On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OCEAN VUONG

Ocean Vuong was born in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, in 1988, but grew up on a rural farm. Like Little Dog in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong's maternal grandfather was a white American naval officer stationed in Vietnam during the war. Vuong's grandparents were married and had three children. After the Fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, however, Vuong's grandfather went back home to the United States to visit his family and was unable to return again to Vietnam. In 1990, Vuong's family fled Vietnam to a refugee camp in the Philippines and later settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Vuong went on to earn a degree in 19th-century English Literature from Brooklyn College and an MFA in poetry from New York University. He published his first chapbook (meaning a small booklet), *Burnings*, in 2011. Later, in 2014, he was awarded the Ruth Lilly fellowship from the Poetry Foundation, which seeks to promote poetry and culture. In 2016, Vuong published his first full-length book of poetry, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. That same year he was awarded the Whiting Award, an annual prize awarded to promising poets and writers. Vuong's first novel, *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, was published in 30 languages in 2019 to critical and popular acclaim, after which he was awarded the MacArthur "Genius" Grant, an award that invests in the future work of gifted intellectuals. Vuong currently lives in Massachusetts, where he is an Assistant Professor in the MFA program for poets and writers at UMass-Amherst.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong explores the lasting effects of the Vietnam War on his family. He specifically mentions the Tet Offensive, a North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam in 1968. The Vietnam War, which began in November of 1955 and lasted until the Fall of Saigon in April of 1975, involved the countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnam was divided into the communist state of North Vietnam (which was backed by the Soviet Union and China), and the anti-communist state of South Vietnam (which was backed the United States, South Korea, and other anti-communist countries). The war began when the Việt Cộng—a group of South Vietnamese guerrillas under the command of North Vietnam—attacked South Vietnam. Along with the Việt Cộng, the North Vietnamese army, known as the People's Army of Vietnam, invaded and attacked South Vietnam and Laos, leading to an increase in American troops in Vietnam. By 1964, American troops in South Vietnam went from 16,000 to 184,000, and both the Americans and the South Vietnamese were engaged and attacked by the Việt Cộng and the People's Army of Vietnam. On January 30, 1968, the North Vietnamese and the Việt Cộng launched the Tet Offensive, one of the largest attacks of the war. The offensive was given its name because it began on the Tết holiday—the Vietnamese New Year celebration. During the first phase of the Tet Offensive, which was focused on both military and civilian targets, the North sent 80,000 soldiers to invade and attack more than 100 South Vietnamese cities and towns. The first phase of the attack (during which, in the novel, Lan and Paul hide in their Saigon apartment with a gun aimed at the door), lasted nearly two months and resulted in more than 45,000 casualties reported by the South Vietnamese and their allies. The North Vietnamese and Việt Cộng reported over 5,000 soldiers killed in action and more than 7,000 captured.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Vuong focuses on his Vietnamese culture and his experiences as an immigrant in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*. Similar themes are found in both *The Sympathizer* and *The Refugees* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, a fellow Vietnamese American writer. *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* is also an epistolary novel, which means it is written in the form of a letter. The same structure can be seen in *The Coquette* by Hannah Webster Foster, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Vuong also explores the theme of memory and considers how one's memories evolve over time and influence one's life and identity. Such subjects are also found in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, Stephen King's *It*, and *Moments of Being* by Virginia Woolf. Lastly, Vuong highlights drug addiction, particularly to opioid painkillers, and the effect of prescription drugs on broader society—a theme that is also explored in *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt, *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden, and Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*
- **When Written:** 2019
- **Where Written:** Northampton, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Saigon, Vietnam and Hartford, Connecticut
- **Climax:** Little Dog's grandmother, Lan, dies of metastatic bone cancer, and Little Dog and his mother, Rose, take Lan's ashes back to Vietnam for burial.

- **Antagonist:** Rose
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Money. Ocean Vuong is the winner of two prestigious awards, the Whiting Award and the MacArthur "Genius" Grant, which include payouts of $50,000 and $625,000 respectively.

The Price of Visibility. On the cover of Ocean Vuong's debut book of poetry, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, is a picture of Vuong with his mother and grandmother in a refugee camp in the Philippines after escaping Vietnam. "The picture cost my family three tins of rice, according to my mother," Voung reportedly said. "Each of us gave up our ration just to be seen."

PLOT SUMMARY

Little Dog writes a letter to his mother, Rose, beginning, "Dear Ma." Little Dog is writing to his mother in order to go back in time—like to the time at the Virginia rest stop when Rose was shocked to see the taxidermy deer head hanging on the wall between the bathrooms. Rose couldn't understand why anyone would want to display and preserve death in such a way. Little Dog is also writing his letter to his mother to "break free," like the **monarch butterflies** that fly south to Central America each winter. Little Dog remembers when he was a boy, just five or six years old, and he hid behind a door in the hallway to prank his mother. He jumped out at her, shouting "Boom!" Rose grabbed her chest and screamed, her face twisted in fear and pain, a reaction Little Dog attributes to her trauma from the Vietnam War. He remembers the first time Rose hit him at just four years old in their small Connecticut apartment.

Little Dog decided to write his letter after rereading *Mourning Diary*, Roland Barthes's examination of his own mother after her death. The difference, of course, is that Little Dog is writing while his mother is still alive. Little Dog remembers the time Rose rode the **Superman** roller-coaster with him at Six Flags, only to throw up afterward in a garbage can. "I forgot to say *Thank you*," Little Dog writes. He also remembers Rose trying on a fancy dress at Goodwill, one she likely wouldn't have reason to wear. "Do I look like a real American?" Rose had asked in Vietnamese. She bought the dress because there was "a *possibility* of use," Little Dog says. He also remembers Rose in the kitchen with a knife, quietly telling him to get out. Little Dog is now 28 years old and stands five feet, four inches tall, and he is writing to Rose "as a son."

"I'm not a monster," Rose once said to Little Dog. "I'm a mother." He remembers reassuring his mother that she wasn't a monster, but now writes that he was lying. The way Little Dog sees it, a monster isn't such a bad thing to be. At school, the kids called him "*freak*, *fairy*, *fag*," and those words, Little Dog points out, are "also iterations of *monster*." Little Dog once read that those suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder are more likely to abuse their children, and Rose was, and is, coping with her own trauma.

Little Dog had explained in an earlier draft of his letter how he became a writer, but he has since deleted it. It doesn't matter how Little Dog came to write his letter; what matters *is* the letter. Everything Little Dog has ever done has brought him to this letter, even though he knows Rose isn't likely to read it.

At five years old, Rose watched as her schoolhouse in Vietnam was burned to the ground after an American napalm raid. Rose never returned to school, and she never learned to read. Little Dog claims that trauma affects more than just the mind; the body, too, responds and collapses under the stress—and Little Dog's grandmother, Rose's mother, Lan, is nearly bent in half. Lan was forced to work as a prostitute to survive during the Vietnam War (Rose's father was an "American john"), and Lan's stories of her home country are rife with bombings and mortar fire.

There is so much Little Dog wants to tell his mother in his letter, but much of it is lost behind "syntax and semantics." In truth, Little Dog doesn't really know what he is trying to say. Most days he doesn't even know who he is, just like he doesn't really know what to call his own mother. "White, Asian, orphan, American, mother?" Little Dog asks.

"Memory is a choice," Rose once told Little Dog, but he can't help but remember. In one such memory, it is a Sunday, and Little Dog is 10 years old. Rose opens the nail salon, where she works as a manicurist, just like she does every weekend. Her first client is an older woman who wants a pedicure. Before Rose's client lowers her feet into the heated foot spa, she reaches down and detaches a prosthetic leg at her knee. After Rose massages the woman's calf, the client motions toward her missing leg. "Would you mind," she says. "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can." Rose says nothing and begins massaging the woman's missing leg, the "muscle memory" of Rose's arms working the "phantom limb," her movements outlining what isn't there. Rose dries the woman's foot, and then she hands Rose a hundred-dollar bill.

It is 2003 and Little Dog is just 14. He is riding his bike to his first job on a tobacco farm on the outskirts of Hartford, Connecticut, where he is paid nine dollars an hour cash. Most of the farmhands are migrant workers from Mexico and South America, except for Trevor, the grandson of Buford, the owner of the farm. Trevor immediately introduces himself to Little Dog.

Trevor is a year older than Little Dog, and they soon become friends. They spend hours talking after working all day in the fields, and one evening, they go to the barn to listen to a Patriots game on the radio. Trevor picks up an old WWII helmet from the floor and puts it on his head, and Little Dog is struck

by the "impossibly American" image of Trevor in the helmet. Just as the Patriots score, Little Dog begins kissing and licking Trevor's body. Little Dog hears Trevor moan in pleasure—at least he thinks he does—and the helmet falls from his head.

