along her street lush with desert plants. Everybody who could, had left. The house with the turret was the only other one on their side of the neighborhood with people still left in it, and those neighbors scared Lan a little bit, but she tried to be friendly with them. She had brought them some surplus prickly pear pads the week before, which a dazed young man she hadn't seen around before accepted at the front door. "It's prickly pear cactus," she'd explained, noticing his confusion. "You can cook it however you like—boiling, grilling, frying... It's from my garden. I live down there." She pointed to her house and the man nodded slowly. "Thanks, man," he'd said, and shut the door.

What Lan's garden had given her was hope. They seem so delicate when you tuck them into the soil, the little seeds and sprouts, but they survive and they grow, and somehow they had given her and her family so much. That all the big commercial farms were either collapsing or moving elsewhere was, to her, an opportunity. It wasn't this place's fault that America had arrived on it. She wondered, often, what it would have looked like before. She'd read about marshes, grasslands, saltbush, but those were only words. Words conjuring a fuzzy imagination of what Clovis could look like, not just in the past but in the future.

Often while Lan was gardening, especially if she were with the herbs, she thought of her mother. How caringly she had tilled the soil in the garden beds of her childhood home, how she noticed when someone needed water even before their leaves had yellowed. How she intuitively anticipated the Valley's seasons as if they were part of her own cycle, even though Lan could tell how much she longed for Vŭng Tau.

Maybe it was because leaving Vietnam had been so hard for her mother, but Lan had always been grateful that she got to spend her whole life in one place. It was far from perfect, it didn't always make her happy, but she knew the roads, she knew the plants, she knew the hills and the mountains and the canals and the reservoirs. She knew where the sun would set in July and where it would set in December. She felt held in this valley.

The dust clouds settled and the ride grew bumpier as Cai pulled off the dirt road onto the broken asphalt of their empty neighborhood. She passed the streets of huge, crumbling houses, their once-pristine front lawns now weedy fire hazards, and longed, as she often did, to live in a sea-side town near San Francisco, in a quaint house with structural integrity. She was supposed to, after college, but then her dad got sick—lung cancer—and then she didn't want to leave her mom alone, and then she got pregnant with Evie, and then she ended up spending her whole life in Clovis.

Lan was sitting on the front porch when she arrived. Cai had been worrying all year about that porch rotting and eventually collapsing, after all the rain they got in the winter, but now, she supposed, it didn't really matter.

Lan smiled as Cai got out of the car. “Hey honey. How’d it go?”

The car door slammed a little harder than Cai meant it to. “We have to leave, Ma.”

Lan’s smile disappeared. “What? You didn’t ask them about FireStay?”

“Of course I did. It’s too expensive, like I told you it would be. They don’t use that for poor, empty neighborhoods like Clovis.”

“That’s wrong of them.”

“But aren’t they also kind of right?!” Cai agreed with her mom, it was unfair, but there was a growing rage inside her, pressing up against the walls of her body, and everything seemed to be Lan’s fault. “We need to leave, Ma. It sucks here. It is empty, it is depressing, it is dying, and I am sick and tired of being here just for you.” Cai felt breathless.

There was a look of genuine sadness in Lan’s eyes. “I never made you stay here, Cai.”

“So I was just supposed to leave you here, all alone, after Bô died?”

“You could’ve. I wouldn’t have been mad at you.”

Cai just looked at her mother through wet eyes. “But you wouldn’t have been okay.”

“Oh, I would have been fine, Cai. But I’m grateful you have spent all this time here with me.” For a moment they were quiet, save the sound of Cai’s gentle sobs. “Oh, come here, honey. It’s okay.”

“We need to leave, Ma,” Cai cried into Lan’s shoulder. “I know you don’t want to, but there’s no way we can stay.” Lan said nothing as she stroked her daughter’s hair and looked at the portrait of Huy on the living room wall.

*

Two nights later, Phoebe dreamed of water. A cool, slippery current ran over the tops of her feet. She wiggled her toes in the doughy mud underneath. She was in a river, the San Joaquin River, something told her, but she had never seen anything like it before. The way it flowed, the way it moved, it seemed like there was a joy there. She smiled at it, big and friendly.

Tilting her head up, she saw that the sky was a bright blue, as if she were in an old landscape painting. She gasped, realizing something, and turned to look behind her. She was right. Hills dotted with oak, and a thick streak of white in the distance. *Mountains*. She mouthed the word. She remembered them from Evie’s story.

She waded further into the river. She had never swam before, but she wasn’t scared. The water got up to her waist, and then she let go. She was floating. The river carried her gently. She let herself close her eyes, drift off back to sleep...

No, she couldn’t sleep. The river had begun to shake her, she held a hand over her face to protect it from the splashes, and then she turned onto her stomach and tried to swim back to shore. She couldn’t reach it now, couldn’t touch the bottom either. She had the unsettling feeling that the water extended below her for miles. The water had become dark, almost black, and parts of it were growing so tall she could no longer see the shore, if there was one.

