



There Is No Respectful Way to Kill an Animal

The prayers and ceremonies do something for us, not the deer, at the very least not the same thing for the deer, and there is no way to escape the fundamental inequity of the relationship. I would go as far as to say the lack of relationship: she's dead, we're not. If, as some would suggest, a relationship between hunter and prey is realized through respectful rituals, it is hard to get around the fact that one of the most significant aspects of that relationship—its symmetry and equity and power balance—is ended when one party is dead. This is not to say that prayers and ceremonies are of no value for the person who has no choice but to kill. It is to say the deer will always get the worst part of the bargain no matter how carefully it is done, and any hunter who is experienced, and honest, knows that in spite of the most thoughtful efforts to minimize suffering it doesn't always go well. Even with the ceremonies and prayers it's an ugly business.

...I'm in favor of people thinking through what might constitute ethical choices for themselves rather than accepting whatever authority figure—traditional or otherwise—that would make those decisions for them.



Craig Womack

There was nothing good or clean about the last shot I fired at a doe. We had hunted the foothills the day before on the eastern slopes of the Rockies in southern Alberta. On a hilly bluff it was so windy that we'd laid our rifles down on the ground and leaped giddily in the air, coming down to earth in front of our selves—I thought of Neil Armstrong bouncing around on the moon. When we came back downhill through the draws as the light faded, there was a little snow on the ground but not enough to my liking. In the time I'd lived up there and gotten to know the stories about grizzlies well enough, I'd developed a healthy fear of bears. If it was up to me, I'd prefer hearing them snore in their dens. So I was relieved when we got back down to the prairies, out of bear country.

My hunting buddy ended up shooting a deer in a big wheat field just before dark, and I stood by while he went and got the station wagon he drove. If you shoot a deer in the middle of a thousand acres of wheat stubble as the light is failing, and you successfully track it to where it's fallen, here's a word of advice. Don't the two of you walk back to the car, even when it's close by, because you won't find the deer you shot. I'm ashamed to say we had discovered this some time before the hard way, and I can only hope the wolves got something out of it. We didn't make the same mistake twice, at least. My friend drove over, we gutted the deer, loaded it up, and headed back to Lethbridge, where we'd hang it to cool for about a week in a metal shed in my backyard and then cut it up, wrap it, and put in the freezer. On the way back home we stopped by the Hutterite colony, my friend said hello to people he knew there, and we bought some homemade bread.

It's legal to shoot does in southern Alberta, in case you're wondering, and you should. Deer are plentiful there, and some winters significant numbers starve due to overpopulation, part of my justification, at the time, for killing them. That and the fact that there simply isn't anything like grilled deer tenderloins.

The next day was my turn to bring something home and use up our allotted tags. And I had a long shot at one in another wheat field. Almost on the edge of being too far but not quite. We'd already crept up on our bellies through the stubble as close as we were going to get. Any minute the wind might shift and scare them off, or they could see us when we came up on some little hump of terrain. So I scoped in the .270 rifle. Got the sights aligned for a chest shot, just behind the shoulder; I wanted to bleed her out. I took a deep breath, held it, waited for the moment when somehow everything pulls into center, and squeezed the trigger.

The deer went down immediately. A good clean shot; there wasn't going to be any trailing this one. It wasn't a short walk over. When I got there the doe was not dead. She couldn't gain her feet, but she had two of them splayed in front of

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her, trying to pull herself up a little rise with her hooves, even if merely inches at a time. Everything in her still wanted to live even after a gunshot that ensured her death. She was so alive, desperate with possibility, dragging herself up a hill to get as far as possible away from me, against impossible odds.

My friend, who had the buck knife in his jacket pocket, cut her throat and ended it. I have some rituals, personal ones, and I did them after he'd walked out of sight to the car to get something. I don't know what I was thinking then, probably not much of anything as far as suffering goes, but I know what I think now, years later. If somebody shoots me with a high-powered rifle, I'm not going to like it no matter how many prayers and ceremonies the guy does before he pulls the trigger. For me there is no longer any respectful way to kill an animal. (Although I'm not an absolutist, and I believe in advocating for the most painless deaths possible for animals if they must be killed, my point is that it will never be a matter of respect—it will be a matter of moderating disrespect.)