Little Dog works at the tobacco farm for two more seasons, but he continues seeing Trevor all through the year. Trevor lives with his father, a miserable alcoholic, in a trailer, and Trevor's room is littered with marijuana seeds and fentanyl patches. It is impossible to talk about Trevor, Little Dog says, without talking about OxyContin and cocaine.

The first time Little Dog and Trevor have sex, they don't really have sex at all. Little Dog interrupts his story. He only has the courage to tell his mother about his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog says, because he knows she will likely never read his letter. After their first sexual experience, Trevor turns his back to Little Dog and cries "skillfully in the dark"—the way boys do, Little Dog says. A week later, they do it again, and Trevor violently grabs Little Dog's hair, roughly yanking his head back. To his surprise, Little Dog is excited by the violence and stunned that it has a place in sex. Although, Little Dog says, violence is really all he knows of love.

Little Dog and Trevor refer to their modified sex as "fake fucking," and Trevor is usually on top. One day, Trevor asks to switch, but when Little Dog slides his penis between Trevor's legs, Trevor stops. "I can't. I just—I mean…" Trevor stammers. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—," Trevor stops again. "It's for you," he says to Little Dog. "Right?" Little Dog pulls the covers up to his chin, humiliated. It is a dreary Sunday when Little Dog finally tells Rose the truth. "I don't like girls," he blurts out over coffee in a Dunkin' Donuts. Rose asks if that means he will start wearing dresses, and then she runs to restroom and vomits.

Little Dog is on a train from New York City to Hartford, his phone lighting up with multiple messages. "It's about Trevor pick up," one message says. "The wakes on Sunday," another reads. Little Dog decides to send Trevor a text. "*Trevor I'm sorry come back*," Little Dog types. He hits sends and shuts the phone off, afraid that Trevor will respond. Little Dog is in the middle of an Italian American Literature lecture at the university when he first sees the Facebook post about Trevor's death from an overdose. Little Dog leaves for Hartford immediately. Upon arriving, he starts to head to Trevor's, but stops; Little Dog knows showing up at Trevor's is a bad idea, so he goes home instead. It is after midnight when Little Dog opens the door to his mother's room. He lays next to her on the mat on the floor and cries.

Rose once asked Little Dog what it is like to be a writer, and he is trying explain. He is giving her a "mess," he knows, but it is all he has. His letter isn't really a story, Little Dog says, "it is more of a "shipwreck—the pieces floating, finally legible."

Seven months later, Little Dog stands next to Lan's bed as she is dying. She has been diagnosed with metastatic bone cancer and has just days to live. Sitting near Lan in her final days, Little Dog thinks of Trevor.

"Let's just do it," Little Dog hears Trevor's voice in the tobacco barn. He promises to be gentle and stop if it hurts, and Little Dog agrees, silently nodding. Trevor climbs on top of Little Dog, and as he inserts his penis inside Little Dog, pain explodes in Little Dog's body. Trevor begins moving back and forth, sending searing pain through Little Dog. About 10 minutes into it, Little Dog feels his bowels release, and he puts his head down, mortified. Trevor jumps up, surprised; however, he gently helps Little Dog up and leads him to the river. Little Dog silently cleans himself, and Trevor begs him not to worry about what happened. Humiliated, Little Dog turns for shore, but Trevor stops him. He drops in the water and grabs Little Dog's thighs, taking Little Dog in his mouth. When he is finished, Trevor stands and wipes his mouth. "Good as always," he says.

After Lan's death, Little Dog and Rose take her ashes back to Vietnam for burial. While near Lan's village of Go Cong, Little Dog wakes in the night to the sounds of music and laughter. He goes outside and finds the streets alive with celebration, a stage erected in the distance on which performers in drag sing and dance. Little Dog learns that the celebration is called "delaying sadness," and it is held when someone dies unexpectedly in the middle of the night. According to belief, the celebration keeps the recently deceased's soul from being lost in limbo, but outside of this well-known celebration, queer people are considered taboo "sinners" in Vietnam.

Little Dog can hear something that sounds like a wounded animal, and when he opens his eyes, he is in the barn on Buford's farm. Trevor is sleeping soundly, so Little Dog gets up quietly to investigate the noise. Out in the field, he finds nothing, but as he parts the crops, he sees his mother come into view. Mist rises from the field, and Rose disappears. Suddenly, a herd of **buffalo** stampedes toward Little Dog, in the direction of a cliff. Just as the first buffalo goes over the cliff, the buffaloes explode into monarch butterflies and soar over Little Dog's head. He looks to the field and, seeing Rose again, asks her how she managed to escape the buffaloes. "Too fast," she says, and they both laugh.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Little Dog – Rose's son, Lan's grandson, Trevor's friend and lover, and the narrator of *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*. The novel consists of Little Dog's letter to Rose, in which he recounts their lives via his own memories and stories told to him by others. Little Dog is born in Vietnam, but he immigrates to the United States with his family after fleeing to the Philippines as refugees in 1990. Little Dog is just a boy when he

arrives in Hartford, Connecticut, where the American children bully him and slap him around. "Speak English," they say, calling him names like "fruit" and a "pansy." Little Dog's trouble with the neighborhood kids only gets worse when Rose buys him a hot-pink bicycle, after which he quickly learns how important color is in America. Little Dog's childhood is further complicated by Rose's posttraumatic stress disorder related to the Vietnam War and her tendency to violently abuse him. Little Dog also writes about his relationship with Trevor, but he only has the courage to do so because he knows Rose will probably never read his letter. To Little Dog, Trevor is the personification of traditional American masculinity, and he is everything that Little Dog will never be. Like Rose, Little Dog lives with mental illness, and his bipolar disorder, according to Little Dog, likely predisposes him to the drug addiction he struggles with after meeting Trevor. Little Dog is devastated after Trevor's overdose and death, and he is equally heartbroken by Lan's death at the end of the novel. Little Dog's letter to his mother represents his attempt to connect with her in a meaningful and lasting way. Through it he also hopes to come to terms with all the things that make him both "other" and beautiful—his Vietnamese identity, his sexuality, and his struggle with mental illness and addiction.

Ma/Rose – Little Dog's mother, Lan's daughter, and Mai's sister. *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* is a letter written by Little Dog to Rose, in which he pieces their lives together with his memories. Rose is born near Saigon during the Vietnam War. Her mother is a prostitute, and her father is an "American john." Rose grows up a half-white "ghost-girl" in Vietnam, where children throw feces at her to make her darker and try to scrape the white from her skin with a spoon, as if to be born half-white is a "wrong" to "be reversed." Rose watches her schoolhouse collapse in a napalm raid when she is five years old, and she never returns to school or learns to read. She marries an abusive man, with whom she has Little Dog. They, along with Lan and Mai, all immigrate to the United States after fleeing to the Philippines as refugees in 1990. Rose's husband is sent to prison for beating her not long after they arrive in Hartford, Connecticut. She must work long hours as a manicurist to support Little Dog, all while trying to cope with the posttraumatic stress of the war. According to Lan, Rose is also schizophrenic, and she frequently responds to ordinary occurrences—like fireworks on the Fourth of July or gunshots in Hartford—in an extreme way. She also loses her temper with Little Dog and beats him, at times for no reason at all. When Little Dog finally tells his mother he is gay, she asks him if he plans to wear a dress and vomits twice. Rose and Little Dog certainly have a strained relationship; however, Little Dog badly wants to connect with her in a meaningful way through his letter. The character of Rose represents the unique generation born of the Vietnam War. Even Little Dog is sure what to call her. "White, Asian, orphan, American, mother?" Rose also reflects the effects of war and posttraumatic stress disorder and its connection to violence and abuse.

Trevor – Buford's grandson and Little Dog's friend and lover. Trevor lives with his father in a trailer behind the interstate in Hartford, and he meets Little Dog when he begins working on Buford's tobacco farm. Trevor is boyishly handsome and, according to Little Dog, "impossibly American." Trevor is "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" by his father, an alcoholic who abuses Trevor and shoots him with a nail gun. When Trevor meets Little Dog in the tobacco field, it isn't long before their friendship turns sexual. After their first time together, Trevor turns to his back to Little Dog and cries "skillfully in the dark." Trevor is "all-American beef but no veal"—meaning he is tough, not soft—and he is clearly ashamed of his sexuality and what it says about his masculinity. Trevor embodies stereotypical American masculinity and the effect this narrow ideal of gender and manhood has on the queer community. Trevor's story also reflects the novel's thematic ideas about drug addiction. As a teenager, he becomes addicted to opioid pain medication after being prescribed OxyContin for a broken ankle. For Little Dog, it is impossible to describe Trevor without also describing "the Oxy and coke," the laced joints, and the fentanyl patches. Trevor is constantly high, and he is high when he crashes his father's Chevy into a tree. By the time Trevor is 22, he is dead from an overdose of fentanyl and heroin. With Trevor, Vuong draws a direct parallel between drug addiction and the pharmaceutical and medical industries and underscores the reality of the opioid crisis in 21st-century American society.