“Phoebe, Phoebe.” She woke up. She was staring into her mom’s face, and realized she was being carried. “It’s gonna be okay, Phoebe,” said Cai. “But we have to leave. The fire is going to be here soon.” She placed her down in the minivan and buckled her into her carseat. “I’ve packed everything you need, okay? Mr. NooNoo’s gonna be here soon.” Then she left, leaving Phoebe in the semi-dark. It was night, but the sky was glowing orange. Phoebe licked her lips. Salt.

Inside, Cai and Evie hurried from room to room, casting a quick glance over each one. The kitchen pained Cai the most, all the appliances she’d have to leave because they wouldn’t fit in the van. Hesitating for a second, she grabbed her best pot and pan and took them to the car with Phoebe’s one-eyed, lopsided stuffed lamb.

On the stairs, Evie was struggling to bring down the suitcases. She’d overpacked hers, for sure— it felt to be at least 80 pounds, and it’d taken everything she had to get it zipped up. Her mom had told her to be practical, take what you need to live, and then a photo album and a couple of your favorite books if you have the space, but Evie had gotten overwhelmed with memories and attachment. There was nothing she could leave without missing it.

She finally reached the first floor, her suitcase hitting the ground with a big *clunk*. She turned her head to glance out the back glass doors. Her grandmother was still out there, just sitting on the steps, looking at the garden. Lan had been near-silent for the past two days. She had packed a small suitcase of clothes and toiletries and thrown some mementos into a reusable shopping bag to satisfy Cai’s nagging, and the rest of the time she’d been in her garden. Evie thought that she had possibly even seen Lan planting new seeds.

The van was finally all packed. “C’mon, let’s go get Bà,” Cai said softly. Phoebe had fallen back asleep in the car seat.

“Grandma,” Evie said softly as she opened the sliding door. Lan was pitched forward with elbows on her knees and hands clasped around her chin. There was a small bag next to her labeled Seeds and a photo of Evie’s grandpa next to it. “It’s time to go, Bà.”

“Do you ever pray, Evie?” Lan asked.

“Me? No, not really I guess. You and Mom didn’t teach me to.”

“I know,” she said. “I wish I had.” She sighed. “Or maybe I just wish that I could believe more.”

“You could believe more,” Evie suggested.

Lan chuckled. “But then it feels like a choice, Evie! And I don’t want it to feel like a choice. It’s supposed to just... be.”

Evie nodded. “You always tell me that you have to choose, though. Like you had to choose to start this garden, and you had to choose to believe in all these little plants.”

She saw Lan raise a finger to her cheek, and realized her grandmother had been crying. “Okay, then. Let’s pray together.” She rearranged herself onto her knees and held out her hand to Evie.

“What are you praying for?”

“To be able to stay here.”

Evie grew panicked. “But we can’t. There’s a fire coming. We have to leave, Bà.”
“Then I’ll pray to be able to come back,” said Lan.

The highway wasn’t trafficked, but there were a lot more cars than normal. “Reminds me of when I used to live in Clovis,” Lan joked in the passenger seat. Cai smiled. “I know what you mean, Mom.” Both kids were asleep in the backseat.

When they finally got to the coast it was almost 2 a.m. Cai pulled the van into an empty beach parking lot, and the two mothers reclined their chairs and went to sleep.

The family was awoken by the soft golden glow of the sunrise. Eight eyes slowly opened, two at a time, followed by the straightening of four backs and the craning of necks to look out the window. The sun was straining through a morning fog, and the ocean—what they could see of it—was dark, almost black, in the muted light. “Should we get out?” someone asked. The minivan doors opened and the four family members stepped out, shoe soles crunching on unfamiliarly moist sand and asphalt. Evie shivered. The wet air left an unpleasant texture on her skin, and it was cold.

There were other cars and other people in the parking lot, but the only noise came from the ocean and the wind. “I guess this is it,” Cai heard someone say, with no reply. Lan had wandered a bit, and was bent over a swath of ice plant. She plucked the bright magenta flower and twirled it between her fingertips, looked out over the ocean, and said another little prayer. *If you’re there, God, bring me back to Clovis.*

Leftover: Ashes

It was drizzling when the bus dropped me off in the Sunset. I checked my phone to see what time my next bus would be coming. Nine minutes. I was better off walking. I wiped the sheer layer of rain off my screen and started up the hill, allowing my hair and unopened umbrella to dampen in the mist.

“One minute!” Outside the pastel pink house, I could hear my mom rushing from the kitchen to the foyer and then back again, trying to coax the dog away from the door. I was surprised Dad had left Chicky with her. After Victoria and I had moved out, the exuberant Samoyed had taken on the role of doted-upon grandchild and Dad’s primary friend and emotional support. Mommy’s relationship to Chicky had been one of reluctance at the start, although the dog was now privileged enough to receive her uncharacteristically warm affection and indulgence. She liked to feed him pieces of Cotsco rotisserie chicken and tell him he was the smartest little man she knew, even though he knew no tricks and greeted guests by jumping on them.

The door opened slightly and a mass of white fluff wiggled out, a big tail thumping against the back of my knees somewhat painfully.

“Oh, Julia, it’s you. Don’t you have a key? You could’ve just come in through the back door.”

“Sorry. I forgot them at home,” I lied. I gave her a light hug and was shocked, as I always was, at the meagerness of her frame, the boniness of her shoulders reminding me of her impermanence. “How have you been feeling?”