The prayers and ceremonies do something for us, not the deer, at the very least not the same thing for the deer, and there is no way to escape the fundamental inequity of the relationship. I would go as far as to say the lack of relationship: she's dead, we're not. If, as some would suggest, a relationship between hunter and prey is realized through respectful rituals, it is hard to get around the fact that one of the most significant aspects of that relationship—its symmetry and equity and power balance—is ended when one party is dead. This is not to say that prayers and ceremonies are of no value for the person who has no choice but to kill. It is to say the deer will always get the worst part of the bargain no matter how carefully it is done, and any hunter who is experienced, and honest, knows that in spite of the most thoughtful efforts to minimize suffering it doesn't always go well. Even with the ceremonies and prayers it's an ugly business.

Some hunters can live with this injustice. I can't. Some I respect (I think of my grandparents growing up in rural Oklahoma in the 1920s, dependent on small game, especially squirrels, to supplement their diet). I haven't shot a deer, or anything else, since then, and it was many years later, but I eventually reached the conclusion that I won't eat meat as long as I have a choice not to. My hope is that this issue of *sail* will concentrate as much on the defense of animals in terms of their physical existence as it will on literary tropes, their meaning in Native philosophy, and metaphysical notions of respect that justify or contribute to killing them.

With these issues in mind—the inescapable fact of disrespect and the need to name it as such, the reality that most of us don’t have to hunt for food, and the availability of choice in many cases (admittedly not all)—I want to look at two well-known scenes in Native literature: Archilde Leon’s hunting trip in the mountains of Montana a little to the south and west of where I killed the doe, on the other side of the Rockies, in D’arcy McNickle’s novel *The Surrounded* and Gerald Vizenor’s “October 1957: Death Song to a Red Rodent,” in what may well be one of the greatest autobiographies, tribal or otherwise, ever written, *Interior Landscapes*. I do not claim that my interpretations in this essay, nor the broader conclusions I draw about the ethics of killing animals, are the only correct ones or authentic ones, only that they have been personally compelling to me; thus, I present them here in case anyone else might find them convincing. As I’ve said before in other regards, they are a point on a spectrum of interpretations, not the spectrum itself.

The deer hunt occurs after Archilde seems to settle in after returning home to his Montana reservation after leaving federal boarding school in Oregon and wandering around the Northwest for a time as an itinerant musician, playing the violin. His mother has given him a feast that he at first finds tiresome but reconsiders later, and it “has started him on a new train of thought about not only his mother but all the old people”. In spite of a burgeoning recognition of his mother’s overt and covert leadership in the community, however, when Catherine asks him to go on a deer hunt in the mountains, Archilde feels a sense of dread:

“Finally he relented and said he would take her hunting. He knew he should not do it. He had a feeling about it which he could not explain”. Little wonder Archilde’s lack of enthusiasm, considering what later happens on the trip, the two corpses Archilde and Catherine haul back in the snow, one Arch’s brother, the other the game warden’s. For our purposes here, however, rather than the much discussed tragedy of the two deaths and the problems they cause for Arch in regard to his evernarrowing circumstances, I want to focus on the hunting itself and suggest something that may seem more mundane: Archilde hesitates to go on the trip because he has an intuitive resistance to killing deer, a potential understanding for nonviolent relationships with animals that he never quite succeeds in understanding. My basic argument in this essay is that Archilde’s failure need not be ours.

When Archilde sights in on a buck watering in “a sandy opening” of a “brush choked stream”, he cannot shoot. The narrator says:

Note

1. One of Orwell’s biographers, Bernard Crick, author of *George Orwell: A Life*, has questioned whether Orwell ever shot an elephant since no record of the event exists.

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She decided not to eat it, however, because it was pork, thus not kosher. When Foer asked her why she didn't eat it in order to save her life, she replied, "If nothing matters, there is nothing to save". While the story is mind-boggling in terms of the triumph of ideals and beliefs over physical needs and sets a high standard at the beginning of the book, much of Foer's attention is devoted to the rest of us who have less ironclad wills.

