



Library podcast

Ocean Vuong and Jess Boyd discuss "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous"

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[00:00:35] Hello. Hi everybody. Thanks so much for being here tonight. I'm Stesha Brandon the Literature and Humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. And as we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we're gathered together on the ancestral and unseated land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to this evening's event with Ocean Vuong and Jess Boyd presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. And finally we're grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight. Thank you very much for your support. Tonight's program will include a brief reading by Ocean followed by an onstage conversation with Jess Boyd and then Audience Q and A. Now without further ado I'm delighted to welcome Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce tonight's program.

[00:01:45] Thank you, Stesha. Applause. Thank you all very much for being here tonight. My introduction to Ocean Vuong's work outside of hearing that there was going to be a book of poems from Copper Canyon Press took place in a small room in Brooklyn. It was a little kind of house party I guess you'd say and there were a few other poets there. And what I remember from that night was an utter sense of transport as Ocean without any kind of amplification or anything started to recite and read the poems that would eventually come out in the extraordinary debut poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* which Copper Canyon did publish three years ago this spring and that everyone in the place other poets included they

were all going Oh my God this is they could tell the singularity of voice the delicacy but strength also in the language and what he was writing. So the years since that that night have have that book of poems has had this extraordinary response Ocean received the T.S. Eliot Prize is actually one of the. I think it was a second time a debut collections ever received one of these are one of most prestigious poetry prizes and all over the country. There's been you know his book has been going out and going into people's hands and it was a year ago this spring that he finally got to Seattle a couple of more or less a small reception with Copper Canyon and then a reading in Sodo. And at that reading by the time the reading happened we knew there was going to be this novel that was coming and Ocean was saying well maybe we could do this.

[00:03:30] That would be fun to do this at your bookstore our being Elliott Bay. I thought that would be great too but I also had a feeling this wouldn't be possible in Elliott Bay because we I. By that time had read this novel On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous and which was published two weeks ago came out two weeks ago and in 40 years of doing what I do. I've never seen a debut novel have this incredible response that this book has had with or without the you know the notion that he was would be here literally we've been racing to keep the book in stacks and we're not the only ones at all. It's been true all over the country. It's had this extraordinary response of a book that tells movingly written in an narrator's voice writing to his mother a family that has got here travails out of Vietnam and and to find even more travail here and many ways in Connecticut and the hard work it takes to establish a life here in a language you don't know. And in the case of the young narrator Little Dog also all sorts of other awakenings coming to terms with his own you know learning his own sexuality his queerness his is striving to grow into adulthood and and yet also convey all this to you this very intimate voice. This book written to the narrator's mother so you'll get to hear from that tonight.

[00:04:59] And you're in for you know we will be in for a treat hearing Ocean read which he will do and then following that he will be up here conversing with Jess Boyd who is known to many of you and should be known to more of you as a wonderful community presence. We first knew of her through her work with the Vietnamese Friendship Association part of the community here that as so so vital to what Seattle is and certainly helping navigate what what Seattle has grown in the last 40 to 50 years is as a Vietnamese presence in this country as more manifest and cultural ways than others. And she also does other things but in fact a Vietnamese is a language she knows the she also knows Thai. She played this role with a wonderful Thai writer who came over here a few months ago. So just and she herself is a writer and you won't get to hear so much of that tonight but she's someone who's work to look for. We do have copies of of Ocean's books the two books Night Sky with Exit Wounds and On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous and to say one other little story about Ocean and he's out there. The other thing you will see if you get to that table are a number of the other writers of the Vietnam diaspora who were here writers like Viet Thanh Nguyen, Thi Bui who was here and others and Oceans

aware of it we brought their books here tonight as we brought Night Sky when Thi Bui was here for Seattle Reads a few months ago and Ocean's aware of this.

[00:06:26] That's also part of it there's been this body of work coming out and finding readers. And one of the writers whose work has his help stand on is is another poetic novel written 20 years ago by women named Le Thi Diem Thuy The only book she's written a book called The Gangster We are All Looking For and she came out here 20 years ago and that book came out. It's a book that's never gone out of print. And she sort of disappeared from the book world and Ocean now lives in Massachusetts and and was doing a poetry reading there and he was signing books since women came up to have her book signed. And he said you know how do you want it made out to. And she said her name. And he writes who it was and did that gesture of respect of going to her feet and acknowledging her work. So Ocean carries that kind of eloquence and urgency in his work and in his very way of going about doing his work again for everyone from the Seattle Public Library to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. And all of us at Elliott Bay we thank you for being here and please join to ask and join in welcoming the extraordinary writer Ocean Vuong.

[00:07:55] Applause. Hello everyone. Thank you so much for being here. Thank you Rick for that incredible eloquent and personal introduction. It's a it's a great pleasure to be back in Seattle. I must say one of my favorite cities in this country and a deeper pleasure to share this night with you and with Jess Boyd an incredible thinker, activist and community builder in her own right. Thank you so much. It was in this city the first time I came here that I saw Vietnamese street names in Little Saigon with the diacritics with the accents and I just I cried I couldn't believe it. So thank you Seattle for um. Thank you for helping me see something I never thought I would see in this country.

[00:09:10] I'd also like to thank one of your your own um.

[00:09:15] Five years ago when I wasn't sure what I was going to do with my life I thought I thought I'd just go back to Hartford work at Panera Bread.