She shrugged and I followed her into the kitchen. “Fine. Work is busy, as always. We have some new interns, and they are *so* incompetent. But you know. Stupid people are everywhere.”

“You don’t always have to pick up other people’s slack at work. It’s not like people are gonna die if they don’t get scarily accurate YouTube suggested videos.”

“Are you hungry?” She was already pulling out five plastic containers of leftovers.

“Mm, I just ate lunch a couple hours ago,” I said. I looked around the kitchen, searching the walls for little burn marks. Dad had told me her episodes had been becoming more frequent. It was two months ago, over dinner at my apartment in Berkeley, when he told me he was thinking about separating from Mommy.

“Like, permanently?” I had asked, stomach becoming hard.

“I don’t know,” he’d said quietly. He didn’t look at me, just swished the ice around in his cup of Cognac. “It depends on if she changes. But I can’t keep waiting for that, you know?” I thought I heard his voice crack.

“Does Vic know?”

“Not yet.”

I nodded slowly. “Is it because of the fires?”

“It’s that, but not just that. The episodes have been getting worse, for sure. I’ll find her in the bathroom in the middle of the night, sometimes in the middle of it, sometimes after, when she’s cleaning up and wiping away the ash. If she’s in the middle of it there isn’t anything I can do, and if it’s already happened, she just won’t talk about it, even when I ask her. You know how it is. It’s like she blacks out during or something.”

“Yeah.” It had been a long time since I’d been there for an episode. It was one of the fights we had the summer before I left for undergrad. I couldn’t remember why we were fighting, the exact sequence of events. Only the car.

“But it’s just overall. I don’t know. The episodes are getting worse but we’re also fighting about other things all the time. Just small, stupid stuff. Like the other day we argued for twenty minutes about what TV show to watch. But obviously we’re not arguing about that. I just feel like she’s so... distant to me now. Like she’s not listening, or doesn’t make much effort to spend time with me. Actual quality time, not just running to the grocery store together. And I don’t know. I guess I’ve felt this way for a long time, and then I realized...” He hesitated. “I think maybe when you were talking about your breakup with Emily, I understood exactly how you felt.”

“Emily broke up with me.” I felt a little angry towards him, all of a sudden.

“Yeah, but you weren’t getting what you wanted from her either, were you?”

I looked at my hands. “I guess.” My cuticle beds needed some maintenance.

“I’m getting old but I’m not that old. I still have a couple decades left, at least. That’s like your whole lifetime, almost!” He said the last sentence with energy, trying to lighten the mood, probably thinking it was for me, but really doing it for himself.

“Mm.”

We both looked at our cups for a minute, the raised glass diamond pattern we’d known for fifteen years suddenly becoming fascinating to us.

“I hope she changes, Julia,” he said quietly, after several minutes, in a higher pitch than I was used to hearing from him. I looked up at him. His face was strangely strained. I realized he was trying not to cry. “Maybe this will be a wake-up call for her.” I paused, unsure and slightly uncomfortable. Then I got up and walked to the other side of the table and sat next to him, wrapping an arm around him and resting my head on his shoulder.

“Me too, Dad. It’s okay to cry about it.”

“Coffee?” Mommy asked.

“Not after 3 p.m.,” I said. She shrugged and poured a spoonful of coffee grounds into the machine.

“How’s school?”

“It’s good. Pretty busy.”

“What are they teaching you in Asian studies?”

“Asian American studies. And I’m mostly doing research now, not classes. I’m researching how trauma affects attachment styles and how that impacts relationships for Asian immigrants and their children.”

“What does that mean?” She poured a small cup of coffee and then opened the half-and-half carton.

“Like, basically the idea is that when parents go through certain things, it affects the relationships they have with their children, and then the kids are intimately tied into that experience of trauma, even if they didn’t actually feel it themselves.”

“Mm.” She was pursing her lips and scrunching her brow in the way that I knew meant she had only absorbed between forty to sixty percent of what I had said. “Are you gonna be able to get a job with that?”

I sighed. “Hopefully.”

Outside of the kitchen, the rest of the house was beginning to look bare. In the living room, only the large items—couch, coffee table, TV, piano—remained; all the little trinkets and picture frames had presumably been packed away into the cardboard moving boxes labeled “living room” in my mom’s scrawly cursive-print.

“When did you start packing?” I asked.

“A few days ago,” her voice called from the kitchen. “Wednesday, I think.”

“So the same day that you called me?” I asked. She had called me Wednesday morning while I was eating breakfast to announce that, seeing as Dad had left three weeks ago for Seattle and the house was quite big for one person, she would be moving out and relocating to an apartment in San Jose.

“San Jose?” I had asked. “You want to leave San Francisco?”

“I need a change of scenery,” she had said nonchalantly. “And that way I’d be closer to my aunts. They’re getting old.”

“But the scenery is worse down there. And you don’t even like those aunts that much.”

“What? I never said I don’t like them.”

“You don’t say you don’t like them but you also come back after every party with something to complain about. And they don’t even live that far from our house now.” No response. “Have you talked to Vic or Dad about it?”

“Why would either of them care? Victoria is in Portland and your dad just moved to Seattle.”

“I don’t know. Maybe because we all lived there for over twenty years together?”