A fascinating aspect of Foer's story is the way he approaches tradition in regard to how his vegetarianism has affected family rituals like Passover and Thanksgiving. He concludes that having to reinvent these rituals to accommodate vegetarianism might give us a new relationship to tradition instead of passively resigning ourselves to accept the past without considering its meaning:

Try to imagine the conversation that would take place [at holiday dinners]. This is why our family celebrates this way. Would such a conversation feel disappointing or inspiring? Would fewer or more values be transmitted? Would the joy be lessened by the hunger to eat that particular animal [turkey]? Imagine your family's Thanksgivings after you are gone, when the question is no longer "Why don't we eat this? But the more obvious one: "Why did they ever?" Can the imagined gaze of future generations shame us, in Kafka's sense of the word, into remembering?

I would be a fool to claim that every person has a choice of giving up meat. Who can possibly criticize anyone who eats meat and has no choice to do otherwise? My point is that so many of us do have that choice, a very significant proportion of us, and that it requires a sacrifice that is not easy to make. Thus, done right, it becomes a ceremony. A good one, a meaningful deviation from tradition, as good ceremonies so often are.

In light of all this I think Foer's story of his grandmother makes sense, her refusal to eat meat, "If nothing matters, there is nothing to save." You have to stand for something, the saying goes, or you'll fall for anything. By knowing something about ourselves, by imagining, however fraught the process, the perspectives of animals, and contemplating how we feel about their deaths on our behalf, we can make sure we haven't fired the gun before we even get to the woods.

Hunting stories had always excited him, giving him a feeling that he would like to be envied for his good shooting and his hunting sense. But it was clear that he had not understood himself, he had not understood about killing. The excitement was in matching one's wits against animal cunning. The excitement was increased when a man kept himself from starving by his hunting skill. But lying in wait and killing, when no one's living depended on it, there was no excitement in that. Now he understood it.

Archilde indicates he now realizes that he has not understood hunting, himself, or his relationship to killing. It occurs to him that excitement will not result from gratuitous killing when hunger is not at stake. McNickle does not indicate why Archilde comes to this conclusion, and, further, Archilde reacts contrary to its logic many times after this revelation. Like much of the rest of McNickle's novel, it is unconvincing to place Archilde in some kind of linear trajectory that would indicate his increased maturity over time.

Further, though Archilde refuses to shoot the deer, he gauges the act in terms of whether or not it will excite him rather than an evaluation of the morality of killing "game." His view, an anthropocentric one, prioritizes Archilde's human need for entertainment over animal survival. Hunters, perversely according to my line of reasoning, might refer to hunting as "recreation," and by this term one assumes they don't mean allowing the deer to spend some time outdoors and get a little exercise. While Arch offers an explanation with a great deal of potential, "no one's living depended on it," he still prioritizes humans since "there was no excitement in that." He does not explore the notion that he has a choice that allows him not to hunt and still feed himself (which almost certainly isn't the case for all Salish people living on the Flathead reservation during this time period) rather than fulfill his need for excitement.

Yet I am struck by Archilde's reaction after he fakes a shot and purposefully scares off the deer. His mother tries to lay a guilt trip on him about his failure to prove his mettle as a mature man: "A young man waits for a better shot and hits nothing. An old man makes the best of it and gets his meat". Though his masculinity is questioned, Arch saves face with his countergibe, "When the smoke clears away the women are still talking", and the narrator says, "[h]e knew how to respond to her in style". Arch also holds his own against his macho, swaggering brother who throws down his "meat," and challenges Arch to show his (and it's not entirely out of the question to read a certain amount of phallicism in the passage given the nature of the pissing contest), to which Arch responds, "Couldn't you find a smaller one? That won't make a mouthful for a man like you, and you'll never stretch its hide to make moccasins for such feet" . We might not be able to turn Arch's nonviolence at the watering hole into

a big epiphany when he lets the deer escape, but we can at least say that Archilde's adroit rhetorical response afterward shows some determination to resist being shamed for refusing to kill.

Arch hardly emerges as an animal rights activist, however. In fact, in the emblematic chapter where Arch journeys through the bone lands and fails to save a starving mare and further endangers her colt by "blast[ing] her into eternity", the chapter begins by commenting on Arch's habit of "picking off " coyotes from a hillside crest after riding out to the horse dumping grounds. Although in cattle country some might provide some justification for the shootings since coyotes kill calves, Arch seems to have no purpose for the killings. His lack of thought about killing them is striking, as is the fact that one of the stories that would eventually make an impression on Arch after hearing them at the feast is about Coyote and Flint. Arch shows no signs of connecting the literary figure, the protagonist of so many Salish stories, to the animals he guns down, or any other means of making their lives significant. And this, I might add, underscores one of the dangers of Native literature. Even those who do garner a literary respect for animals, and their prominence in discussions of Native philosophy, may do very little to protect their actual well-being in the world, especially in terms of their unnecessary deaths for human pleasures and tastes.