[00:09:29] Make my way up to a regional manager which is not too bad. Um. And write at night and weekends and. But someone said you know there's this foundation out in the northwest. Called the Elizabeth George Foundation and it's a long shot but apply and and see what happens. And I was caught I was uh. Struggling and to go to grad school I thought I was gonna go to grad school and I didn't I couldn't afford it.

[00:10:09] And then uh I wrote to this foundation to this incredible writer named Elizabeth George which you all know who lives here. Um I asked for you know 20 grand just to help me pay rent and. I told her this is the end of the line for me. She came back with double.

[00:10:32] And she's here tonight. So thank you Elizabeth.

[00:10:54] Having been trained as a poet I was taught to never.

[00:10:59] Expect anybody to wait at the end of what I write. And it's good advice. We shouldn't write expecting an audience so to have an audience filled this beautiful space like this not only here but across the country. Thus far it's a great privilege that's not lost on me. So thank you for supporting this library for supporting libraries. Thank you for your presence here in supporting Elliott Bay Bookstore and its powerful foothold and heartbeat in the Seattle community. And thank you to Rick Simonson. And again thank you so much.

[00:11:43] I'm going to read about seven minutes. From this book what I was interested in as a novelist. Was to turn the I, the first person narrator.

[00:11:59] Which which can easily be a black hole you know in books it's all about me myself and I I wanted to turn the I into a search light. Into a way to cast a vision onto those around the protagonists' life. In this case his grandmother and his mother both of whom suffer from PTSD having survived the war in Vietnam. In the same way that Ishmael saw Ahab in Moby Dick and Nick Carraway to Gatsby and Yuniors to Oscar Wao in Diaz's work. And in this moment we're dropped into a scene where they're.

[00:12:45] Moving through.

[00:12:48] An episode of mental illness that is quite common. And the

[00:12:53] The speaker here is about six or seven. I'm dragged into a hole darker than the night around it, by two women. Only when one of them screams. Do I know who I am. I see their heads black hair matted from the floor they sleep on. The air sharp with a chemical delirium as they jostle in the blur of the car's interior. Eyes still thick with sleep I make out the shapes a headrest, a felt monkey the size of a thumb swinging from the rearview, a piece of

metal, shining, then gone. The car peels out of the driveway and I can tell from the smell of acetone and nail polish that it's your tan and rust Toyota you and Lan are in the front clamoring for something that won't show itself the street lights flying by hitting your faces with the force of blows.

[00:13:59] He's gonna kill her ma. He's gonna do it this time. You say breathless. We riding. We riding helicopter fast Lan says.

[00:14:11] She's in her own mind red and dense with obsession. We riding where she clutches the flip down mirror with both hands. I can tell by her voice that she's smiling or at least gritting her teeth. He's gonna kill my sister, Mama you say you sound like you're flailing down a river. I know Carl. It's for real this time. You hear me? Ma! Lan rock side to side from the mirror making whooshing sounds. We getting out of here huh. We got to go far. Little Dog. Outside the night surges by like sideways gravity the green numbers on the dash read three o' four am. Who put my hands in my face. The tires squeal at each turn. The streets are empty and it feels like a universe in here in everything hurling through the cosmic dark while in the front seat the women who raised me are losing their minds. Through my fingers the night is black construction paper only the frazzled heads of these two before me are clear swaying. Don't worry Mai, you're speaking to yourself now. Your face so close to the windshield. THE GLASS FOGS a ring that spreads in equal measure to your words. I'm coming. We're coming. After a while we swerved down a street lined with Continentals.

[00:15:46] The car crawls then stops in front of a gray clapboard townhouse. Mai you say pulling the emergency brake. He's gonna kill Mai. Lan who all this time had been shaking her head stops as if the words have finally touched a little button inside her.

[00:16:08] What. Who killed who. Who die this time.

[00:16:13] Both of you stay in the car. You say you unbuckle your belt leap out and shuffle toward the house. The door left open behind you. There is a story Lan would tell of Lady Trieu the mythical woman warrior who led an army of men and repelled the Chinese invasion of ancient Vietnam. I think of her seeing you. How as legend goes armed with two swords she'd fling her yard long breasts over her shoulders and cut down the invaders by the dozens. How it was always a woman who saved us.

[00:16:56] Who die now.

[00:16:58] Lan swings around her face made stark by the overhead light ripples with this new knowledge who gonna die. Little Dog. She flips her hand back and forth as if opening a locked door to indicate emptiness. Somebody kill you for what.

[00:17:20] But I'm not listening.

[00:17:22] I'm rolling down the window arms burning with each turn. Cool November air my stomach grabs as I watch you mount the front steps. The nine inch machete glinting in your hand. You knock on the door. Shouting Come out. Carl you say in Vietnamese come out you fucker. I'm taking her home for good. You can have the car. Just give me my sister. At the words sister. Your voice cracks into a busted sob. Before regaining control. you bash the door with the machetes wooden but the porch lights turn on your pink nightgown. Suddenly green under the fluorescent. The door opens.

[00:18:05] You step back.

[00:18:08] A man appears he half lunges from the doorway as you backpedal down the steps. The blade locked at your side as if pinned in place.

[00:18:20] He has a gun Lan and whisper shouts from the car. Now lucid. ROSE It's a shotgun it shoots two eaters at once. They eat your lungs inside out. Little Dog tell her.

[00:18:38] Your hands float over your head. The metal clanks on the drive way the man huge his shoulders sloped under a gray Yankee's sweatshirt steps up to you says a few words through his teeth then kicks the machete to the side it disappears in the grass with a flash. You mumble something make yourself small cup your hands under your chin the posture you take after receiving a tip at the nail salon the man lowers his gun as you back away shaking toward the car.