“Things change, Julia. I know you’d like to but you can’t stay in the same place forever doing the same things with the same people.”

I sighed. “Okay, well, do you need help finding a place in San Jose?”

“Nope. Cô ba’s friend is going to rent me her property near Milpitas. I’ve already put down a deposit.”

“Milpitas? Jesus.” A change of scenery for sure. “When did you decide all this and put down the deposit?” I was a bit shocked. Two weeks ago when I was home she had asked me for help forwarding an email to a coworker.

“Over the weekend. Anyways, I need you to help me pack. Can you come over this weekend?”

“Yeah. Mika’s birthday party is in the city this weekend. I’ll just sleep over.”

“Mika... isn’t that Emily’s friend?”

“They’re my friend too.”

“Is Emily gonna be at the party? Do you guys still talk?”

My heart rose as if by muscle memory, with some weird hope that because my mom had just asked the answer might be yes and things might actually be okay. “No.” My heart dropped again, disappointed by a truth I had already known. “She’s spending a year in Guatemala with her family.”

“Ah. That’s good. You guys are moving on.”

“Okay, the class I’m TAing is starting in five minutes,” I lied. “I’ll see you on Friday. Love you.”

“Love you, bye.”

The living room having been nearly voided, Mommy and I went up to her bedroom together. She had already started – the shelves were empty, the closet half-full. I lifted *The Phantom Tollbooth* out of one of the cardboard boxes and flipped to a random page. “What are you going to do with all this stuff, if the place you’re moving to is smaller?”

“Give it away,” she replied from inside the closet, where she was folding clothes and placing them into a suitcase. She poked her head out. “That box is stuff I’m giving away, the other one is stuff I wanted to keep.”

“What? Some of this stuff isn’t even yours!” I exclaimed. I thought of the time she’d forced me and Vic to give away a total of fifty stuffed animals, as punishment for something I can’t even remember now.

“Were you planning on re-reading *Ralph the Mouse* anytime soon?”

“No, but maybe there will be kids in my life who want to read it one day.” Vic and I had cried in the foyer as we said goodbye and apologized to each of those fifty toys.

“I thought you and Victoria don’t want kids.”

“Yeah, but some of my friends do. Mitch is thinking of getting a sperm donor,” I said.

“Does she have a girlfriend?”

“They. No. But they want to raise kids with Callie.”

“Which one is Callie again? Is she the Salvadoran one?”

“Yeah. You met her, remember? She played the piano at that party we had last year.”

“Mm, can’t remember,” she said absently, returning to the task of putting clothes away.

I put down *The Phantom Tollbooth* and picked up one of Dad’s Ken Follett books. As I opened to the first page, a picture fell out. Mommy and Dad’s smiling faces looked up at me,

Dad's arm wrapped around Mommy's neck, her leaning back into him. It looked like they were somewhere in Europe, on a trip they must have taken before I was born that I didn't know about. Dad's hair was still golden blonde, Mommy's eyes were a little wider and brighter. She looked fuller and healthier.

I glanced back at the closet, where her shadow held up clothes behind the curtain, deciding whether to put them in the suitcase or the trash bag. I imagined those smiling twenty-something-year-old faces in the hands of a random thrift-store-goer who just wanted to read a Ken Follett book. What would they do with the photo? Keep it? Throw it away? I wondered if it would be possible for any random voyeur to hazard a guess about how these peoples' lives had turned out and get anywhere close to the truth. If it would occur to them that the woman in the photo had grown up in a war and left her country over night and at some point started breathing fire and now that was fucking shit up for the rest of us.

I pushed the photo into *The Phantom Tollbooth* and set it aside. I looked through the box to see what else my mom had planned to give away. There were more books, a bunch of CDs, some old vinyls.

"You're giving away the BeeGees vinyl? You love the BeeGees."

"Your dad took the record player with him," she said dismissively.

I pulled the vinyl out of the box and placed it on top of *The Phantom Tollbooth* and an ABBA CD. Dad had also made some of the same decisions to leave this music and these things behind, I guess. I thought of how I'd recently noticed that Emily had deleted one of our shared playlists on Spotify and how much I'd cried to Callie about it. It had hit me like a punch in the gut, this moment of witnessing not just my deletion from Emily's life but the deletion of my memory, too. I'd done the opposite of her, looking at old pictures or wearing jewelry she gifted me more often than before, small comforting reminders that her existence would always be entangled with mine, even if the medium of entanglement changed. I was terrified of forgetting, and I was determined not to.

I had a dream that night that Emily was with me in the apartment we used to share in Berkeley, my apartment now. Our one-bed, one-bath had become a spiraling maze, and she silently led me through it, her back to me the whole time. She'd pause to look at something, and I'd almost catch up to her, hands reaching out for her back. "Emily, wait." She'd pick up whatever she was looking at, and then start walking again, just before I could touch her. I felt the familiar mixture of longing and resentment. "What are you doing? Emily, wait." She picked up another item, the stuffed animal she had gotten me for our first Valentine's Day, and placed it into a big, black trash bag that I hadn't seen before. "Wait, stop." She sighed, finally acknowledging me. "Move on, Julia." The apartment had stopped growing. I watched her walk across the bedroom, searching for something else. "Aha," she said, pulling open my drawers. "You still wear this?" She held up a plain gray Champion hoodie. "It's comfortable." "It has holes in the sleeves." She dropped it into the trash bag. "Wait!" She pulled out more of her old clothes from the drawers, things I still wore—crewnecks, a pair of jeans, a Lorde concert

t-shirt—and dropped them all into the bag. “Emily, stop, I still wear all of that.” She laughed and moved to another part of the room. I followed her, but then she became out-of-reach again. “Stop!” I said it over and over, my voice becoming wet and uneven and loud.