Just before his failed attempt to save the mare, Arch tries to help a blind and deaf woman, and his efforts are grotesque in terms of the utter lack of understanding between would-be benefactor and the person he would like to aid—this theme of failed beneficence is carried into the bonelands. When Archilde tries to help the mare, in a graveyard for abandoned workhorses who have outlived their usefulness to humans in a scene that has strong mythical overtones, Archilde thinks he understands what is best for the recalcitrant animal. In fact, he thinks he understands better than she does: "He had to show her kindness in spite of herself ". As he pursues her across the badlands, however, Archilde weakens the mare, whose nursing colt has already drained much of the life out of her, and she refuses to cooperate in the rescue, evidently having a contrary view of what she needs. The very sight of her, and her obstinate refusal to accept help, drives Archilde into a sense of futility, rage, and powerlessness: "The tormentor had become the tormented". Just when there is finally hope for her "improvement," since Archilde has roped the mare and dragged her to water, she lies down and dies: "She groaned aloud, a final note of reproach for the man who had taken it upon himself to improve her condition".

Not only has Archilde killed the mare, but he has probably ended the chances of survival of her young colt.

My arguments reeked of individualism, another critique went, of individual ethical choices, and, to be sure, I'm in favor of people thinking through what might constitute ethical choices for themselves rather than accepting whatever authority figure—traditional or otherwise—that would make those decisions for them. Personally, I don't view thinking as overly individualistic, and we've romanticized community to the point of absurdity, forgetting that a "we" viewpoint is impossible apart from the many "I's" that comprise the "we," always creating an ongoing negotiation between individualism and consensus.

I was also told that I picked bad examples—that neither Gerald Vizenor, the protagonist, if you will, of *Interior Landscapes*, nor Archilde, the protagonist of *The Surrounded*, understands tradition because both of the examples arise out of modernity—this from the same person claiming that modern tribes can and should reclaim hunting, by the way. Neither protagonist understands the meaning of hunting within a "living Native spiritual context," as this person put it. First of all I don't accept this premise—Archilde Leon seems substantially connected to Salish traditions, and Gerald Vizenor to Ojibway ones. Second, I want to make a larger point. One decided not to pull the trigger; the other wished like hell he hadn't after he allowed himself to imagine what the shooting meant to his victim. That's plenty of "living Native spiritual context" for me, all the more so if such acts resist tradition instead of blindly endorsing it.

I have also heard that I haven't done my homework, that I should elucidate my position in relation to Native stories about hunters and their prey. I find this impossible, reducing a huge body of highly variable stories, across hundreds of tribes, to a formula that supports or debunks my position. One such story, for example, "The Hunter and His Dogs," rendered in both Creek and English in Totkv Moccvse = New Fire: Creek Folktales (Gouge), is about a pack of loyal dogs that volunteer to rip a guy's wife to shreds after, at least according to the dogs' side of the story, they've discovered her committing adultery; the hunter consents, and his hunting partners, the dogs, kill his wife. I'd be hesitant, to say the least, to draw some reductive moral from this story about hunting relationships. Further, I don't think the validity of my position hangs on whether or not the oral tradition confirms it.

In fact, I'll conclude by thinking "outside" of Indian country, to whatever degree any place is really outside it. The novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, in his first nonfiction work, *Eating Animals* (2009), opens with a story about his grandmother who escaped the Nazis during World War II by hiding out in European forests and scrounging for food wherever, and from whomever, she could get it. Near the end of the war, a Russian farmer, whom she recalls fondly for his kindness, snuck her a piece of meat when she was closest to starvation.

it” carries great weight in both stories as well as potential in the lives of those of us reading the stories today. While Arch’s understanding of animals helps him frame a more sophisticated notion of the failures of paternalism as it applies to humans rather than a comprehension of the sufferings of animals, Vizenor stays focused on animals instead of using them as a stepping stone to discuss “more important” matters relating to people. This could be a good direction in Native studies where the physical welfare of animals could be just as much a concern as their representations in Native literature or meanings in Native philosophy.