Lan – Little Dog's grandmother, Rose and Mai's mother, and Paul's ex-wife. Lan is born in the Go Cong District of Vietnam, and after leaving an arranged marriage in the late 1960s, she moves to Saigon. Lan is forced to work as a prostitute to survive during the Vietnam War, and she soon gives birth to Rose, the daughter of an "American john." Lan meets and falls in love with Paul, an American soldier, in a Saigon bar in 1967. She marries Paul and has two more children, but when Paul goes to the United States for a visit, he is unable to return to Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon and the end of the war in 1975. Lan flees Vietnam with Rose, Mai, and Little Dog in 1990, and she later lives with Rose and Little Dog in Hartford, Connecticut. Lan is schizophrenic, a condition that is worsened by the trauma of war, and she is a big part of Little Dog's life growing up. When Rose beats Little Dog, Lan uses her body as a shield to protect him, and she tenderly treats his cuts, bruises, and welts with old Vietnamese remedies. Lan tries to get Little Dog to see that his mother cares for him, even if Rose's own mental illness makes it difficult for her to express herself. Lan tells Little Dog countless stories of their family and history in Vietnam, through which Little Dog learns about his Vietnamese identity. Lan dies of metastatic bone cancer at the end of the novel, and Rose and Little Dog take her ashes back to Vietnam for burial. Lan and her stories represent the power of memory and storytelling in

the novel, but her character also represents the lasting effects of war on survivors. Like Rose, Lan likely has posttraumatic stress disorder, and the violence, fear, and pain of war remain with her throughout her life.

Paul – Lan's ex-husband, Mai's father, and Little Dog's grandfather. Paul is a white American from Virginia who plays the trumpet and aspires to be a "white Miles Davis." When his father rips up his music school application, Paul joins the military to get as far away as possible. He is stationed in Vietnam in 1967, where he meets Lan at a bar in Saigon. Lan is a prostitute and already has Rose, but she immediately falls in love with Paul. They marry a year later and have two more children, but then Paul's mother fakes a fatal illness and tricks him into coming home for a visit. After Paul arrives in Virginia, American troops begin to pull out of Vietnam, and after the Fall of Saigon and the end of the war in 1975, he is unable to get back to Lan. In the following years, Paul's brother intercepts all of Lan's letters, and by the time someone from the Salvation Army tells Paul that there is a woman in a refugee camp in the Philippines claiming to be his wife, it is already 1990, and Paul has been married to his second wife for nearly 10 years. Growing up in the United States, Little Dog sees Paul as his grandfather, even though Paul isn't Rose's real father. Throughout Little Dog's childhood, Lan and Paul's wedding picture hangs on Paul's living room wall in Virginia, and when Lan dies at the end of the novel, Paul is heartbroken. Via a video call, Paul says goodbye to Lan's grave in Vietnam from his home in Virginia, and he apologizes for not waiting long enough for her. Paul illustrates the power of memory in the novel, as he never forgets his love for Lan; however, he also represents the American presence in Vietnam during the war, and the unique cultural hybridity that was created because of this connection.

Rose's Client – A customer in the nail salon where Rose works as a manicurist. Rose's client is about 70 years old, and she comes to Rose looking for a pedicure. Before the woman puts her feet into the heated foot spa, she reaches down and detaches a prosthetic leg from just below her knee. Rose meticulously clips and paints the woman's nails, and then she massages her calf. When she is finished, the woman gestures to her missing leg. "Would you mind," she says. "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can." Rose silently massages the woman's invisible leg, and the woman gives her a hundred-dollar bill. Rose's client and her "phantom limb" illustrate the power of memory, which, Vuong argues, remains even when everything else is gone.

Gramoz – An Albanian boy at Little Dog's elementary school, whose family immigrated to the United States after the fall of the Soviet Union. Gramoz is friendly, and he offers Little Dog a pizza bagel during lunch—an act of kindness that causes Little Dog to start following Gramoz around. After days of trailing behind Gramoz, he turns on Little Dog on the playground. "Stop following me, you freak!" Gramoz yells. "What the heck is wrong with you?" Years later, Little Dog realizes that he followed Gramoz because he was looking for a reflection of himself. It wasn't pizza he wanted from Gramoz, Little Dog decides, "but replication." Gramoz is an immigrant just like Little Dog, and Little Dog desperately wants to think there are others like just like him—lost and out of step with American culture.

Carl – Mai's abusive boyfriend. Rose piles Little Dog and Lan into the car in the middle of the night when Little Dog is just a boy and drives to Carl and Mai's house. Carl has a history of abusing Mai, and Rose is convinced he is "killing" her sister. She pulls up to their house and bangs on the door with the wooden butt of a machete, and a man answers, knocking the knife from Rose's hand. She returns to the car, and Lan tells her that Mai and Carl haven't lived in the house for over five years. Rose's late-night trip to Carl's old house underscores the severity of Rose's mental illness, as well as the abuse and violence endured by Little Dog's family.

Mai – Rose's sister, Lan and Paul's daughter, and Little Dog's aunt. Mai immigrates to the United States from Vietnam with her family, but she soon moves in with Carl, her abusive boyfriend. Mai relocates from Connecticut to Florida, but Rose continues to go to Mai's former Hartford home, convinced that Carl is beating Mai and will kill her. Mai is present at the end of the novel when Lan dies of metastatic bone cancer. She feeds her mother rice with hot jasmine tea and swears the rice was just harvested from the Go Cong District in Vietnam. Like Little Dog and Rose, Mai is a direct product of the Vietnam War, and her father, Paul, was a white American soldier stationed in Saigon.

Kyle – Marsha's son and Kevin's brother. Kyle is a student at Little Dog's school when Little Dog first moves to America, and Kyle bullies Little Dog and pushes him around because he is different. "Speak English," Kyle demands of Little Dog, slapping his face. Like his brother Kevin, Kyle overdoses on drugs and dies later in the novel. Kyle's character draws attention the effects of drug use and abuse in American society, and his actions also illustrate the discrimination faced by people of color; Kyle exerts power over Little Dog and makes him miserable simply because Little Dog is Vietnamese.

Trevor's Father – Buford's son. Trevor's father is an abusive alcoholic, and Trevor has a small scar on his neck in the shape of a comma from where his father shot him with a nail gun. Trevor and his father live in a trailer behind the interstate in Hartford, Connecticut, and while it is never confirmed, Little Dog implies that Trevor's father knows that Trevor is gay. After Trevor overdoses on heroin and fentanyl, Little Dog is alerted to Trevor's death by a Facebook post Trevor's father leaves on Trevor's page. "*I'm broken in two*," he says of his son's death.

Marsha – A woman in Little Dog's Hartford neighborhood who goes door-to-door petitioning for stop signs to be put up in the area. Marsha has two sons, Kyle and Kevin, and she wants them

to be safe. Soon after, Kevin dies of a drug overdose, and Kyle dies the same way five years later. Marsha's sons represent the pervasiveness of drug use and addiction in 21st-century American society, and the character of Marsha underscores the difficulty parents have in keeping their children safe from such a widespread epidemic.

Marin – A transgender woman who lives in Little Dog's neighborhood when he is a young boy in Connecticut. Marin walks to work every day in high heels, even as the neighborhood men call her a "*faggot*" and threaten to kill her. Like Little Dog, Marin does not embody traditional ideals of gender, and she is therefore ostracized by her community. The character of Marin underscores the discrimination and violence faced by queer people in American society.

Kevin – Marsha's son and Kyle's brother. Kevin and Kyle live with their mother in Little Dog's neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut, and like his brother, Kevin overdoses on drugs and dies near the end of the novel. Both Kyle and Kevin illustrate the ubiquity of America's opioid crisis, and their tragic deaths underscore the tendency of drug abuse and addiction to run in families.

Xavier – Little Dog's classmate in Hartford, Connecticut. Xavier is killed when he flips his Nissan while high on fentanyl; he is one of five of Little Dog's peers to die because of opioid drug abuse. Like most of Little Dog's friends, Xavier illustrates the pervasiveness of opioid abuse in 21st-century American society, and his death further underscores the tragedy of addiction.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Callahan – Little Dog's ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher when he is a boy in Hartford, Connecticut. Mrs. Callahan teaches Little Dog to read, which sparks in him a lifelong love of language, words, and stories.

Mr. Buford – Trevor's grandfather and the owner of the tobacco farm where Little Dog gets his first job.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WAR, TRAUMA, AND ABUSE

Ocean Vuong's epistolary novel *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* is a letter from Little Dog, a young Vietnamese American, to his mother, Rose, who grew up near Saigon during the Vietnam War. Little Dog recounts his mother's experiences during the war, as well as those of his grandmother, Lan, and the result is a stark picture of violence, suffering, and starvation. At the age of five, Rose watched as her school collapsed after an American napalm raid, and much of her childhood was punctuated by gunshots, frequent bombings, and mortar fire. Little Dog confronts the lasting effects of such trauma, including the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) Rose lives with after the war. The violence of Rose's childhood in Vietnam is mirrored in the violence of Little Dog's childhood in Hartford, Connecticut. "I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children," Little Dog says, and this is certainly his experience. Rose frequently abuses Little Dog, and he recounts this violence in his letter, too. With the portrayal of war and trauma in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong underscores the multigenerational effects of war and ultimately argues that there is a direct relationship between war, trauma, and abuse.