The screaming didn’t stop when I woke up. I rubbed my eyes, adjusting to the dark and remembering that I was in my childhood bedroom, and Emily’s old clothes—mine now—were safely tucked away in my Berkeley apartment.

The light was on in Mommy’s room. She was sitting up in bed, holding her knees to her chest. “I didn’t mean to,” she wailed in between sobs. I walked in just in time to see the last of flames die out, leaving behind two singed thirds of what used to be a queen-sized blue and white quilt.

It was the smell that brought me back. The burning. The memory came on so fast I felt for a split-second that I might vomit. The car, I was in the car with her. We were in the school parking lot. “You didn’t even want kids, and you shouldn’t have had them!” That was what I had said. She’d turned to me, with a face that looked like she wanted to hit me. “What was that?” I think I’d heard her growl, before the fire had seeped out of her mouth, filling the small hatchback with an unbearable heat and the smell of burnt flesh. I think I had yelled, struggled with the door handle before realizing I needed to unlock it, gone to the driver’s side, banged on her window and pleaded with her to open her door. When I finally managed to pull her out she had small burns on her arms. She was exhausted and dazed and amnesiac about what had just happened.

“I didn’t mean to, Julia.” The smell in her bedroom was the same as the smell in the car that day. “I didn’t mean to,” she repeated. I had never seen my mother sob before. I’d sat next to her while she cried gently during sad movies, I had watched her hold back tears while arguing with me, but I had never witnessed an unrestricted, unmeasured cry. I scooted myself onto the middle of the queen bed with her and pulled her small, bony frame into my chest. “I know, Mommy,” I said softly. “I’m sorry.”

We sat there for a while, her shoulders shaking and my t-shirt growing wet with her tears and snot.

“The quilt was a wedding gift from Cô ba,” she finally said, pulling away slightly. I let her go. “She hand-made it.”

“I see.” I wondered if this would be the moment we finally talked about her illness. If she would finally admit to needing help, needing to change. Instead, I asked, “Do you miss him?”

“Of course, Julia.”

“Oh. I don’t think I realized. You just seem like... like you’ve been moving on really fast.”

“I think I thought I was,” she said.

“Like... denial?”

“Maybe. I just wanted to keep moving, I don’t wanna sit around being sad all the time.”

“Sometimes you have to just sit around and be sad all the time, so that you don’t end up being weirdly uncomfortable but not quite sad for the rest of your life,” I said.

She studied my face. I could tell she was genuinely considering what I had said, which felt rare and unusual. “These sorts of things are easier for you, I think. You spend time thinking about things. You were always an emotional kid. Whenever you got really upset, you would cry way harder than Victoria ever would. But then you’d be over it way sooner, too. Victoria would be quiet and stay mad at you for hours, maybe even a whole day.”

“So do you think you’re more like Victoria then?”

“I don’t know. Victoria is so angry, I don’t think I’m like that.”

“Mm.” I looked at her, wondering if I should say something.

“What, you think I’m an angry person?”

“Not an angry *person*. And neither is Victoria. But you hold onto things without realizing it, I think,” I said hesitantly. “Like this.” I gestured to the quilt.

She was silent for a moment. I held my breath. “I guess you have a point.”

“You know... I think all Dad wants is for that to change a bit. Just to start to change.”

She shook her head. “Of course I miss him, Julia, but we can’t just get back together. Life changes, and you gotta keep moving.”

“But you have some control over the way it changes. And it’s a separation, right, not a divorce?”

She sighed. “Some people are like big leafy plants. They need lots of attention, lots of love, lots of care. That’s your dad. I think that’s you, too. I’m like a cactus. Maybe Emily is, too. And that’s just who we are. You can’t change that.” *Who we are.*

“Can’t you, though? That’s just— we can work on the ways we love each other. Those are actions, not identity. You don’t have to change your whole personality, or who you are... he just wants you to listen more, be a bit more emotionally supportive.” I was pleading. “No one expects you to become perfect overnight, you know? And you don’t ever have to be perfect, you just have to try. I think even if you just started to change, he would—”

“Julia, it’s okay.” We were silent again for a while. She picked up the quilt and examined one of the singed edges. “I know I can’t just get rid of him though.”

“Of course not. You guys were together for twenty-nine years. That’s about half your life.”

She started crying again. “I didn’t mean to ruin the quilt,” she said. I wanted to ask her what she had meant to do, if she remembered anything about how it happened or why. I had lived alongside it for years, but the fire-breathing was still mostly a mystery to me.

Instead I took the quilt from her hands and traced my fingers along a burn mark. “It’s not so bad,” I said. “Let’s send it to Victoria. She can do something artsy to it.”