[00:19:14] It's not worth it. Rose Lan says cupping her mouth with both hands. You can't beat a gun. You just can't come back. Come back in the helicopter.

[00:19:27] Ma I hear myself say Ma. Come on.

[00:19:32] You edge slowly into the driver's seat. Turn to me with a nauseated stare. There's a long silence. I think you're about to laugh but then your eyes fill. So I turn away to the man carefully watching us hand on his hip the gun clamped between his armpit pointed at the ground. When you start to talk your voice is scraped out. I catch only parts of it. It's not Mai's house. You explain fumbling with your keys. Or rather Mai is no longer there. The boyfriend Carl who used to slam her head against the wall is no longer there. This is somebody else. White man with a shotgun and a bald head. It was a mistake. You're saying to Lan an accident. But Mai has not lived here for five years. Lan says with sudden tenderness.

[00:20:35] Oh Rose.

[00:20:38] Although I don't see it I can tell she's brushing your hair behind your ear. The way a mother does. Mai move to Florida remember to open her own salon. Lan is poised, her shoulders relaxed. Someone else has stepped inside her and started moving her limbs her lips.

[00:21:03] We go home now. You need sleep. Rose.

[00:21:08] The engine starts the car lurches into a U-turn. As we pull away from the porch a boy no older than I am points a toy pistol at us. The gun jumps and his mouth makes blasting noises. His father turns to yell at him. He shoots once two more times.

[00:21:32] From the window of my helicopter I look at him. I look him dead in the eyes and do what you do. I refuse to die.

[00:21:59] So we have already established that we're both Libras and will likely be crying together. So I actually forgot the tissues, Stesha.

[00:22:10] Thank you.

[00:22:17] That's gonna be empty very soon. A minor housekeeping that is not real housekeeping. I am drinking durian in because I thought if there was a night when I could it

was tonight. So if anyone smells durian and it is not a gas leak it is my drink. So I wanted to start by giving Ocean a couple of love and thank you notes from the Vietnamese community.

[00:22:48] Oh come on come on I didn't want to be the only voice up here. So these are from folks both in state and out of state.

[00:22:55] Just to say thank you for coming. Vietnamese spoken.

[00:23:11] So where to start. So reading this book for me was such a sensory experience I felt like when I read it I read it with my whole body. and there were parts of it that felt like home that smelt like home. That sounded like home and I saw you posted a Spotify playlist that was kind of the playlist the soundtrack of you writing this.

[00:23:41] And I was wondering what was the food and smell version of the playlist like what were you eating and what were you what smells were you surrounding yourself with as you manifested this.

[00:23:54] Oh Lord I I work whenever I can. And I work at night so often I.

[00:24:01] I wrote a lot of this book in New York and some of it in New England. And it's usually just the smell of dew and wood fire you know coming through the window.

[00:24:15] But I think I went back to to all the sensory. Details and the richness of. Of Connecticut the tobacco farm that I worked on the barns the Vietnamese kitchen which is its own world. And the sounds and the textures. I wanted the book to have an embodied sense of knowledge. Because for so many of us immigrants and refugees.

[00:24:50] When your tongue is gone when English is not available to you. You have to learn other languages. The language of the body the language of vigilance and I was taught by these women to look at the world and read the world not only the words but the way people move to understand how people look at you to understand it to make my way through sense and sound to understand the tone.

[00:25:24] Whether you're safe in this space or not depends on the tone of how someone speaks to you. So this equipment this knowledge was what I wanted to replicate for a reader that you're not entering a story you're entering a climate an atmosphere made real by disorientation which is so much of the reality of the immigrant's life just disorientation as a Praxis to understand the world.

[00:25:59] That word disorientation I think is so interesting especially when we're talking about Asian identities and the word Oriental and how we deconstruct that word and disorient away from it. And in the novel Little Dog writes They will never want you to succeed but never more. They will want you to succeed but never more than them. They will write their names on your leash and call you necessary. Call you urgent. So I was wondering how do you continue to disorient and disrupt the space of success. And what we know as the literary canon.

[00:26:38] Yes success is interesting in this country because it's always inevitably tied to capitalism.

[00:26:47] And I think.

[00:26:50] That's why I never felt. In my bones that a career as a writer is a given for me. I wrote two books. I tried my best. I did two things that I'm very proud of. It's very rare to be able to do that. even once and I got to do it twice. And if that's it that's perfectly fine. You know I think so much of success is out of one's own hands. You hope. You know when I was growing up in Hartford I was inundated by this myth. I grew up in a black and brown community. And I would wake up on Sundays at my friend's house sleeping over and they'll drag me to Baptist Church. And when I was there I was enamored of this this myth. The preacher would always return to was Noah's Ark. And I thought and I think that myth really haunted me and really informs the way I see art and art making. Is that the book is a vessel. And what you put into it. You got to put everything that you want to see in the future. You have to put everything you can't hold anything back. You put everything you want and you cherish and you put it as a way as a map of thinking. The novel at its best is a way to think in the future.