As Little Dog is growing up in Hartford, Connecticut, Rose frequently displays symptoms of PTSD, which underscores the lasting trauma of war. When Little Dog is a young boy, just five or six years old, he hides behind a door to prank his mother, and as Rose walks by, he jumps out and yells, "Boom!" Rose screams, her face "raked and twisted," and breaks down into tears, grabbing her chest and gasping for air. Little Dog means only to scare her as a joke, and he doesn't understand Rose's catastrophic reaction. Rose lived her early life in a state of constant fear and anticipation of violence, and this state remains even after the war. One Fourth of July, when Little Dog's neighbors set off fireworks in celebration, Rose throws herself on top of Little Dog and covers his mouth. "Shhh. If you scream," she says to Little Dog, "the mortars will know where we are." It has been several years since the war, but the booming sound of the fireworks and Rose's lasting trauma launch her right back to Vietnam in the 1970s. After dinner one night, the sound of gunshots ring out, and Rose drops to the floor, screaming. "Someone turn off the lights," she yells. According to Little Dog, gunshots are not uncommon in Connecticut and can often be heard from their apartment. Rose's disproportionate reaction to the gunshots is further evidence of her lasting trauma.

Little Dog's own childhood is rife with violence in the form of Rose's abuse, which reflects the violence and stress Rose was subjected to during the Vietnam War. Little Dog's first memory of Rose's abuse is when he is just four years old. "A hand, a flash, a reckoning," Little Dog says, "My mouth a blaze of touch." Little Dog never does say why his mother hits him, but Rose's violent reaction to such a young and innocent child suggests she is struggling to cope with her own stress. One day, Little Dog fails to pick up his toy soldiers before Rose returns home from work. When she comes in to the scattered soldiers, Rose beats Little Dog until Little Dog's grandmother throws herself on top of him, absorbing the blows. Rose's reaction to the mess—which

has symbolic significance, given that the toys are soldiers and are scattered about as if in death—is more than excessive, and her violence again implies she is struggling with trauma connected to the war. Then, when Little Dog is just ten years old, Rose becomes angry for an unspecified reason and picks up a kitchen knife, shaking. "Get out. Get out," she says quietly to Little Dog. Rose's violent anger implies she has the potential to seriously hurt her son, which Little Dog directly links to the deep and lasting trauma Rose herself encountered as a child during the Vietnam War.

Little Dog questions when a war ends, and he ultimately decides that it never truly does—at least not as long as those affected are still living. "Once [war] enters you it never leaves," Little Dog says, "but merely echoes." In this vein, the violence of the Vietnam War echoes in Rose, and this violence is released on Little Dog, which will in turn echo in him. "I'm not a monster," Rose says to her son, and Little Dog seems to agree. Rose isn't a monster, Vuong argues; she is a mother deeply affected by the violence of war, struggling to cope with the stress and trauma even after the fighting has stopped.

DRUGS AND ADDICTION

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* is an intimate look at the many forms of addiction. Vuong's main character, Little Dog, grows up in Connecticut in the 2000s, during the early days of America's opioid epidemic, and drugs are commonplace during his teenage years. Little Dog's mother, Rose, chain-smokes cigarettes, and his grandfather, Paul, grows his own marijuana. "They say addiction might be linked to bipolar disorder," Little Dog explains to his mother in his letter. "It's the chemicals in our brains, they say. I got the wrong chemicals, Ma. Or rather, I don't get enough of one or the other." Vuong acknowledges that his own struggle with addiction is likely rooted in both physiological and psychological factors; however, he also recognizes the role that the pharmaceutical and health care industries play in the continuing public health crisis that is America's opioid epidemic, which claims the lives of an estimated 130 Americans every day. Through *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong highlights the rampant addiction and drug use present in American society and ultimately argues that drug companies and doctors are directly responsible for the widespread drug use in the United States during the 21st century.

Little Dog recounts lots of drug use among his peers growing up in Connecticut, especially Trevor, Little Dog's close friend and first lover, which reflects the widespread nature of the drug crisis in early 21st-century America. Little Dog says he can't talk about Trevor's life without talking "about the drugs that soon blew it apart, the Oxy and coke, the way they made the world smolder at its tips." Drug use is central to Trevor's life, and as such, it is central to Little Dog's as well. As Little Dog recounts his time with Trevor, he thinks of Trevor speeding in his truck, "a patch of fentanyl hot on [Trevor's] arm, the liquid melted through its edges and dripping down his bicep like sick sap. Cocaine in our noses, our lungs, we laughed, in a way." They crash soon after into a tree on Trevor's father's property, illustrating just one of the many risks of drug use and addiction. Even Little Dog's most mundane memories of Trevor include drugs, like sitting in the grass, "passing a joint sprinkled with crushed Oxy." Drugs are commonplace in Little Dog's early life, especially in his relationship with Trevor, and this again underscores the pervasiveness of drugs and addiction in broader American society.

The drug use and addiction Little Dog is exposed to during his early years includes the overdoses and deaths of several of his friends, including Trevor, which further reflects the tragedy of America's drug epidemic. By the time Little Dog goes to college in New York City, four of his friends have already been killed from drug overdoses. "Five," Little Dog says, "if you count Xavier who flipped his Nissan doing ninety on a bad bunch of fentanyl." The deaths of Little Dog's friends highlights the loss inherent to such a widespread problem. Little Dog tells of Kevin and Kyle, two brothers he grows up with in Hartford, who, within five years, both overdose on heroin and die. Keven and Kyle's mother leaves town, heartbroken, soon after, an example of how America's drug epidemic has destroyed entire families. Trevor overdoses twice, and he later dies after breaking three months' sobriety with an overdose of heroin laced with fentanyl at just 22 years old. Little Dog never fully recovers from Trevor's death, which again reflects the pain and destruction of America's drug crisis.

According to Little Dog, Trevor was put on OxyContin when he broke his ankle during his sophomore year in high school. OxyContin, Little Dog explains, which was "first mass-produced by Purdue Pharma in 1996, is an opioid, essentially making it heroin in pill form." Trevor's ankle healed in a month, but by that time, he was already addicted to the pills. OxyContin and its generic forms were first developed for patients with late stage cancer, but doctors soon prescribed the drug for all types of pain, including arthritis and headaches. Pharmaceutical companies swore the drug was "abuse-resistant" and it was marketed as a safe and effective pain reliever. "By 2002," Little Dog says, "prescriptions of OxyContin for noncancer pain increased nearly ten times, with total sales reaching over $3 billion." The resulting drug crisis, Vuong thus implies, is directly related to the gross misinformation and overprescribing of opioid painkillers.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Ocean Vuong explores both gender and sexuality in his autobiographical novel, *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*. The novel focuses on Little Dog, a Vietnamese American, who knows from a very young age that

he is gay. As Little Dog grows up in Connecticut during the 1990s and 2000s, he is constantly bombarded with society's stereotypical assumptions of gender, particularly masculinity. When the cruel neighborhood kids laugh at Little Dog and call him a "little bitch," Little Dog's mother, Rose, encourages him to be strong. "You have to find a way, Little Dog," she says, "You have to be a real boy and be strong." Little Bird is taught early on that being a "real boy" is rooted in strength and hinges on a very narrow, traditional definition of masculinity. "See?" Rose says to Little Dog the next morning. "You already look like **Superman**!" Little Dog's trouble with the neighborhood kids is just the beginning of the discrimination he faces because of his sexuality and failure to embody the qualities of a "real boy." Through Little Dog's experiences, Vuong highlights the discrimination faced by the queer community in 21st-century American society and argues that such hate is ultimately rooted in traditional ideals of gender and masculinity.

Most of the discrimination Little Dog faces and witnesses in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* is related to sexuality and stereotypical assumptions of gender and masculinity, which reflects their connection within American society. When Little Dog is just a boy, his mother buys him a hot-pink Schwinn. The colorful bike is the cheapest, and it is all she can afford. The first day Little Dog rides his new bike, a neighborhood kid knocks him from it and proceeds to scrape the pink paint from the metal frame. Little Dog is a boy, and the neighborhood kid isn't comfortable with the hot-pink bike, a color stereotypically associated with girls and femininity. Little Dog tells of Marin, a transgender woman in his neighborhood, who is harassed everyday on her way to work. "I'm gonna kill you, bitch," the neighborhood men say to Marin. "Don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight. Don't sleep." Marin, like Little Dog, does not embody stereotypical gender ideals, and she must similarly face hate and abuse. At one point, Little Dog and his mother wake up to find "FAG4LIFE" spray painted in red across their front door. Little Dog's mother is illiterate and doesn't speak much English, so he tells her it says "Merry Christmas," but the hateful message is still clear. Little Dog's sexuality is the source of much abuse and discrimination.