I won’t pretend these arguments have gone over smoothly. One response I received to the ideas raised in this essay is that I have disregarded an agreement between animals and humans—one person called it a treaty—that allows feeding, to use his exact phrase, of “our kin.” I do not know how animals feel about this treaty, of course, or if they would agree that they’d signed it, yet I feel it is valuable to try to contemplate how they might feel about being killed. Animals, not just us humans, have kin, and we would do well to imagine them if we want to take into account all—not some—of our relations.

Since animals have spirits that continue after physical death, one critic reminded me, our killing them does not constitute an infraction. Thus, he argued, I had taken a materialist position rather than a spiritual one since, he claimed, I refused to acknowledge animals live on after providing food. I’ve never staked out a position on animal mortality or immortality. I have doubts that they like getting shot, afterlife or no, the point of my opening anecdote. I don’t see how getting people to rethink hunting and meat eating constitutes a claim that animals lack spirits, the human kind or otherwise, or lack continuance after physical life ends. Suffice it to say that speaking against animal violence is hardly the same thing as denying the possibility of a spiritual relationship with them; some might argue, as I have here, that it makes one possible.

Other critiques emerged as well. What about tribes reclaiming traditional hunting practices? I can only counter, what about tribes considering nonviolent alternatives? My grandparents all kept gardens; my ninety-five-year-old grandmother, God bless her, still does (I hate to admit it, but she also likes Burger King Whoppers). Still, I can at least think about the fact that my religion, a pretty old one, is called the Green Corn religion, not the breaded and fried pork chop religion. Is hunting the only thing that can make a person Indian? Does every person in the tribe need to become a hunter? How realistic is that? Anyone living in an Indian community, or even away from one, knows not everyone is going to become a hunter. Some members can exercise personal sovereignty and decide against killing.

In the chapter after the bonelands fiasco, the novel provides its own interpretation of the failed rescue of the mare in regard to human youngsters, rather than a mare and her colt, and the problem of paternalism that pervades their reservation lives: Archilde recalls, “Mike and Narcisse taught him something—it did no good to make a fuss about things: just go ahead and do what you liked, and ask only to be let alone. They had that in common with the mare in the Badlands”. Mike and Narcisse had been tricked into going to the mission school at St. Ignatious, and Archilde has at least learned enough to decide he will no longer aid and abet those tricking them who think they know what is best for his young Indian nephews. Much could be said about McNickle’s own frustration with government paternalism in his years as an administrator in John Collier’s Bureau of Indian Affairs (bia) during the 1930s and 1940s. This also holds true in his independent community work, such as his involvement with the Crownpoint project in the eastern part of Navajo country in the 1950s, where he often chose not to intervene even when he thought it would be in the best interest of the Native people with whom he was working to do so—since the major emphasis of his work there was to allow the community to make its own decisions.

Archilde’s understanding of the debilitating paternalism of priests, agents, store owners, wardens, sheriffs, and federal policy is stronger than his sense of what constitutes animal rights. What I want to explore in this essay is the notion of nonviolence that Archilde considers in the short but significant phrase “no one’s living depended on it” when he makes the decision not to shoot the deer. While Archilde later chooses to kill animals instead of refraining from doing so when “no one’s living depended on it,” I want to raise the possibility that he could have continued to make this nonviolent choice, and it would have constituted a legitimate tribal alternative. “Outside” of literature, in the world we live in today, such a choice might be even more significant since the greatest proportion of our meat supply comes from factory farming, very little if any from our own hunting or even humane farming methods, and the system that creates the food maximizes disrespect of animals instead of moderating it.

Gerald Vizenor’s story, “October 1957: Death Song to a Red Rodent,” occurs in the time period Vizenor narrates after he was discharged from the army after serving in Japan, started college at New York University, returned to Minnesota after things did not work out in the city, and worked as a counselor at Silver Lake Camp near Minneapolis, which served public welfare mothers and their children.

The hunting scene, unlike many other place-specific scenes in the autobiography, does not have a sense of geographical exactitude that might

locate it, for example, outside Silver Lake Camp while Vizenor was a counselor there. It only has the time marker in the title that indicates it took place in October 1957, seemingly after Vizenor's departure from the camp and before he'd moved into an apartment near the University of Minnesota shortly after the birth of his son. Vizenor, whatever the other anti-mimetic features of his writing, often has a strong sense of geographical realism in his stories. I want to consider the implications of this different sense of geography as well as the unusual relation to tragedy, given that Vizenor resists tragedy more often than he accommodates it.