[00:28:18] And you filled that vessel and you hope that it lives that it that it that it's everything you know that if you live in the future that you get the privilege of surviving the moment surviving this era. You can see yourself in what you've built. And that's all I know it's grandiose. I know it's almost comically so and sometimes we're embarrassed of that in this culture we don't want to be particularly for artists. For others like sports figures and musicians grandiosity is OK. But for an artist we're supposed to put our head down. But I think to do this incredibly difficult thing and to do it well you have to have a large vision a vision beyond the success of a

best seller. The success of a prize you have to look at. What is the historical amplification. The urgency the contextual urgency. What is the crisis. In this case it's the crisis of language. And then you build an architecture whether it be a novel or a book of poems or a play. You build an architecture worthy of that. In that crisis to hold it so that we can think through it together. The book is an architecture of thinking and.

[00:29:45] Having done that I don't know there's anything left you know. I hope so. I hope we all have this weird set of tools that I can't use a Panera Bread. so I gotta use it somewhere so I hope there's another book but I don't sit on that fact.

[00:30:03] I don't expect it to happen but it's it's a it's a testy relationship because at the end of the day we're selling something you know I thought when I was gonna be a poet I quit business school. I dropped out of business school after three years and I said I'll be a poet. I'm going to be a. I will do this pure noble you know vocation. And in some sense you know people say there's no money in poetry and all that. And there is a lack compared to Wall Street. But you still have to sell a book. You still have to find a job and make a living. And I think when I started to think about that it really helped me reframe creativity. That just because we say that I'm an artist doesn't mean we are you know liberated from the lexicon of capitalism. Even the word workshop which is so common the workshop is a capitalistic framework tightening. Cleaning up. Right. We think about our creativity in the frame of the assembly line. We are machines and machinations towards capitalistic output and we start to weaponize it to shame each other. We all have that friend who you know. I wrote 300 poems last year.

[00:31:30] What did you do. You know.

[00:31:33] And I thought oh you know there's no escape here. So before I wrote a single book I had to figure out. You know where I stood in relation to all that. And for me I knew that the book is a singular act. And there's no career after that. There's no it's not a given. And if I have nothing else to say two books it's a great run. It's beautiful. You know I see myself as a teacher. That's my profession. I teach and I'll teach for as long as I live. But that's very different from my writing.

[00:32:15] Like if you worked at Panera Bread I would always be there. I actually was really lucky to get an early edition of your book.

[00:32:27] From Rick and I was like I'm gonna read this so quickly and it actually took me months because every page really challenged me to reconsider things that lived inside me but

that I'd never articulated either in my mind or externally. And I also read it out loud because I felt like it was a really important story for my baby in utero to hear and absorb and in the novel you write about mother tongues and how perhaps our first real mother tongue at the blood utterances between a child and the placenta and the mother and I've never really seen or read an author. Who has really contemplated the placenta and the embodied relationship between a child and a parent. I was wondering if you could talk more about how you reached that place.

[00:33:30] Yes I.

[00:33:32] I think a lot of it is the training of a poet. Because. The lyric poem is liberated or not beholden to plot. And so what it charges the writer is to think about proximity as a way to build tension. And every poet knows this. You can think about proximity on the level of language. One word standing next to another word and end depending on what's around. Depending on the citizenry of the words around it meaning changes. In the same way that chemistry works you have hydrogen. Complete on its own oxygen complete on its own. Put them side by side. Water. And poetry and language works in this way. And so when when a poet engages a subject or theme in this case placenta or monarch butterflies or what have you. The question is Where does meaning collaborate collaborate with the subject. And when you don't have plot. The subjects the facts of the world whether it be science history. Metaphors they get to stand on their own terms. And I think a lot of modernism. In the West as a sex obsessed with juxtaposition and conquest one thing has to overpower another for the future to be realized. David and Goliath. The father must be defeated by the son for the son to realize himself. And I just I knew as a poet that you didn't need that. The Big Experiment was that can it happen in fiction can facts amplify reality without overcoming the story. And I think with that gaze with a poet's gaze of research you realize that you don't have to. Use facts towards a grand scheme. You can just put them side by side in this case. The fact of the placenta and the crisis of the mother tongue. Put them side by side and the reader will see the connection in the same way. Hydrogen and oxygen becomes water. Side by side.

[00:36:17] That was so beautiful.

[00:36:22] And. Talking about things that live side by side and coexist and are reimaged. I saw a quote where.

[00:36:33] You said something like the inheritance of mankind for men to create war and for women to clean up the mess after them and. And I was wondering if you could speak more to being raised by two such women. Because I think like you said so often we juxtapose these

things as black and white like war equals trauma the end or like war equals PTSD the end. And how in your book you told us about the beauty in those relationships as well as the pain.

[00:37:13] Yes. Yeah. I think one of the opportunities of a novel. That in some ways the lyric poem. It's not as best suited at because the lyric poem narrows its language narrowed down towards a pinnacle that that expands in the psyche. But the novel you have to expand in a physical sense the world has to keep growing as you write. The characters have to move through that world in a very almost mathematical sense. And one of the challenges and the excitement that I had writing this book was that I didn't want to be off the hook. I felt that. I got so comfortable with poetry. That that I knew myself well I knew when a poem's getting good. And and I relished in it. But what happens is that. The page the end of the page is coming and I said oh I get to leave I get to leave this tough place maybe two pages you know. And I felt like the poem was letting me off the hook too easily. And the novel excited me as a way of forcing me to follow my language. And these people.