This discrimination and stereotypical gender assumptions are even present in Little Dog's relationship with his first lover, Trevor, a masculine boy whom Little Dog describes as "all-American beef." After Little Dog and Trevor's first sexual encounter, Trevor turns from Little Dog and cries "skillfully in the dark. The way boys do." Trevor is clearly ashamed of his sexuality, and he hides his tears in an attempt to prove his masculinity. Little Dog and Trevor have a type of modified sex they refer to as "fake," during which Trevor is always on top. Once, they attempt to switch, but Trevor stops. "I can't. I just—I mean…" Trevor says. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch." Trevor is comfortable having sex with Little Dog, as long as Little Dog agrees to be the "girl," and it doesn't violate Trevor's sense of masculinity. Furthermore, Trevor often insults Little Dog and makes comments based on Little Dog's sexuality and Trevor's stereotypical gender assumptions. Once, during an argument, Little Dog stops talking to Trevor. "Hey," Trevor says to Little Dog, "don't do the fuckin' silent thing, man. It's a fag move." This same hatefulness is later seen when Little Dog refuses to shoot up heroin with Trevor. "Looks like you dropped your tampon," Trevor says to Little Dog, again illustrating the connection between stereotypical masculinity and discrimination of the queer community.

Not long before Trevor overdoses and dies, he asks Little Dog how long he will be gay. "You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean," Trevor says, "I think me…I'll be good in a few years, you know?" Trevor is "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity," and, regardless of his own sexuality, he leaves Little Dog feeling as if he has "tainted [Trevor] with [his] faggotry." Unlike Trevor, Little Dog knows he will be gay forever—that it's part of who he is and not some sort of phase—and the discrimination Little Dog faces because of his sexuality is closely connected with society's expectations of what it means to be a "real" boy or man.

RACE AND RACISM

In addition to gender and sexuality, Ocean Vuong also explores race and racism in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*. Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog, is a Vietnamese American who immigrates to the United States from Vietnam in 1990. From the moment Little Dog and his family arrive, color proves to be of paramount importance in American society. "Do I look like a real American?" Little Dog's mother, Rose, asks while trying on secondhand clothes not long after arriving in the United States. Little Dog is not yet five years old, but he still knows that to be a "real American" is to be white, which Little Dog will never be. Little Dog faces considerable racism growing up in Hartford, Connecticut, but the stories he tells of his mother and grandmother, Lan, back in Saigon suggest that skin color is just as important in their native Vietnam. In Vietnam, Lan is considered "dark," and Rose, whose father was a white American soldier stationed in Vietnam during the war, is nearly light enough to "pass" for white. Through Little Dog and his family, Vuong illustrates the racism endured by people of color and ultimately argues that it is one's differences—such as skin color and race—that makes one beautiful.

After Little Dog and his family arrive in the United States, race and racism is an everyday part of their lives, which highlights the racism that plagues American society. When Little Dog first arrives in Connecticut, he speaks very little English, and the boys at his school slap him around and bully him. "Look at me when I'm talking to you," a boy named Kyle orders Little Dog at school, adding, "Speak English." Kyle immediately establishes power and dominance over Little Dog because he is

Vietnamese. Rose is a manicurist, and she often brings home mannequin hands to practice on. Rose's hands are darker than the mannequins, which are "pink and beige, the only shades they come in." White is considered the default race in America, and this status is reflected in the color of the mannequins. Furthermore, Little Dog reads about an article in an El Paso newspaper from 1884, in which a white man is accused of murdering a Chinese man. The case was dismissed because, according to Texas law, a human being was only defined as white, Mexican, or African American, and the Chinese man was none of those things. As an Asian boy himself, Little Dog lives in a society that has not always counted his race as human, which again reflects the racism of American society.

However, Little Dog also recounts the stories of Lan and Rose, who also face discrimination and abuse in Vietnam because of their skin color, which suggests such hate is not just an American problem. After Lan gives birth to Rose, the child of a white American solider, the people in Lan's village call Lan "a traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy." Both Lan and Rose are ostracized because of Lan's relationship with the white soldier. As Rose grows up in the very same village, she is chased by the people, who slap "buffalo shit on her face and shoulders to make her *brown again*, as if to be born lighter was a wrong that could be reversed." The villagers hate Rose, just as they hated her white father. What's more, the people in Rose's village chase her with spoons, which they take to her arms and yell: "Get the white off her, get the white off her!" The Vietnamese people try to scrape the white from Rose's skin, which again underscores the racially motivated hate of the Vietnamese people.

"Remember," Rose says to Little Dog every morning as he leaves for school in Connecticut, "don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese." While Little Dog is shy and generally observes his mother's warning, he refuses to look at himself in the same way. Little Dog is proud of his Vietnamese identity, and he won't hide who he is. "To be gorgeous, you must first be seen," Little Dog says, "but to be seen allows you to be hunted." Little Dog embraces his "yellow" identity, which is, he argues, one of the things that makes him both beautiful and hated.

LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* examines the power of language and storytelling. Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog, is Vietnamese American, and English is his second language. Language is also central to Little Dog's identity as a writer, and the novel, which constitutes a letter to Little Dog's illiterate mother, Rose, further draws attention to words and language. Storytelling, too, is foundational in Little Dog's life, and the stories his mother and grandmother, Lan, tell of Vietnam connect Little Dog to his history and heritage. Little Dog frequently refers to the works of Roland Barthes, a 20th-century French literary critic and theorist. Barthes is best known for his contribution to structuralism, an area of study that assumes human culture can only be understood by its relationship to a broader social structure, such as language. In Little Dog's letter to his mother, he adopts Barthes's view of structuralism and explores language in both writing and storytelling. He considers individual words and the structure of sentences, as well as the power of personal narratives. Just as Barthes argues culture can only be understood by its broader social structures, Vuong argues that to truly understand another, one must also understand the stories that give structure to life.

Little Dog examines both English and Vietnamese, and like Barthes, he concludes that language is steeped in the culture that creates it. Language can't be understood without a grasp of the broader social structure. When Little Dog is a kid, a hummingbird hovers over a nearby flower, and Rose points to it excitedly. "Đẹp quá!" she says, "It's beautiful!" Little Bird says in English, "the only language [he has] for it." They smile blankly at each other, neither one understanding the other. Rose grew up in Vietnam, but most of Little Dog's life is spent in the United States, and their cultural differences are reflected in their language. According to Little Dog, the Vietnamese rarely say "I love you," and when they do, they say it in English. "Care and love," Little Dog explains, "are pronounced clearest through service" for the Vietnamese, and to express that emotion in words, they must go to an entirely different language. In Hartford, Connecticut, where Little Dog grows up, locals greet each other with "What's good?" not "Hello" or "How are you?" Life is often difficult for Hartford's working class population, and the point of the greeting, Little Dog says, is "to move, right away, to joy" and push "aside what was inevitable to reach the exceptional." This completely unique greeting can only be understood within the cultural context of Harford.

Just as Little Dog explores language in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, he also explores storytelling, which, like language, reflects the unique culture and structure of Little Dog's life. Little Dog's love for stories is born with Mrs. Callahan, his English language teacher, who, with her stories, pulls Little Dog "deeper into the current of language." Little Dog learns English through stories, and the importance of stories continues throughout his life. When Little Dog is a boy, he plucks the grey hairs from his grandmother's head, as she tells him stories of their life back in Vietnam. As Little Dog plucks Lan's hair, the room is filled with her stories, and the floor whitens "as the past unfolds around [them]." Little Dog learns about his Vietnamese identity through Lan's stories, which further reflects the importance of storytelling. Little Dog runs away from home when he is just a boy, taking with him only "a bag of Cheerios taken out of the box, a pair of socks, and two *Goosebumps* paperbacks." Little Dog doesn't know where he is headed, but with the books, Little Dog knows there are "at least two more

world" he can "eventually step into." Stories are necessary for Little Dog's life, second only to food and possibly warmth.

In *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog tries to explain to his mother through stories what life is like as a writer. "You asked me what it's like to be a writer and I'm giving you a mess, I know," Little Dog says to Rose. "But it's a mess, Ma—I'm not making this up. I made it down." Little Dog's letter often reads as random stories and memories, which often seem unconnected and insignificant. "I'm not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck," Little Dog says, "the pieces floating, finally legible." Little Dog's stories, as well as the language he uses to tell them, are a direct reflection of his life and identity, which one must understand to truly know Little Dog.