Unlike a possible literary cousin, George Orwell's "nonfiction" essay "Shooting an Elephant,"¹ first published in 1936, the same year as McNickle's novel, Vizenor's story is not a direct reflection on the way in which colonial power structures push both the metropole's authorities and the invented Native into simulated roles (although, surely, these themes are relevant in other parts of the autobiography as well as the whole of Vizenor's work). While there is some discussion of the way in which Vizenor's hunter's pose is an unnatural one, it is not analyzed in terms of colonial relations. More a personal reflection on responsibility than a political analogy, it is all the more striking for the way it turns away from "big game," and the overarching political themes inherent in the Orwell essay, to the smallest of creatures, a rodent, as the title draws our attention to, and the most personal of considerations, the suffering its killer brings upon the animal and, by extension, himself.

I'm struck by the way the story opens with what one might regard as romantic nativism with the emphasis on the inherent skills of the tribal hunter who "must trust his own survival instincts with birds and animals and move with the natural energies of the woodland, trees, and water". In Vizenor's work such a statement is seldom on stable ground, however, and the essay's opening also uses terms that connect hunters with "primal posers," as well as those who "mock the sacred," and, obviously, Vizenor tells a story here that does far more than simply affirm tribal tradition. If Archilde's story is about failing to understand oneself in relation to killing, Vizenor's story is about the painful consequences of such knowledge. If any hope mediates the story's tragic outlook, it might be the possibility of changing behavior based on a very painful lesson; in this way, the story prioritizes action over theorizing. I use the term cautiously, but I think whenever a Vizenor story is largely tragic in orientation, the way "Death of a Rodent" is, we would do well to ask why.

The beginning of the story emphasizes Vizenor's city background, which the squirrels know, and much of the essay is about what squirrels understand: "The squirrels . . . sensed my intentions. I had come from the cities to kill them with

where they can actually do some good.

If we could ask an animal which it would rather have, our empathy or a life reasonably free of suffering, I wonder which it would choose. Is such a question simply maudlin sentimentalizing or essential to understanding who we are as humans? Our life depends on it, you might say, depends on answering these questions. The killing not only shatters Vizenor's relationship with the natural world as he is "isolated in the environment" but also cuts off a relationship with himself, as indicated by the image of his "hands . . . strange, alone, distant." Here hunting is the end of relationships for Vizenor, not the beginning of them. He killed the chance he had of both interacting with the environment and internalizing his interaction, dreaming it. He failed to realize those relationships could be fostered without a gun.

One of the silences with which Vizenor ends the story is deafening. The squirrel, though not breathing, blinks once, and Vizenor continues to beg forgiveness, but no forgiveness comes, and Vizenor recalls "[a]t last my piteous moans were silent".

The squirrel's last blink represents loss of potential for both the squirrel and Vizenor—a terminal creed might not be the exact phrase for it, but it is a terminal narrative because it is about the squirrel's termination. The story cannot simply be relegated to the realm of literary trope even though the trope has hope beyond termination (we're still reading, writing, and discussing the story), but this is at the expense of the squirrel. The death requires more than a literary response: "I sold my rifle and never hunted to kill animals or birds again". Analysis, literary or personal, in this case, can only be part of the answer. Changed behavior is what is called for:

"I would defend squirrels and comfort them in death; that would be the natural human response. I would not shoot an animal again unless my life depended on the hunt".

Action—here, ending killing—turns into theory of a certain kind, united with practice:

"[t]he violent death of a wild animal caused by my weapon was a separation from the natural world, not a reunion".

As far as the ethics of killing animals goes, the protagonist of Vizenor's story, Vizenor himself, demonstrates a much more conscious response than Archilde does in *The Surrounded*; still, Archilde's idea that "no one's living depended on

eyes; he was close to death, he wanted to live. I fired a second time at his head. The bullet tore his lower jaw away, his teeth were exposed. He watched me and then moved in the leaves toward the tree. Blood bubbled from his nostrils when he breathed. I fired twice more, the bullets shattered his forehead and burst through his left eye. He held to the base of the tree, his last paw weakened, and he watched me with one eye. His breath was slower, slower, more blood in his nostrils, in his mouth. In his last eye he wanted to live, to run free, not to dare me, to hide from me. I knelt beside the squirrel, my face close to his blood soaked head, my eye close to his eye, and asked him to forgive me. I begged him to forgive me before he died. I looked around at the trees. My breath was sudden, short. I remembered the moment, nothing more; my hands were strange, alone, distant, isolated in the environment.