[00:38:34] Further into the aftermath to flesh them out further and I sense that. Language dictates that the connotations of an immigrant or refugee. that they should have nothing that they come to this country with only the shirts on their backs. Empty Hands also that they are powerless victims and only victims. But I would argue through this book that as much as there are epigenetic trauma which is very real there is also simultaneously epigenetic strength. That these women teach Little Dog the narrator. How to recognize beauty. Because they knew how valuable beauty is in a world on fire. And there's no record of that education for refugees. It's only through the private moment between mother and son grandmother and granddaughter. They point it out and at one point. The grandmother. Tells Little Dog to harvest these violet flowers at this at the side of the freeway. She doesn't know what they're called but she points out that that's beautiful. Go and get it. So they have to climb over this fence. It's a mini allegory. They have to risk this this thing for what. Because it's beautiful.

[00:40:16] And.

[00:40:18] That beauty doesn't have to have meaning. It can exist on its own terms. It could exist simply because somebody recognized it. Anyone can pass a bunch of dusty violet flowers and think that's just weeds, wildflowers, overgrowth but this woman from war suffering mental illness saw it as a sight worthy to bring home and celebrate it. She teaches her grandson to see that. So I think one of the things the novel offers us is a map of a lineage as well which is very important to me. You know I think a lot of the American canon particularly in the hands of white male writers history is very fraught. It's anxious because if they go back enough they arrive at Native American genocide and slavery. And so we would look at a lot of coming of age stories particularly Salinger's *Catcher In the Rye* which this book kind of navigates and

echoes with that that that book and I loved that book. I and I was enraptured by it but that book was celibate as the coming of age story of a male coming of age in this country. But one of the things that was peculiar to me is that it had no history. It took place you know in just a few days and everything was crammed into this claustrophobic city. And that was its power. But I thought what would happen. If you wrote if you saw the coming of age as also a coming of history. How far back can we go to trace a life. As it develops. So as much as this is a coming of age story it's also a coming of art and a reckoning with American violence as a means towards American self-knowledge. Is to go back and reckon with.

[00:42:24] It's so refreshing to hear you talk about the ways that you reframed and wrote this novel. And like the retelling of history the coming of age story because I think even you know we called the war in Vietnam the Vietnam War which inherently takes it away from what it actually was.

[00:42:46] And so often the narratives connected to that war are told by white male writers coming from a very specific place. And for you to take us back to that place. But yeah it be a place that we've never been before. But the place that we think we know is so incredible. And one place that you take us to that I would love to ask about because I'm on a group chat with a collection of Vietnamese women some of whom are here. We were all going back and forth like what do you think this means. This is what I think this means and we all had such different interpretations. And it's the scene with the monkeys and the brains. And for me personally I interpreted that as the the Asian mind and these foreigners coming in and excavating it and like eating it dry and consuming it for their betterment and then leaving. I would love to know from your perspective what the story was behind that piece.

[00:43:58] Yes there's this there's this some. What was once folklore was this also fact is urban legend that that men Vietnamese and in other places, China would eat the the brain of the macaque monkey to support virility and it was important for me to it to engage that theme of animal cruelty. Um because this book as American as it is and it's influenced by a lot of Western art. Simone Veo, Roland Bach, Chopin is very French and so it's haunted by the French colonial impressions on our culture. But it had to stand. On Asian philosophy for me and in this case is a Buddhist philosophy. You know even if you see an ant on the table and you slap the table the ant tries to get away it tries to live. It tries to survive even an ant knows that who knows what else is in its head. But when the when the hand comes down it scrambles. For its life. That that's a fact of all sentient life. And I wanted while engaging in the polarities. Of the politics of the Vietnam War and the conflicts in Vietnam thereafter. I also wanted to destabilize. What for me was always this very limited narrow scope because even the way we think about Vietnam what we don't think about the Hmong, Kampuchea, Laos all of those folks are equally displaced the Cham people the lu Mien all these communities. It was not just about Vietnam. It's a whole region decimated. And on top of that is it. Did you win or

did you lose. Right. We often say this is the first time in history that the winners did not get to tell the story. But what is winning if three million people died.

[00:46:20] I don't know who won. And.

[00:46:24] So I knew that I had to look elsewhere. The book couldn't just be focused on this human chess game. Those books were written before. I needed to destabilize the stage and to say that even amongst the chaos whether they're victims or aggressors human beings through the mishandling of mythologies the mishandling of knowledge can commit something this cruel to devour the brain of a monkey as it's living. And also it was a small nod to an Asian-American elder Maxine Hong Kingston who wrote about this. Also a brief paragraph. In Woman Warrior One paragraph and. The Asian American community really went hard on her. How dare. Don't do don't air our dirty laundry. How dare you expose us as part you know paint us as barbarians. And I felt that I would have forsaken the efforts that she put through 40 years ago. Because what she was trying to engage in. Is the Patriot the patriarchy. What happens. With when. When men decide to destroy things to. Progress their genes. And every culture has a story of this right that the fetishization of the lineage. The blood lineage. And in that moment in the middle of the war there is this moment where these men gathered a table trying to in one way in one cruel twisted way. Propagate the future. I just did not want any easy answers. I wanted to be as complicated as it is. No more black and white no more winner and loser. This book is orchestrated to refuse and reject all answers but simply lay out the grounds. The veins that allowed us to get here and it asked the question.

[00:48:43] What is the price of trying to get out of these large systems. And that's where I started to engage in whiteness particularly white masculinity with this farm boy named Trevor. What I wanted to ask is. If. A white boy in rural Connecticut decided to say no to his milieu to his hegemonic masculinity to say no to the restrictions put forth on him to the point where tenderness became a breach and a betrayal of his forefathers. Because that's what hegemonic masculinity informed by whiteness is. When I was growing up in the early aughts the saddest phrase that I heard was no homo. It was used as a magic spell for boys to just put your arm around your shoulder. And I think. We should ask what happens. To a country when our men and boys need a magic spell to do something as humane as touch one another. Where are we going to go from there. No where. And my question in this book is. Can somebody break out of this system. Can they reject the system. Can they outlive that.

