Review – On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

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On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous
by Ocean Vuong
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Traditionally, international relations (IR) happily embraces a rich plankton of literary sources. Where these texts are semi-autobiographical or infused with artistic licence, we still pay revered respect. Ethnographies remain pivotal archives in IR as demonstrated by a recent study of prominent diaries. Professor Ocean Vuong's critically acclaimed "On Earth" is a formidable example of the epistolary novel. As Tessa Hadley put it elegantly, he, "mines his extraordinary family story with passion and beauty." The traumascapes of the Vietnam War inhabit Night Sky with Exit Wounds, "On Earth" and Time is a Mother, enriching his ephemeral writing.

Admitted to the USA, the war still looms like a hostile spirit as the extended Vuong family salvage a life in semi-rural Glastonbury and Hartford, Connecticut. The medium of "On Earth" is part-autobiographical or even autofiction and one has a sense that the joys of this new American youth will always, like Huck Finn's, be potentially threatened by adult challenges. What follows is an impelling account of forced migration, war trauma, and humourful resilience. "On Earth" is an intense sequence of letters narrated by Little Dog (a protective tag of endearment fashioned to shield the child from his hostile host society) to his late mother Rose. His family, (including his late grandmother Lan) are at the cradle of his challenging childhood and coming of age, as the gay Vietnamese-American tenderly recounts a legacy of familial trauma.

Scholars and students of IR will find much of importance in Ocean's work not only about the experience of Vietnamese-American diaspora and refugee communities, but also about the legacy of trauma visited on survivors, and its continuous re-transmission. Combatants and non-combatants suffered in equal measure, and were also proportionately neglected in the wake of war. This writer's teenage recollections of the fall of Saigon are prickled by Irish national ambivalence. 1970s Ireland (an honorary 51st US state) was juxtaposed between shock witnessing the travails of our big cousins in Vietnam (our own diaspora relatives dotted across the USA, and now themselves reluctant Vets) and a political neutrality which rather favoured David over Goliath. As we listened to crackly broadcasts from Radio Eireann, of Saigon evacuating, for the first time I felt uncontrollable global events of magnitude. The "teenage me" had no conception that the "professional me" would enjoy over a decade working for the UN in the shadow of Ho's gargantuan statue.

Ocean offers us a beautiful personal manuscript of how prescient events loomed large in family narratives. Blessedly, his truly prototypal voice shakes us rudely from our scholarly silos. Word-crafted and endearingly self-effacing, so much of what Ocean has to say has resonance for IR scholars. War runs like a hurtful lesion in the narratives of his grandmother, and (perhaps) as if by transmutation, in the writer's surreal, familial memorisation. As a writer, Ocean follows Emily Dickinson's maxim: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" so while his work is highly auto-biographical, Vuong is only obliquely Little Dog. Ocean was literally "saved by books"- initially feeling like a trespasser in the public library which then became his refuge, and launching pad for exploration of society, self and sexuality. We are offered a mesmerising curiosa of ideas like a quick fire round of raw bullets. Perhaps (oftentimes) these are genuinely, "the exit wounds of every misfired word". Of becoming "Ocean" he notes: "When we came to the US… she chose Ocean… like the Pacific Ocean, we don't truly reside in either the United States or Vietnam… tell them your name was fleshed

from the toothless mouth of a war-woman…"

In painting the context of war-torn Vietnam, Ocean shows consistent generosity for his female role-models: "Men create wars and often die within them. It is the women who…must live with the inheritance of trauma propagated by men… Perhaps this is why history repeats itself—the women who live to tell of it have little access to change its social and political discourse…Being raised by strong women, I was able to witness the strength, ferocity, bravery, and diligence of womanhood…" In evoking the family's precarious transit from Vietnam: "When we first arrived in the U.S. in 1990… seven of us… lived in a one-room apartment in Hartford… no TV, no radio, and no one knew how to read, in any language. So, we told stories… my grandmother…would close her eyes and…every wall would melt into fantastical landscapes of ecstasy and terror… When I started to write poems, I wanted to honour these memories."

The flashbacks are excruciating: "As a girl, you watched, from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid…The girl Grandma knew back in Go Cong… sandals cut from the tires of a burned-out army jeep…erased by an air strike." Of the suffocating poison of war, "Inside my head the war is everywhere…" His advice to his students at NYU: "If you want to study literature, study war. For as long as there are soldiers there are poets." Vuong is self-evidently a poet born of war: "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus, my mother exists. Thus, I exist." As a teenager in bleak post-industrial Connecticut, Vuong then witnessed friends pass in the opioid epidemic.

This powerful ethnology, part epistolary tale and prose poem, was experienced by an entire generation of New Americans who escaped refugee camps only to find discrimination and urban obsolescence. Of temporality, Ocean writes, "If, relative to the history of our planet, an individual life is so short… then is to be gorgeous only briefly." Little Dog regrets his childhood naivety about PTSD: "That time when I was five or six and, playing a prank, leapt out at you from behind the hallway door, shouting, "Boom!" You screamed, face raked and twisted… I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves…"

Conflict spatters the novel…his mom's insistence her Goodwill dress is "fireproof", "The napalm clouds of your childhood" and Lan's "schizophrenia…" The novel excretes a militarized vocabulary. Lan observes, "they say good soldiers only win when their grandmas feed them". She warns the child, "if you scream the mortars will know where we are" Ocean offers a continuously shifting narrative caught in its prism, "a miniscule change…two air-raids instead of three , an AK47 instead of a 9mm…the past never a fixed and dormant landscape, but one that is re-seen" As the narrator asks: "When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?" Ocean reminds us of the cyclicality of conflict and its residue of trauma. However, in one of the most touching passages he sets the record straight with his ma, "All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it." He begins to imagine recovery and future happiness.

He recalls: "I remember the room was burning because my grandmother spoke of fire…" Of the nervous insecurity of the émigré: "my mother saying…you're already Vietnamese…"; the protective instinct not to draw attention to things dearest: "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive." This instinctive emigrant's survival technique merges with familial transmission of trauma. Little Dog says, "I remember grandmother talking in her sleep, how she raised her hands and said no bang bang…" We learn Vietnamese kissing and lullaby are PTSD's metaphors. Ocean's novel revisits for me a day I stepped out of a UN meeting in Saigon and accidentally found myself on the very spot of Nguyen Van Lem's brutal execution, and looking back how true Ocean's words, "Whether we like it or not, someone is always being executed, someone is always being forced to kill…"

This writer has no doubt that Prof Vuong will find his kipuka. Ocean Vuong Is more than just an American national treasure. I (a flimflamming vegan, quarrelsome Catholic and Buddhist novice) truly understood Vietnamese resilience only after the privilege of meeting Phan Thi Kim Phuc at UNESCO. Happily, by then I'd fallen in love with Vietnam. I (now) know it better because of people like Phan Thi Kim Phuc and Ocean Vuong. This novel will encourage an entire generation of IR students to consider holistically, the totality of the Vietnamese American experience. It is a happy irony that families like Ocean's who have sacrificed so much, bequeath to their host society a narrative not

only gorgeous, but priceless.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.