Mommy nodded. “Thanks, Julia.” She looked at me for a moment and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. “You used to have such a round, chunky little face. What happened?”

“Twenty five years, I guess.”

“I guess so,” she sighed. She pulled me into her. “Oh, I know it’s hard, Julia,” she said into my hair. “You miss Emily. You guys loved each other a lot. But you’re gonna be okay.”

I felt my eyes get warm and watery. “I know,” I said. “But it’s still really hard right now.”

“I know,” she said, holding me. “I know.”

I got up before Mommy the next morning, another rare and unusual moment. It was still drizzly outside but the sun had come out. Chicky sat on the tile floor next to me, waiting hopefully for me to drop a morsel of scrambled egg.

“You already ate, puppy.” I pulled out my phone to Google the picture of Phan Thi Kim Phúc that my reading was discussing. I didn’t look for too long before turning off my phone and leaning back into my chair. I looked around the kitchen. It would be the last room Mommy planned to pack up, and it was still full with all of its usual trinkets and pictures, ceramic chickens and rustic floral plates accumulated over the years and organized with influence from *Good Housekeeping* and other American women’s magazines. There were no Vietnam fridge magnets, no tiny Catholic idols like there were at my aunts’ houses in San Jose. She said that kind of stuff was tacky.

I wondered if it were too easy for me to blame all our problems on the war, if I’d been thinking completely wrong about everything. Maybe it was just an easy cop-out to make sense of the pain that was leftover from a charmed childhood with piano lessons and a nice house and parents who took good care of you and didn’t fight. I didn’t blame Mommy anymore because I blamed it on the war. So then what about my white friends and their war-less mommy issues? Maybe we were all just messed up and bad at love for some ineffable reason that I couldn’t blame on Henry Kissinger or Charles de Gaulle or whoever it was that invented napalm.

It was ultimately a selfish endeavor, too, trying to make my grief make sense through those images of Vietnamese people’s dead, naked, starving bodies. That wasn’t even the experience of my upper-class, sheltered Saigon family, and here I was, blaming me and Emily’s problems on our respective inherited wars, claiming the dead and the maimed to make sense of the ordinary. What if my heartbreak was just completely regular and mundane? Not complicated and tragic and special, not an after-effect of war. Just the side-effect of the innocent, inescapable passage of time.

That thought made me feel so much worse.

I shivered under my leather coat while we waited in line. Mika had picked a place in the Mission, a small club where tonight’s DJ was playing soul music over more contemporary beats. With my cheeks pink from the shitty wine I had gulped down after dinner, our little group of eight felt like a massive crowd. I was good friends with Mika and Callie, acquaintances with four of them, and had just met two new people. Someone lit a joint, and seconds later I was coughing and lightheaded. I hadn’t been high or gone out in the Mission since the breakup. I tilted my head toward the sky. The clouds had cleared tonight and I fixed my eyes on the few stars you can see from San Francisco, picturing them not as above me, but below me and in front of me, and imagining myself tumbling through space toward them. I used to do this with Emily, look up into the stars when we were high on a camping trip and feel like I was falling, and then Emily would

put her chin on my shoulder or lace her fingers through mine and I'd stop. Back when our love still felt so pure and unconditional that we were arrogant about it.

I imagined screaming out into the stars now, my voice escaping San Francisco and dissipating into the vastness of a universe that didn't care.

"ID, ma'am?" the bouncer asked while looking down the street, extending her hand with a yawn. I apologized, letting the people behind me go in front while I fumbled for my ID.

"Julia!" Mika had found me by the bar. I was waiting behind a couple who'd definitely butted me in line and was way too high, way too absorbed in my thoughts about Emily, to care.

"Oh, hey Mika," I said with a small smile.

Mika studied my face so carefully I thought I might cry. "What's wrong?" they asked.

"What? Nothing. Um, can I get you a drink for your birthday?"

Mika looked at me a bit longer, then suddenly hugged me. "It's okay if you're sad right now, Julia."

I broke. "But it's your birthday," I choked out between sobs.

"Don't worry about it. Do you want to step outside for a minute?"

I nodded.

The bouncer watched us as we leaned against a wall a few yards from the entrance, me weeping and blubbing some words about my parents' splitting and how I missed Emily, and Mika quietly listening with one arm around my shoulders and the other holding my hand, their cheek on my bicep.

"That's a lot," they said.

"I'm sorry. I'm, like, no fun right now."

They shook their head and reached into their pocket. "Don't be. Cigarette?"

I laughed and wiped my nose on the back of my hand. "Sure."

We spent a minute or two in silence, smoking and watching as two people across the street made out with so much enthusiasm we would have looked away if we weren't drunk.

"Hey," Mika said suddenly. "You're gonna be okay, Julia."

I smiled, eyes still raw. "I know."

"It's only this sad because you guys had something really beautiful, you know that, right?"

"I think so."

"Really. That love doesn't just go away like that." I nodded and looked down, my eyes welling with new tears. "I'm really proud of you. This is sooo hard, but you have been navigating it with so much grace and tenderness and strength, and it's been such a gift to witness how much you're growing. It's not easy to just sit with the grief."