[00:50:13] And we realize that Little Dog actually doesn't struggle with his sexuality as much as Trevor does because he's raised by women. He comes from a tradition where queerness is celebrated for clairvoyance as a side of power.

[00:50:30] And. That becomes knowledge pre-ancestral knowledge that Trevor is robbed from.

[00:50:48] I don't know if I'm answering all your questions. No, you answered all of my questions. It's funny sometimes I feel really terrified to live in this country because as some of you might be able to tell this is not an American accent.

[00:51:03] And hearing you ask these questions and seeing such prominent papers write these questions into print makes it feel like a safer place to be. So thank you. And on that note I think we're going to open it up to questions.

[00:51:22] Who has questions. Excellent.

[00:51:27] Hello. Thank you so much for sharing your heart with the world. And my question has to do with that. I'm sure you started writing when you were very young and I just wanted to ask you. At what moment did you realize that. You were ready to share or you felt. Like you needed to share your heart with the world. Because it's so vulnerable.

[00:51:56] Yeah it is. It is vulnerable. But it was.

[00:52:04] I want to be careful and make sure I'm honest with myself when I answer this.

[00:52:13] But it wasn't hard.

[00:52:17] It's not exactly hard. It's very difficult to write. But the decision to share it is not hard. Because I think. One of the experiences of being a person of color in this country is akin to walking into a house of mirrors. We've all done that in the in the carnivals. It's like walking into a house of mirrors. Looking into the mirror.

[00:52:48] And seeing nothing. You know you entered it.

[00:52:55] You said I know I have a body. I know I went in here but you look at every mirror. You don't see yourself. And you can extend this to the media, to books, to movies, to film, to presidents, to people in power. You don't see yourself. So when it's your turn. And I don't know if it's my turn. I stumbled into this vocation. But I'm here when it's your turn to have the pen in your hand. You walk. You walk right up to that mirror and you start writing on it on that mirror. You write your story. I never hesitated. I had to do it. So I mean it when I say it wasn't hard writing it was hard. It took a lot. And I don't know if I want to do it again. But the decision to share.

[00:54:01] You know you say vulnerable. I don't know if I feel vulnerable because when I'm writing at my best my urgency to write on that mirror my urgency to speak outpaces my terror.

[00:54:22] Applause. I think we have a question up in the balcony is that right.

[00:54:26] Tim. No. Oh. Back. Back here. Great.

[00:54:39] Hi. Thank you so much for sharing your words with us. It's really special. I'm really interested in the genre of an autobiographical novel and reading your book really opens up like that possibility for me as a poet right and a writer as well and I wanted to ask you about like what your decisions were and where you fictionalized and where you drew straight from the truth and what that meant to you to fictionalize like a very true story for you.

[00:55:15] Yeah I. I knew from the get go that I wanted to invite an autobiographical reading. But ultimately rejected that was important. I see myself working in the American tradition a tradition that I'm dropped into and one that I am inspired by as fraught and problematic as it can be. There is moments of inspiration and what we realize at the very beginning of the American novel. In my mind it would be Herman Melville's Moby Dick. That the I the historical I is malleable. People rarely write about it that book in this way. But it's an autobiographical novel. Herman lived that life. And further. The I the personal I was negotiable with truth and that was part of the American myth that one can be invent oneself anew here. When it comes to policy that was atrocious it turned itself into manifest destiny right. Westport expansion via death.

[00:56:42] In literature it created this moment where a self is up for grabs in the agency of the Creator and the artist in Whitman picked it up right right after right. Do I Do I contradict myself. Very well then I contradict myself. I contain multitudes but I actually think Melville enacted it much better in much more complicated ways. And in that sense.

[00:57:14] He's he compromised. Nothing.

[00:57:18] 30 pages on how to harvest spermaceti sure. 20 pages comparing humpback whale sketches across Europe and the early Americas. Fine. Right. It's also a thriller a theological negotiation on whiteness as relates to the whale and race. Much ahead of its time. Sure. Which is why it wasn't a success in his day. It was a flop. People didn't know what to do with it. One critic thought he had mental illness but that was the tradition that I'm in. That the I is negotiable. In that autobiography was a way of understanding where one situates and where one goes. In the very specific space of America. So that book Moby Dick was also an essay into the inquiry of the futurity of a nation at a moment of crisis. It came out 1850 right.

[00:58:24] This is a moment where everything is about to blow up. What we now call the Civil War. And so where where do I go from there. I just look at that and I said my goodness what would happen in the hands of a Queer Asian American writer if he decided just to compromise nothing on his own terms. And it's important I think to look back at those writers with the gazes and concerns of a person of color. We are in the moment where it's very empowering to cancel writers because they are problematic and as a teacher as a professor. My student asked me that question a lot. What should we do with Whitman. He's racist. He's also innovated in incredibly radical political line. And I say we can hold them both. Those are facts. The idea is that we have to be thorough with how we educate and how we look at the past. Look at our influences. On one hand. If we don't do that it's a very powerful moment to say cancel it sweep it off the desk. But that doesn't mean we sweep it off the desk of every every elementary school every middle school every high school student. The cannon is much larger than that.