The squirrel dreams too. Long after any possible hope of recovery, the squirrel imagines living, “he was close to death, he wanted to live.” After the squirrel is reduced to one eye, the severe violence has neither put his body, or his consciousness, “out of their miseries,” and he still “wanted to live, to run free, not to dare me, to hide from me”. The dare, we might note, had been part of the tribal game when Vizenor had earlier described the tribal hunter in right relationship with his prey:

“[t]hat red squirrel had dared me to hunt him; his dare was a response to my silence, as he would respond to the songs of a tribal hunter”.

Because the story that unfolds, the shot-by-shot account of the squirrel’s suffering, is so much more compelling than any of the tribal platitudes, a serious question implied here is whether or not a respectful relationship is even possible in regard to killing an animal.

Vizenor begs the squirrel for forgiveness. It is impossible not to read this against all the clichés about the Native hunter who ritualistically asks for forgiveness, usually after the death of the animal. Does the hunter have such a right? Dare he ask to be forgiven? Is the request reasonable? The narrator’s begging becomes more urgent after the squirrel stops breathing, and, perhaps realizing the impossibility of forgiveness, young Vizenor begs the squirrel, instead, to live again, another impossibility because the physical reality, the squirrel’s body blasted beyond anything it can survive, outweighs the powers of empathy, imagination, and dreaming. My argument here, of course, is not that we should end empathy, imagination, and dreaming. We should stop shooting animals when we don’t have to so that we can save these powers for those circumstances

my rifle, to breathe concrete into their souls, to eat their bitter thighs”. Yet what begins as a romanticism that pits city against country, real tribal hunters against their simulations, turns increasingly toward the ethics of killing itself.

Rip Van Vizenor falls asleep against a tree with his gun nearby and even dreams, but he seems to wake up much sooner than his Dutch counterpart who’d slept through the American Revolution. Vizenor’s will be a much more personal revolution whose place cannot be located in the exact locales of the cities and army camps of much of the rest of his autobiography, nor can the story reach the same level of comedy since the terminal part of Vizenor’s terminal creeds receives its fullest, most literal exploration here, maybe more than anywhere else in Vizenor’s body of work. In fact, there is more terminal in the story, literally a death, than creed since the devastating power of his description of the details of the shooting far overshadows any kind of abstraction about it.

Powers of imagination and dreaming are important in Vizenor’s stories; imagination, in fact, rather than some kind of Indian essence, is claimed as a source of tribal identity. When Vizenor wakes he sees the squirrels feeding around him and recalls, “I pretended to run with them: we were the hunted and the hunters”. Yet what starts out “as in a dream” quickly turns into the death of a dream as soon as Vizenor fires his rifle. Powers of imagination will prove insufficient to create a respectful relationship, given the imbalance of power that results—the death of the squirrel and the survival of his killer.

I suggest that this story is one of the most tragic works in Vizenor’s oeuvre because it is a rare instance in which imagination cannot carry the day since it does not compensate for inequitable violence. This failure of imagination, given Vizenor’s faith in it, can only cause grief. The uncertainty of place, withholding the exact location, relates to this failure. If the narrator would not have fired his gun at the squirrel, he would have known where he was at, and there is a close relationship between self-knowledge about one’s potential for violence and sense of place in the story. The narrator blasts his sense of location into oblivion. Since *Interior Landscapes* is partially a war autobiography, an analogy can be drawn: some soldiers may not understand the place they are in because of carrying a gun, which alters their relationship to it. The gun blast in Vizenor’s story shatters the dream that creates relationship to place. The story is about waking up from a dream, from what a hunter in a bad dream can do. Sometimes you wake up out of a deep sleep and don’t know where you are, sometimes even who you are. The story is about the failure to know yourself—the self that is realized when you look into the eyes of others, in the last blink before the eye shuts permanently.