MEMORY

While arguably a lesser theme in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, the novel is based on Little Dog's stories and those told to him by others, and memory is nevertheless an important part of Ocean Vuong's book. For example, Little Dog puts his father back together using only his memories, and his Vietnamese identity is closely related to his grandmother Lan's stories, and her ability to remember their life back in Vietnam. For the most part, Lan's stories never change, with the exception of "minuscule details," like "the time of day, the color of someone's shirt, two air raids instead of three, an AK-47 instead of a 9mm, [or] the daughter laughing, not crying." According to Little Dog, "shifts in the narrative" are inevitable, as the past "is never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen" through memory. "Memory is a second chance," Little Dog says, and this belief is reflected in the letter he writes to his mother, Rose. Through *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong highlights both the power and limitations of memory and ultimately argues that which is truly important is never forgotten.

In Little Dog's letter to his mother, he tells the story of the **macaque monkeys** that serves as a metaphor for the importance of memory, which is imperative to the telling of Little Dog's story. Little Dog writes about the macaque monkeys of Southeast Asia, which are the most hunted primates in Vietnam. Men consume the brains with alcohol and garlic, as the monkey "kicks beneath them." Macaques, whose brains are considered a delicacy and a cure for impotency, are "capable of self-doubt and introspection," and they are able to remember the past and use their memories to stay alive. In consuming the monkey's brains, the men symbolically consume their memories. Asian men eat the macaque's brain until the skull is empty and the animal stops moving. "When nothing's left, when all of its memories dissolve into the men's bloodstreams," Little Dog says, "the monkey dies." The monkey stays alive until the last memory is gone, which again highlights the importance of memory in Vuong's novel.

Little Dog also recounts the story of his mother and her client at the nail salon, which also serves as a metaphor for the importance of memory in the novel and further suggests that some memories can never be forgotten. Rose's pedicure client is an amputee, and she asks Rose to pretend to massage her missing leg. "I can still feel it down there," the woman says. "It's silly, but I can." Even though the woman's leg has been removed, it still holds memories, and her body still remembers what it feels like. Rose massages the woman's invisible leg, and when she is done, she slides a "towel under the phantom limb" and pats the air, "the muscle memory in [Rose's] arms firing the familiar efficient motions, revealing what's not there, the way a conductor's movements make the music somehow more real." This story relies equally on Rose's memory, as well as her client's, and this connection again underscores the importance of memory in the novel and the power of memories to remain, even after everything else is gone.

Rose tells Little Dog "that memory is a choice. But if you were god," Little Dog says to his mother, "you'd know it's a flood." Memory can't be avoided or ignored in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, but Little Dog records his memories in the letter to his mother just in case. Rose believes in reincarnation, and even though Little Dog isn't convinced of life after death, he still hopes it is real. "Maybe then," Little Dog says to Rose, "in that life and in this future, you'll find this book and you'll know what happened to us. And you'll remember me. Maybe." Memories keep the connection alive between Little Dog and his family, again illustrating the importance of memory in Vuong's novel.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BUFFALO

Little Dog frequently employs the image of a herd of buffalo thundering over the edge of a cliff in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, and the buffalo are symbolic of the opioid crisis that is sweeping American society both in Vuong's novel and in the real world. While watching television, Little Dog and Lan watch a herd of buffalo follow each other directly over the edge of a cliff, falling to their death below. Lan can't understand why the buffalo would willingly go over the edge to their death, but Little Dog tells her that they don't know what they are doing. The buffalo are simply following their family, he says. Vuong draws a parallel between the buffalo and the thousands of Americans who die each year from drug addiction, in many cases after watching their friends and family members go out the same way.

"You don't have to be like the buffaloes," Little Dog says to no one in particular. "You can stop." Little Dog implies drug

addiction as a learned behavior picked up from previous generations and friends, and if others would simply learn from the actions of others rather than simply mimicking them, Little Dog argues that this vicious cycle can be broken. In another life, Little Dog hopes he and his mother, Rose, can be "the opposite of buffaloes" and instead "grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of **monarchs**, heading home." Unlike the buffalo, monarch butterflies use the memories and learned experiences of their ancestors to survive. At the end of the novel, a heard of buffalo charge directly at Little Dog on their way to a cliff; however, just as the first buffalo reaches the edge, the entire herd explodes into monarch butterflies and soar off over Little Dog's head. Through his own learned experiences and those of others, Little Dog stops himself from going over the metaphorical cliff, and he implies that others can, too, if they only acknowledge and learn from the experiences of those before them.

MONARCH BUTTERFLIES

Butterflies, specifically monarch butterflies, are repeatedly mentioned in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, and they are symbolic of memory, migration, and the importance of passing knowledge and lived experiences from generation to generation. Little Dog first mentions monarch butterflies in the very beginning of the novel, when he tells of the butterflies in Michigan during the fall that are beginning their migration south for the winter. From September to November, butterflies are everywhere and cover nearly every surface, but their survival is tenuous, and a single night of cold can quickly kill them off. The butterflies lay eggs on their journey south, and they never live to fly north again, but future butterflies automatically know the route because this knowledge in ingrained in them by their "ancestors."

As an immigrant and a refugee, Little Dog and his family were forced to migrate in order to survive, much like the butterflies, and Little Dog equally relies on the lessons he learns from his mother, Rose, and his grandmother, Lan. Whereas the **buffalo** are symbolic of the blind following of one's family in the novel, the monarchs represent a purposeful legacy, one that is essential for survival. Little Dog hopes that he and Rose will one day be "the opposite of buffaloes" and instead "grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home," and this is precisely what happens at the end of the novel. As a thundering herd of buffalo charge at Little Dog, they suddenly turn into monarch butterflies and soar over his head. The stories and memories Little Dog cherishes, most of which come from his mother and grandmother, inform his life and guide his decisions, and in many ways, they help him to survive.

MACAQUE MONKEYS

Little Dog frequently references monkeys, particularly macaque monkeys, which are symbolic of memories and the importance of lived experiences in Vuong's novel. As Little Dog writes his letter to his mother, Rose, he tells of the macaque monkeys, the most hunted primates in Southeast Asia. The brains of the monkeys are considered a delicacy, and they are thought to be a cure for impotence. Little Dog claims that the brain of a macaque monkey is closer to a human brain than any other living mammal, and he claims that the macaques are capable of critical thought and problem solving, and that they have the ability to recall past events. In short, Little Dog says, macaque monkeys "employ memory in order to survive," just a people do.

In the consumption of macaque brains, the animal is strapped under a table, and the brains are consumed while the monkey is still alive. When the brain is gone and the last memory consumed, the monkey finally dies, which reflects the importance of memory in Vuong's novel. Little Dog tells a story of 1968, the Year of the Monkey according to the Chinese zodiac, during which his mother and grandmother, Lan, are still in Vietnam during the war. They are both held at gunpoint by American soldiers, and while they are eventually let go, it is a powerful memory of fear and survival. Near the end of the novel, Little Dog asks Rose to tell him the story about the monkeys, and he reminds her that she was born in the Year of the Monkey. "So you're a monkey," Little Dog says. Like the macaque monkeys, Little Dog uses his own memories and those told to him through the stories of others in order to survive.

SUPERMAN

Little Dog mentions Superman, the popular comic hero who saves the world wearing a cape, several times in *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, and Superman is symbolic of society's narrow view of masculinity in Ocean Vuong's novel. When Little Dog's mother, Rose, takes him to Six Flags, a Midwestern amusement park, they ride the Superman rollercoaster, and Rose throws up in a garbage can as soon as the ride is over. The Superman rollercoaster is simply too big and too frightening for Rose, a middle-aged woman, to take. After Little Dog is beat up by some bullies at school, Rose says Little Dog must get bigger and stronger, and then she encourages him the next morning by calling him "Superman." Superman is the epitome of strength and manhood, and Little Dog is taught from an early age that to be a real man is to be Superman.

When Little Dog is just six years old, his mother locks him in the basement after he wets the bed, which, presumably, he does a lot. Little Dog begs her not to do it, but Rose closes and locks the door, leaving Little Dog alone and naked, save for a pair of Superman underwear stained with his urine. The implication

here is that to be a real boy, and one day a man, Little Dog can't wet the bed and cry like a baby. Rather, he must be strong and macho if he is to embody traditional notions of manhood and masculinity. Little Dog's stained Superman underwear is a powerful image—he will never live up to this narrow and unobtainable image of manhood and masculinity, and he is reminded of this at every turn.

THE TABLE

Many of Little Dog's random memories involve a wooden kitchen table he thinks he remembers from this youth, which symbolizes the power of suggestion on memory in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*. Little Dog can remember a fire in his family's Hartford apartment—but only because Lan told him there was a fire—and he can see in his mind the flames crawling up the walls and licking at the edges of the table. Little Dog can remember his father sitting at the table, and he can remember running his finger over the nuts and bolts the held the wood together. Little Dog can even remember hiding under the table with Rose and Lan in Saigon. Many of Little Dog's memories, especially those associated with his father, involve the table in some way.