[00:59:59] And what we end up doing when we cancel is we actually surrender we leave the page blank. And when that happens it gets written over by somebody else. Someone who will never tell the whole truth and will never consider our bodies. So we have to be. We owe it to ourselves to be thorough and we owe it to our elders. I live in New England I teach in New England. And when I was writing this book I went up to visit Arrowhead in Pittsfield where Herman Melville lived and wrote Moby Dick and I looked at the grounds I toured the grounds. I saw the home and it was an incredible property because you realize that everything was built and created for him to write that book including the bodies his wife his sisters his cousins all the women who cooked and clean for him to sit in a room with a giant desk and that's it. To write this book.

[01:01:02] The freed slaves who escaped the South who worked until the land who went to get his groceries who attended his horses. The nameless people. All of these writers. Discovered incredible things to innovate. American literature.

[01:01:24] And they did it on the nameless anonymous backs of brown bodies and a woman. If we cancel that innovation we also forsake those bodies. We owe it to those bodies to harvest the merits of their efforts and to apply it to new gazes to build a literature where we can see ourselves better. So the autobiographical I is a potent site of power for me because what what it says is that I will begin with truth. But the rest is on my own terms. According to my imagination to go back to Maxine Hong Kingston in 1975 when *The Woman Warrior* came out in her letters to her friends she says very excitedly.

[01:02:14] I'm writing. The next great American novel novel as an Asian American Chinese American woman I'm going to write and put my name right next to Faulkner and Hemingway and all of those folks. Somewhere along the line her publisher convinced her to call it a memoir. So the subtitle is *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts*. It even went on to win the National Book Critics Circle for non-fiction. So I asked myself why did that happen. When I was shopping this book around and talking to publishers they asked the same thing but I was prepared. Because I from 1975 to now a lot has happened I was prepared. They said you know a memoir would sell more. A memoir would be juicy. And we realize that we get into a very precarious moment with writers of color. Toni Morrison talks about this in *Playing in the Dark*. That often we think we're just we're riding alongside everybody else because we have a book. We have a publisher. We have a publicist.

[01:03:28] It all stands in the same place in the bookstores. But in fact the gaze and expectation for the writer of color is very different. We are often seen as conduits of an anthropological reality rather than craftspeople. In other words tour guides to premade worlds rather than world makers.

[01:03:51] Toni Morrison went through the same thing when she published *The Bluest Eye*. And what happens is strips. Agency and artistry. What what it says that the coded language is. Oh you just looked up from the pad. Looked at your world and just recorded things that were already exciting. Already inherent inherently dramatic exotic. You just. Made yourself a bridge into a smoldering world. You didn't make that world yourself. That's how it's coded.

[01:04:34] So I knew that I could have bypassed that. And by the way Morrison went on to write *Beloved* as a way of saying I can make anything I want right. And that's one answer. That's one answer. But I was interested in experimenting not only with the book but with the

book's publication. Where we are now. I was interested and I was curious you know. I thought well. I would forsake myself I would forsake the work of Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison and my elders. If I just folded here and wrote a juicy memoir Just because some of these publishers wanted me to. I went with the one that respected my vision as a novel as an artist from the beginning. But I had that choice because so many folks sacrifice so many writers of color sacrificed to made it possible for me. I mean I got to make that choice. I'm sorry. I'm going out of hand. But in short an autobiography is an American experiment and there's no reason why you too shouldn't keep doing it.

[01:05:50] Thank you Ocean for being here.

[01:05:54] I am too a refugee from Vietnam and I have a story to write and I've been hiding my stories for a long long time and I figured if I just write about everything else in the world then my story I could write later. So I took a moment just to put it away and my dear friend here gave me your book and I got your book on my birthday and I read and I cried. So just to let you know that I sat until the sun and I sat on the couch and I cried every words that were written in your book and so I just want to tell you that um.

[01:06:33] Thank you for being an inspiration. Thank you for being that light that shining star that pave a way for many refugees like me to say it's OK go.

[01:06:49] You know I'm so I've been following you and one thing that you said in your several interviews were that you need more Vietnamese writers to create the big L and L was in literature. And so I want to thank you and I want to tell you that the not only that the L that you want to create in literature but it's also about the lives that were lost and the lives that loved our country. So my question to you is.

[01:07:27] What is your philosophy for your younger self as a Vietnamese man, writer, refugee, teacher, and as a human being. What is your philosophy and what would you tell yourself. And how can you rewrite as you were saying like rewrite into the future. So because that's what you want to see. So what would you want to share. Thank you.

[01:07:57] Um. I think in in short. I wrote this book as a map for my younger self.

[01:08:07] And.

[01:08:10] I think because it's not simple. I couldn't say it in one sentence. I have to say it in two hundred and fifty pages. There's so much. How do you begin to tell a younger self. What happened to you. What happened to your family. What this country means and I think that's why it's really important to engage in a prehistory as a writer. And it's it's just as important for writers who come out of Diaspora but also important for white writers. I was just in San Francisco with Rebecca Solnit and she's an example of somebody a white writer who leaves nothing unturned no history no vein unturned and the myriads that she can discover by holding her own lineage and her own ancestors accountable is incredible. And it's yet to be really done in a long earned tradition. And as as a teacher of a lot of white students I tell them you owe it to yourself to look at this history and to look at whiteness as it is which is a construct.

[01:09:28] Race is a construct. Whiteness is a thing. What is that thing. How did that come about. How does that inform all the characters you owe it to yourself. If you don't you're writing with only one eye open.