The first blast leaves one of the squirrel's front legs dangling while he desperately tries to climb up a tree to escape yet falls back down over and over again. Vizenor tries to help his prey through powers of empathetic dreaming, yet he fails because of the physical reality of the squirrel that cannot be overcome through imagination: "I understood his instinct to escape; in a dream we reached up with our right paw, shattered and blood soaked, but it was not there to hold us to the tree" .

A powerful imagination cannot alter the physical reality of dismemberment. In his conclusion Vizenor will claim that a superior dream would have been never pulling the trigger in the first place.

The strongest image that Vizenor develops in the story has to do with the squirrel's eyes, which will diminish into a single eye, and he explores the eyes in relationship to single and multiple levels of consciousness—what one can know about oneself, what one can know about the other, and what forms mutual understanding might take: He writes, "[t]he squirrel fell down again and watched me with his dark eyes; I watched him and he watched me that autumn". Vizenor's exploration of consciousness has to do with both waking and dreaming forms. Animals present a special challenge in relation to empathy. While it is impossible for us to know their perceptions, this does not change the fact that they perceive things, and, according to the arguments I hope to develop here, there is a compelling case to be made for trying to imagine their perspectives, no matter how fraught the process.

Further, animal studies provides one of the most salient challenges to the directions of cultural theory and the emphasis on the linguistic turn, the way experience, it is insisted, is always mediated through discourse, thus causing social construction to loom so large in our analyses. We have a whole body of knowledge based on a premise that only applies to a very small part of the biosphere: the claim that reality is mediated through language. This, of course, applies to humans but not other species who don't speak—at least not the way we do—or write. A fundamental question is what happens to philosophy when one includes the vast majority of the universe that does not speak or write? We have pretended, rather blindly, that our truths are a universal template, when, actually, they take in very little.

Meanwhile, the squirrel, wounded so severely, still dreams of survival. If dreams are a part of vision, bad dreams are also a possibility since the squirrel "tried to climb the tree again, and again, to escape from me, to escape from my dream". A key question is the degree to which walking into the woods armed,

with the intent to kill, creates the bad dream.

In other words, can some bad dreams, unlike the ones we suffer involuntarily, be avoided? If we want to give the narrator agency over his dreams so he chooses better ones instead of being overtaken by nightmares, we might suggest disarmament, a conclusion, in fact, he reaches himself. It is interesting that a major context for *Interior Landscapes* is that it is a war story, connected to the Korean conflict, about a Native veteran, yet it contains no battle scenes. While part of this has to do with the historical fact that the war was ending at almost the same time Vizenor was stationed in Japan, it also relates to the centrality of the hunting experience after the war, to Vizenor's lifelong quest for humane relations in his writings, to the possibility that war stories, even, can be dreamed better. Vizenor interrupts our focus on the suffering squirrel to point out that "[t]he best urban hunters learned never to let a wounded animal suffer, as if the animal were bound to a moral code of the state ministrants; the animals we wounded must be put out of their miseries, our miseries". A cursory reading might interpret the statement to mean that minimizing suffering makes respectful killing possible. The phrase "state ministrants," however, casts the statement in an ironic light, as do the sentences that follow about the Boy Scouts of America and the Izaak Walton League and their "monomercies". Though I would argue that reducing suffering is an important goal, I still don't see how killing can ever be respectful. While humane slaughtering practices, for example, are very important and much needed, even in the best of circumstances butchering animals will never be respectful although in some instances it may be necessary.

While Vizenor quotes a text that seems to defend the hunter's attitudes of "honor" and "awe" for his prey and forms of "ceremonial address" to his victim, as is often the case in Vizenor's writing, the quotation is surrounded by ironies that make any assumptions about the narrator affirming its validity ambiguous, and the sentences that immediately follow undermine the platitudes of the quote, as well as the earlier statement about values learned from Boy Scouts. The reality of putting an animal out of its misery is seldom like the platitudes; rather, it might turn into a long, time-consuming effort that, in the worst case scenario, may even make the animal suffer more due to factors outside the hunter's control (or, more sinisterly, in factory farming where almost all of our meat comes from now, the animal may suffer for many months). The most powerful paragraph in the story is worth quoting in its entirety:

I fired one shot at his head when the squirrel tried to climb the tree again, to put him out of his miseries. The bullet tore the flesh and fur away from the top of his skull. He dropped to the ground and turned on the oak leaves. He looked at me. I watched his dark