Toward the end of the novel, Little Dog admits that he never actually laid eyes on the table. Rose claims there was a table, but it was back in Vietnam, before Little Dog was born. The first time Little Dog's father came home drunk and beat Rose, she was sitting at the table, but it is impossible that the same table is in Little Dog's memories. Still, Little Dog remembers the table, and he can even remember helping his mother set it. Like the fire, Little Dog only remembers the table because he was told it existed, which is much like Little Dog's memories of his largely absent father. Little Dog has few memories of his father, and each one is vague. Little Dog remembers his father because he knows he had one, not because he has any meaningful memories of him. Through the table, Vuong not only implies that memories can be planted by suggestion, he argues that such suggestions can seem just as real and vivid as actual memories.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* published in 2019.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ 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, then burst into sobs, clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. I stood bewildered, my toy army helmet tilted on my head. I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. 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—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very beginning of *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, when Little Dog is looking back on his childhood, and it highlights the posttraumatic stress Rose is plagued by after the Vietnam War. Rose is mentally ill, and the extreme violence she lived through during the war—the bombings, the mortar fire, and the napalm raids—has left its mark on her. Little Dog's harmless prank, one that is played on many parents everywhere, instantly launches Rose back to Vietnam in the 1970s.

Rose's face is "raked and twisted" like the mangled cities and villages decimated by the war. Civilians were targeted during the war, and over two million of them were killed. Rose grabs at her chest and gasps when Little Dog jumps out, and it is clear that for just a moment, Rose genuinely fears for her life. Little Dog's toy army helmet is symbolic of the source of Rose's fear, as her own childhood was one of checkpoints and soldiers with machine guns. To Little Dog, war is a game to be played, something from his favorite television show; however, to Rose, war is real, and that fear remains even years later.

❝ "I'm sorry," you said, bandaging the cut on my forehead. "Grab your coat. I'll get you McDonald's." Head throbbing, I dipped chicken nuggets in ketchup as you watched. "You have to get bigger and stronger, okay?"

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears early in the book, after Rose throws a box of Legos at Little Dog, bruising and cutting his head. This passage hints at the narrow view of gender, particularly masculinity, that Little Dog is expected to conform to. Little Dog never does say why his mother hits him, other than her own history with violence and mental illness, and this image of Little Dog in McDonald's eating chicken nuggets—something countless children have done—underscores just how young and innocent he is.

Rose clearly feels bad that she hit him, which is why she takes him to McDonald's—a rare treat for Little Dog. Still, with her comment that Little Dog must "get bigger and stronger," Rose implies that Little Dog is somehow to blame for his poor treatment, that if he was bigger, he wouldn't be abused—or he'd at least be able to shoulder the abuse better. This also puts an expectation on Little Dog as a boy, and later a man, that he must be big and strong. Later, as an adult, when Little Dog writes his letter to Rose, he is nearly 30 years old and is five feet, four inches tall and weighs less than 120 pounds. Little Dog will never be big and strong, at least not physically, and this unobtainable ideal is impressed upon him from a very young age.

❝ The time we went to Goodwill and piled the cart with items that had a yellow tag, because on that day a yellow tag meant an additional fifty percent off. I pushed the cart and leaped on back bar, gliding, feeling rich with our bounty of discarded treasures. It was your birthday. We were splurging. "Do I look like a real American?" you said, pressing a white dress to your length. It was slightly too formal for you to have any occasion to wear, yet casual enough to hold a *possibility* of use.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs when Rose and Little Dog go shopping on Rose's birthday, underscores the racism and American exceptionalism that pervade most of the novel. Rose is a single mother, and she doesn't have much money, and this shopping spree at Goodwill, a secondhand store, is what passes for a special occasion for her and Little Dog. Rose makes her living as a manicurist, and since she is an immigrant and doesn't speak or read English, she has few options for bettering their lives.

Little Dog points out there is a "yellow tag" sale, a word which has increased meaning to Little Dog, who is Vietnamese and frequently describes himself as "yellow." The yellow tags mark the "discarded treasures" at Goodwill as if there specifically for Rose and Little Dog, who can't afford new items from a department store. Rose tries on a "white dress," its color reflective of America's default race, and asks Little Dog if she looks like a "real American." She has nowhere to wear the dress, which implies the answer is no, but Little Dog admits there is a "*possibility* of use." This slim chance of use reflects the cliché of the American Dream—anything is possible, even if Rose and Little Dog are at a disadvantage because of their status as immigrants.

❝ If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose, Lan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Little Dog is explaining his reasons for writing his letter to his mother, Rose, and it is important because it illustrates the importance of language and writing within the novel. This quote also refers to monarch butterflies, a symbol of memory and shared familial experiences in the book, and underscores the importance of passing on stories and lessons to future generations. Little Dog makes many explanations as to why he is writing his letter, but here he implies that what is important is not the letter itself, but what comes *after* the letter, at 'the end of the sentence."

Little Dog's letter is not just his own memories and stories, but those of Rose and Lan, too, and these stories are what he hopes to "pass on." Through these stories and lessons learned, Little Dog tries to make sense of life and prepares himself for the future, just as the monarch butterflies imbue their "kin with the silent propulsion to fly south" and survive. It is the stories and lessons of one's "ancestors" that are

important, and they are the "alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron" that Little Dog mentions here. With this collective knowledge, descendants like Little Dog can venture out to new places "in the narrative," secure in their survival. For Little Dog, stories are not only an important part of life, they pass on vital memories and lessons and are essential to long term survival.

"You have to be a real boy and be strong. You have to step up or they'll keep going You have a bellyful of English. [...] You have to use it, okay?"

Related Characters: Ma/Rose (speaker), Little Dog

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Little Dog is beat up at school for not speaking English, and it highlights the American exceptionalism and racism that pervades most of the novel. It also contains an additional layer of significance, as it highlights the stereotypical gender ideals that are forced onto Little Dog and reflects America's narrow view of masculinity. Again, Rose suggests that if Little Dog were big and strong, he wouldn't get hit so much. Not only does this imply that Little Dog himself is to blame for his trouble, it also suggests he will always be a target. "You have to step it up, or they'll keep going," she says.

Rose tells Little Dog that to be a "real boy," he must also be "strong," which is to say that Little Dog isn't a "real boy" because he is weak and scrawny. This assumption aligns with traditional notions of masculinity, which assume that men must be strong and virile to be considered "men," and anyone not fitting this ideal is considered weak and inadequate. Rose also implies that it is Little Dog's knowledge of English that will save him, an implication that assumes English is a superior language to his native Vietnamese. Little Dog is constantly reminded that to be a "real" boy and a "real" American are both narrow and antiquated views that he, and many other people, can never live up to.

As a girl, you watched, from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again. Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue it to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Little Dog explains his mother's childhood in Vietnam, and it is significant because it underscores the trauma Rose endured as a child during the Vietnam War. Beyond that, this quote also highlights the importance of language within a culture and explains why Rose never learned to read. Little Dog repeatedly claims he is writing a letter to his mother, which, he says, he only has the courage to do because he knows she will never read it. The fact that Little Dog doesn't expect his mother to read his letter allows him to be honest and reveal truths he might otherwise keep from her.

The image of a young girl standing before a burning schoolhouse exemplifies the horrors of war and the effect it has on innocent civilians, especially children, but it also symbolizes the end of Vietnam as Rose knows it. Vietnam is forever altered because of the war, and it can never be what it once was. For Rose, the collapse of her schoolhouse represents a collapse of normalcy, and the destruction of Vietnam. Vietnamese, then, is a language without a country, an "orphan," which is a word Little Dog also uses to describe Rose. This pain and violence has left its mark on Vietnam and the language that represents it, just as it has left a mark on Rose.

Paul finishes his portion of the story. And I want to tell him. I want to say that his daughter who is not his daughter was a half-white child in Go Cong, which meant the children called her ghost-girl, called Lan a traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy. How they cut her auburn-tinted hair while she walked home from the market, arms full with baskets of bananas and green squash, so that when she got home, there'd be only a few locks left above her forehead. How when she ran out of hair, they slapped buffalo shit on her face and shoulders to make her *brown again*, as if to be born lighter was a wrong that could be reversed.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose, Lan, Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which occurs after Paul tells Little Dog that he isn't Little Dog's real grandfather, illustrates the abuse Rose was subjected to because of her white identity and suggests that race is just as important in Vietnam as it is America. Rose's biological father was, like Paul, a white American soldier stationed in Vietnam during the war. The American soldiers present in South Vietnam where Rose and Lan lived were there to aid the South Vietnamese in their civil war with the North Vietnamese; however, American soldiers were still viewed by many Vietnamese as the "enemy" during the Vietnam War, which, in Vietnam, is often called the American War.

Rose's white skin triggers all the animosity and frustration the Vietnamese people see in the American soldiers who have seemingly taken over their country, and Rose suffers because of this. The name "ghost-girl" reflects Rose's light complexion, and her "auburn-tinted hair" is just as out of place. The treatment Rose is forced to endure—the other children literally rip the hair from her head and cover her with feces to make her darker—is extreme, and it is specifically designed to humiliate her and make her feel shame for the color of her skin. While this scenario is certainly different than the racism Rose and Little Dog face as immigrants in America, it nevertheless proves that race and hate are prominent issues in Vietnam, too.