[01:09:43] You have to investigate everything. And that was you know you learned that as a writer a son of refugees growing up in this country. And the book in a way as much as it is a letter to a mother. It's also a letter to myself too to each other and it works in a cycle and in the in that sense. But in short I had to write a book to say there's no one way to say it.

[01:10:14] Any questions from up in the overflow area.

[01:10:18] Anyone. Looks like we have one.

[01:10:22] Thank you Ocean for coming to speak today and I say that as especially as an Asian-American a queer Asian-American and an Asian-American that as a child of a strong woman who is a refugee from Indo-China. So for that I want to profoundly thank you for existing for being an inspiration and for coming to speak to us today. When I read your first work Night Sky with Exit Wounds there was one passage that really struck me where you spoke in front of. To paraphrase a group of older white folks and your mother in the back. You know welling up with what her son has done. When I read that piece I had just graduated from university and to this day my mom still doesn't know what an American university education entails.

[01:11:25] And.

[01:11:27] I'm not a writer but I'm a storyteller and like a lot of young Asian-Americans, POCs, folks of intersectional backgrounds there's a lot of stories I want to share. But very often the audiences for these stories are in that act of American capitalism. They're too folks who are able to peruse the New York the New York Times best sellers and have the education and a literary background to appreciate the works of authors like you. What I want to do is support the folks who have got me here today. My mother who has never got a university education who may not be able to understand a novel in the likes of yours to uplift the communities of my own who are still struggling with PTSD and intersectional intergenerational trauma. So my question for you is as an Asian and American. How do we both spread our stories to folks who need to hear them but also at the same time uplift our communities that have supported us thus far.

[01:12:57] That that's an incredible question and one that I think we're still in the middle of navigating Asian American identity in this country has a long lineage but it's also relatively very young. And the reason why is very young is that it's full of holes. It's full of ghosts. We begin with Carlos Bulosan an Filipino American writer. And from there it takes a lot maybe one every couple of decades to come out.

[01:13:30] So we are a very fraught and tenuous lineage and where the reason the fact that you're asking this question is incredible. It's exactly what we need to ask because now we have the opportunity. We are the bodies that make the narrative possible. We are the bodies that disseminate the narratives and make the narratives into myriad forms. And I think we can do it. We can do both. Last night I was in L.A. and I'm learning this as I go. I grew up in New England factory towns. I'm still learning. I went to L.A. and I couldn't believe how many beautiful Queer Asian American people were running organizations like Viera. In Orange County educating their elders who are by the way are still homophobic who still have the French colonialism the Catholicism shame that's embedded into them. And that work is still being undone and dismantled now by our young folks. I didn't know this. I'm learning I'm meeting all of you as I go and it's really exciting. We won't have the answer tomorrow. We won't have the answer tonight. We won't have the answer anytime soon. But the fact that you're asking it means you're already thinking and building the architecture to hold this better. And we have the opportunity to keep doing it. And I'm I'm. My mind is is open. You know I came to Seattle a year ago when I met Jess Boyd and the Vietnamese peace community the friendship community. I am still moving out of that space you know growing up Asian-American in Massachusetts is completely different than and than than it is in Minnesota than it is in Florida than it is in California and I'm still starting to know what we look like in. Publishing this book has allowed me to see us.

[01:15:37] And I think I'm starting to understand that when I look closer at the Hall of Mirrors.

[01:15:45] There was already words written there. By somebody else. And that's part of this journey.

[01:15:59] Applause One more question. One more question.

[01:16:05] Let's send it up to the top just because.

[01:16:09] They're way up there. I haven't finished your novel yet but I started it and something that I'm struck by when I read.

[01:16:25] Narratives of diaspora of immigrant stories people who have fled war and immigrated to America is there's this sort of because I'm not the Vietnamese American but my parents also immigrated here and there is this common thread of when I read our stories of intimacy and survival and honesty in the work the literature so I was wondering if you noticed that as well.


[01:17:02] In your writing and reading.

[01:17:06] Can YOU CAN YOU REPEAT THAT LAST PART ONE MORE TIME.

[01:17:08] Oh I WAS WONDERING IF YOU NOTICED uh those sort of commonalities as well in your own reading and your own writing.

[01:17:18] Yeah absolutely. And I think it's also important to not get trapped into the labels that are readily available for us Asian American queer.

[01:17:33] I think it's important to also insist that when we write we write as a sum total of all of ourselves. Even the parts we've yet to know. And in this case when you read this book you're reading. Sure.



[01:17:47] Vietnamese American queer but also dog lover. You know son brother video gamer it does show up right. Right. An appreciator of aesthetics. Someone who has an interior life someone who's worked on the farms knows the land the complications identities that we've yet to have a name for yet to have a word for.

[01:18:18] Allow them to come through. Don't let the dominant containers trap you.

[01:18:25] Just because it's there. And I think the beautiful thing about a book. Is that. In a way. We all have a thumbprint. And that means there's no other thumbprint on Earth.

[01:18:41] But we also have something just as unique and idiosyncratic is a selfhood. And at its best a book is the thumbprint of the self, articulated through language. When you're reading a book you're reading somebody's mental emotional spiritual thumbprint. And so I would say the answer of course is yes. All those things come through but go beyond that to more things. All the things that make you who you are according to your parents histories but also all the things that make you are according to who you are. Your obsessions your private joys.

[01:19:23] All that is available and should be open to you as a writer. Thank you.

[01:19:42] Let's let's give Jess an Ocean a round of applause. That was amazing.

[01:20:00] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