I was crying harder now. "Thank you, Mika." I looked back up at my friend, their dark brown eyes watching me with serious consideration, the neon sign across the street giving their black hair a reddish tint. When they blinked I noticed the glitter they'd put on their eyelids.

“Just— make sure you give yourself space for joy, too, you know? It’s gonna suck for a long time, so you have to give that to yourself. Or make it for yourself. You have to start giving yourself the happy, tender moments you used to have with Emily.”

“Okay,” I nodded, too emotional to say anything else.

“Come on, I think I recognize the song they’re playing.” Mika stubbed out their cigarette and put their hand in mine. Their skin was soft, their hand was small, and they took me through the door and through the tangle of wobbly bodies with a firmness that refused to let me go. The bass rattled my ribcage, something wet, a spilled drink, landed on my pants, some man’s large hand lightly touched the small of my back. Finally we found our way to the front, the speakers so loud it felt like someone was pushing the music into my ears. Mika grabbed my other hand and began to dance, thrusting me away from them and then pulling me back in, leading as our feet messily kept time with “Cry to Me.” “Come on, Julia, I know you love this song!” they yelled over the music. I smiled and gave them a spin. My hips found the swing, punctuated the air in time with the vibraphone, my arms loosened, my hands moved with my feet, and for the moment, I had nothing to think of but Solomon Burke’s soulful crooning. Not Emily, not Mommy, not Dad. For the moment, I could dance, and I was free.

Acknowledgements

This thesis only exists because I am one little sapling in a vast, vast forest!

First, I'd like to thank the mentors and advisors who supported me directly with this project: Michelle Dinh, whose thoughtful feedback and brilliant teaching opened up new and exciting questions in Vietnamese American studies for me; Roanne Kantor, whose passionate insight about my short stories was a little bit like therapy; Annie Atura Bushnell, who pushed me to lean more into the creative work of this project and whose email response time is so quick it concerns me a little; Pablo Seward, whose reliably kind support and thoughtful engagement with my work helped me feel like I might be doing okay. I feel a little horrified every time I think about how many times all of you have had to read my run-on sentences and disorganized Google docs, and I'm very appreciative that you have done so. Thank you also to Jerome Reyes for reading my earliest versions of "Dragon Baby" and being hyped about my writing before I was, and to A-lan Aren Holt, Amara Tabor Smith, and Grace Toleque for their work in the Institute for Diversity in the Arts, a space that opened a new world for me and convinced me to think of myself as an artist.

I have numerous other mentors and teachers who supported and inspired me before this project even began: Edith Wu and Jerald Adamos, who've been excited about my potential since my freshman year, well before I thought they had any reason to be; Mai Wang, whose Asian American Literature & Criticism class seeded this thesis and made me realize English can be a really cool subject; Bac H. Tran, my Vietnamese language teacher, whose patient instruction opened a new level of cultural connection for me; and all those at the Stanford Storytelling Project from 2018 to 2020, who gave me a wonderful sense of community and helped shape me into the storyteller I am now, with special gratitude for Jenny March and Christy Hartman, mentors turned beloved friends.

A nod to a few writers: Monique Truong, Mitski, Ocean Vuong, Octavia Butler, Banana Yoshimoto, Florence + the Machine, Hanif Abdurraqib, Toni Morrison, Mary Oliver, Elena López Riera, Diana Khong (whose play *Mary Magdalene, Daughter, Boat Person* convinced me to start really writing fiction).

I'd of course be remiss not to mention my family. My dad, David Tilley, is probably the reason I'm such a nerd, and my mom, Catherine Nguyen, has kept me alive and is definitely a character-builder. My younger sibling, Madeleine, helps keep me sane through it all while only occasionally driving me insane. I'm so lucky to have grandparents, Tuyết and Hải, who share their stories with me. Much love also to Uncle Gilbert and Uncle Dan, Aunt Deb, and my cousins, Allie and Carson. Thank you all for nourishing me, literally and figuratively.

Finally, I owe everything, not just this project, to the love and care of a beautiful network of friendships. Through the gentle ways they've tended to me while I've sobbed over the phone or in their rooms, the moments of mischief and laughter, their theories of the world, and their

own art, their love has manifested in the ending of “Leftover: Ashes.” First, I’d like to give credit to the intellect that has made its way into this thesis: me and Haniyah Burney’s conversations back in 2021 around Asian “American” identity and imagining liberation beyond borders enabled me to articulate my ideas around reimagining citizenship; I’d be totally different without Camilla Wickman’s incisive insights about the world of our emotions and spirits; my problematization of the ocean-crossing chronotope was seeded along the Skokomish River during a conversation with Kavya Srikanth about diaspora literature and the publishing industry. Other friends to whom I am endlessly grateful: Sierra Porter, Renad Abualjamal, Alexis Mack, Amy Forsbacka, Jordan McDougall, Margot Bloch, Rebecca Wessel, Jo Brané-Wright, Julia Hok, my Okada community—friends & neighbors old and new—and so many other beautiful people. I hope you all know who you are. Lastly, two people who aren’t really in my life anymore, but without whom I would never be who I am today: Erick Hernandez, who was my biggest supporter/enabler when I decided to quit engineering and major in ethnic studies, and Serena Debesai.

Bibliography

Introduction

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do*. New York, NY: Abrams ComicArts, 2018.

Caputo, Philip. "'The Sympathizer,' by Viet Thanh Nguyen." *New York Times*, Apr. 2, 2015.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/books/review/the-sympathizer-by-viet-thanh-nguyen.html>

Chuh, Kandice. "introduction: on Asian Americanist critique." *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 1-29.

Davis, Angela. "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist." *Women, Race & Class*. New York, NY, First Vintage Books Edition, 1983. Pp. 172-201.

De Genova, Nicholas. "Citizenship." *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2017, pp.36-39.

Do, Scarlett Nhi. "'The War Never Ends': Films about the Vietnam War." *Limina*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2020.
www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-26.1-2020/perspective-nhi-do

Giovannini, Kyle. "THE VIETNAM SYNDROME AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE U.S. PUBLIC AND FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY DECISIONS DURING THE POST-VIETNAM ERA BETWEEN 1975-1991." Boise State University, 2020. Accessed 5/8/23. scholarworks.boisestate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2786&context=td

Grosfoguel, Ramón, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David Saldívar. 2005. "Introduction: Latin@s and the 'Euro-American Meance': The Decolonization of the U.S. Empire in the Twenty-First Century," in *Latin@s in the World-System: Decolonization Struggles in the 21st Century U.S. Empire*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. (Pp. 3-27)

Herring, George C. "THE 'VIETNAM SYNDROME' AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (AUTUMN 1981), pp. 594-612. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26436983>

Kirby, Robert. "The Best We Could Do." *The Comics Journal*, www.tcj.com/reviews/the-best-we-could-do/, 9 March 2017, accessed 13 Dec 2022.

Kupersmith, Violet. *Build Your House Around My Body*. Penguin Random House, 2022.

Lewis, Flora. "VIETNAM AND SALVADOR-A BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS." *New York Times*. Feb. 21 1982. Accessed May 7 2023.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/21/weekinreview/vietnam-and-salvador-a-battle-for-hearts-and-minds.html>

Lowe, Lisa. "Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization: Asian American Critique." *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 1996, pp.1-36.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Boston, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017.

Nguyen, Eric. *Things We Lost to the Water*. Penguin Random House, 2022.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. Grove Press, 2015.

Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy. "Overview." *This Is All I Choose to Tell*. Temple University Press, 2010. Pp. 22-43.

Schlund-Vials, Cathy J. "Cambodian American Memory Work: Justice and the 'Cambodian Syndrome'." *Positions*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2012, pp. 805-830.

Shah, Nirvi and Alia Wong. "The fight for African American studies in schools isn't getting easier, even after 50 years." *USA Today*. Feb. 17 2023. Accessed May 7 2023. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2023/02/17/desantis-college-board-battle-over-ethnic-studies/11229921002/>

"The Post Vietnam Battle Scene." *YouTube*, 11/13/2018. Accessed 5/8/2023. [youtube.com/watch?v=ibYhLTwRhok](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibYhLTwRhok)

The Trial of the Chicago 7. Directed by Aaron Sorkin, Dreamworks Pictures, 2020.

Ticktin, Miriam. "A world without innocence." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2017, pp. 577-590.

Vo, Quynh. "Home is rooted in a sense of plurality: An interview with Andrew Lam." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 25, 2019. Accessed May 8, 2023. lareviewofbooks.org/article/home-is-rooted-in-a-sense-of-plurality-an-interview-with-andrew-lam/

Bound to Explode: Rage, Revenge, and Model Minority Subject Formation

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Penguin Classics, 2014.

Koshy, Susan. "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness." *Boundary 2* 28 (Spring 2001): 151-91.

Lowe, Lisa. "Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization: Asian American Critique." *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 1996, pp.1-36.

Ninh, erin Khuê. *Ingratitude*. NYU Press, 2011.

Ninh, erin Khuê. "Without Enhancements." *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*. University of Washington Press, 2018. Pp. 69-81.

Nguyen, Mimi Thi. "Introduction: The Empire of Freedom." *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 1-32.

Qian, Zhenchao and Daniel T. Lichter. "Changing Patterns of Interracial Marriage in a Multiracial Society." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Oct. 2011. Pp. 1065-1084.

Rosa, Jonathan. "Introduction: Making Latinx Identities and Managing American Anxieties." *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*. 2019.

Said, Edward. "Jane Austen and Empire." *Culture and Imperialism*. First Vintage Books Edition, 1994. Pp. 80-96.

There Will Be Fire

Claire, Theo and Surprise, Kevin. "Moving the Rain: Settler Colonialism, the Capitalist State, and the Hydrologic Rift in California's Central Valley." *Antipode*, pp. 1-21, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12777>

Hurtado, Albert L. *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988.

Schwartz, Norah Anita et. al. "Where they (live, work and) spray": Pesticide exposure, childhood asthma and environmental justice among Mexican-American farmworkers." *Health & Place*, vol. 32, March 2015, pp. 83-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.12.016>

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.

Reisner, Marc. *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. New York, Penguin Books, 1993.

Love in the time after war

hooks, bell. *Communion: The Female Search for Love*. HarperCollins, 2002.