Part 2 Quotes

"If it's the same price anyway," she says. "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can. I can."

Related Characters: Rose's Client (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which is spoken by one of Rose's clients at the nail salon, underscores the power of memory within the novel. This particular client has come to Rose for a pedicure, but she only has one leg; the other leg has been amputated just below the knee and replaced with a prosthesis. The woman removes her fake leg when she places her foot in the footbath, and after Rose massages her calf and foot, the woman asks Rose to massage her missing leg as well. She can "still feel it down there," she says.

The woman knows that her request is "silly," but she insists three times in just a handful of words that she can still feel the leg as if it is there. A phantom limb, which can be the source of extreme pain, is not an uncommon claim among amputees. The muscle memory of the woman's leg remains even in the absence of the limb, which serves as a greater metaphor for memories within the novel. Little Dog's memories, and the memories of others that he shares in his stories, can't be ignored. His memories are like a flood that releases without his control, and they can't be avoided. For Little Dog, it seems that some memories will never be forgotten, much like the phantom limb of Rose's client.

In the nail salon, *sorry* is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely *apologizes*, bur insists, reminds: *I'm here, right here, beneath you.* It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. In the nail salon, one's definition of *sorry* is deranged into a new word entirely, one that's charged and reused as both power and defacement at once. Being sorry pals, being sorry even, or especially, when one has no fault, is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91-92

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Little Dog explains the nail salon where Rose works. This passage reflects the racism and American exceptionalism Little Dog and Rose are subjected to as immigrants, but it also underscores Vuong's primary argument that language can only be understood with an equal understanding of the greater social structure from which it comes. The word "*sorry*" as it is spoken in the nail salon is not the same as the word's dictionary definition. Many Asian immigrants work as manicurists in American nail salons, and in doing so, a unique American subculture is created. Thus, what the word "*sorry*" means within the walls of the nail salon does not translate in a broader sense.

In the nail salon, the word "*sorry*" is used by Asian manicurists to throw themselves at the feet of their (mostly white) clientele. "*Sorry*," one of the only English words spoken in the salon, is used to "pander" to clients and "lower" the manicurist, making the client feel "right, superior, and charitable." This ensures maximum tips, "Because the mouth must eat," Little Dog says, but it also perpetuates the racism and American exceptionalism that relegates Asian women to the nail salon in the first place. The women in the nail salons who speak the word "*sorry*" have nothing to apologize for, and this word keeps them, as immigrants and people of color, subordinate to their clientele.

❝ Afterward, lying next to me with his face turned away, he cried skillfully in the dark. The way boys do. The first time we fucked, we didn't fuck at all.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Trevor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which appears after Little Dog and Trevor's first sexual encounter, reflects Trevor's struggle with his sexuality and the traditional notions of masculinity that both Little Dog and Trevor are expected to embody. Little Dog claims that the first time he and Trevor have sex, they don't really have sex, because most of their sexual encounters are a form of modified sex the boys refer to as "fake fucking." While there technically isn't penetration involved in Little Dog and Trevor's sex, the intention is still the same, and Trevor is clearly struggling with what this says about his sexuality and his identity as a boy, and soon a man.

Afterward, Trevor turns his face away from Little Dog, which implies he doesn't want to look at him. To look at Little Dog is to remind Trevor of who and what he is, and he reacts with shame. Trevor even cries, which further suggests he is deeply troubled by his feelings for Little Dog, which clearly don't align with society's idea of an acceptable relationship. He cries "skillfully in the dark. The way boys do," because as a future man, he is not allowed to cry or show emotion of any kind. To do so is to be soft and feminine, or, as Trevor obviously fears, gay.

❝ "I can't. I just—I mean…" He spoke into the wall. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—"He paused, wiped his nose. "It's for you. Right?"

Related Characters: Trevor (speaker), Little Dog

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs during one of Little Dog and Trevor's sexual encounters, illustrates the narrow view of masculinity in 21st-centry American society and reflects the discrimination and hate Little Dog faces because of his sexuality. When Little Dog and Trevor engage in their modified sex known as "fake fucking," Trevor is always on top—a position he equates with masculinity and power—except for this one time. However, after about five seconds Trevor tells Little Dog to stop.

Trevor turns away from Little Dog and speaks to the wall, which further suggests he is ashamed and struggling with his sexuality. As long as Trevor is on top during sex, he can pretend he is still a man in the stereotypical and traditional sense. To be on bottom, however, it to make Trevor "feel like a girl. Like a bitch." He wipes his nose, which suggests he is near tears and deeply troubled by the implication that he is anything but masculine. Trevor won't be "a bitch"—he can't be "a bitch"—but he expects Little Dog to be. "It's for you. Right?" Trevor asks. Trevor is only comfortable in his sexual relationship with Little Dog if Trevor is able to feel like a traditional man, which leaves Little Dog completely emasculated and reinforces that to be a real man is to always be in power.

❝ "I don't like girls."

I didn't want to use the Vietnamese word for it—pê-đê—from the French pédé, short for pédéraste. Before the French occupation, our Vietnamese did not have name for queer bodies—because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source—and I didn't want to introduce this part of me using the epithet for criminals.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears when Little Dog tells Rose he is gay, and it is important because it reflects the discrimination and hate Little Dog faces as a member of the queer community. Rose speaks very little English, so, of course, Little Dog speaks to her in Vietnamese, and he must modify the way in which queer people are usually referred to in Vietnamese because the very language used to describe such people is rooted in hate and judgement. The Vietnamese word for queer, *pê-đê*, comes from the French *pédéraste*, which in English is pederast. The implication of the Vietnamese *pê-đê* is that to be queer is also to be a pederast, a particularly despicable sexual predator who has sex with young boys.

Little Dog refuses to describe himself in such a way because he won't align himself with such an offensive and false description. The association of queer bodies and criminals is evidence of society's broader hate and disgust of the queer community, and Little Dog implies that such hate is rooted in a Western influence. Prior to the colonization of Vietnam by the French, a separate word for queer bodies did not exist, and they were considered "fleshed" and human like everyone else. It is only after the arrival of white colonialists that the Vietnamese language began to reflect such hate, a general disgust that is generally seen in Little Dog's experience in America as well.

❝ "Tell me," you sat up, a concerned look on your face, "when did all this start? I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy. I know that. When?"

Related Characters: Ma/Rose (speaker), Little Dog

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, spoken by Rose, appears after Little Dog tells her he is gay, and it is significant because it further reflects the hate and discrimination faced by the queer community in 21st-century American society. After Little Dog comes out to Rose, she sits upright with "a concerned look on [her] face," an action which suggests she considers Little Dog's sexuality a problem, or something to fear and worry about. She responds as if he has an illness or disorder, which is to say she responds as if Little Dog's sexuality is wrong.

Rose goes on to say that she "gave birth to a healthy, normal boy," and this implies that to be gay is neither healthy nor normal, especially for a boy, who should be rough and tough and interested in girls. Rose's response to Little Dog's coming out implies that not only is he sick in some way, but also that he can no longer claim to be a "normal boy" and will forever be something else. Furthermore, Rose's response to Little Dog's sexuality—"when did all this start?"—suggests that to be queer is something transient that comes and goes, or a phase that Little Dog will grow out of. For Little Dog, being queer is part of his core identity, like his Vietnamese heritage, and he has always been this way.

❝ A few months before our talk at Dunkin' Donuts, a fourteen-year-old boy in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy's locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club and the boys, because that's who they were—sons, teenagers—looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which appears after Little Dog tells Rose that he is gay during their talk at Dunkin' Donuts, highlights the extreme hate the queer community is subjected to and the risk they take in merely existing within society. After Little Dog comes out to Rose, she is worried that his sexuality means he will start wearing a dress, which, she says, gets people killed. This passage here suggests a dress isn't needed to draw the negative attention of society—to be queer and alive is enough.

The 14-year-old boy in Vietnam who was burned with acid because of his sexuality suggests that being queer in Vietnam is nearly as dangerous as being queer in America, where queer men are killed in large numbers simply for dancing together in a public space. Little Dog's mention of real-life events in Vietnam and America highlights the fact that the hate Little Dog encounters in the novel is not just fiction, and it is happening in real time out in the world. The men and boys killed in the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando were all just like Little Dog—someone's son and friend, and just another human being trying to survive in a world that has largely rejected and condemned him.

❝ *I don't wanna*, he said. His panting. His shaking hair. The blur of it. *Please tell me I am not*, he said through the sound of his knuckles as he popped them like the word *But But But*. And you take a step back. *Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?*

Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck, not

A pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy. Trevor meateater but not

veal. *Never veal. Fuck that, never again* after his daddy told him the story when he was seven, at the table, veal roasted with rosemary. How they were made. How the difference between veal and beef is the children. The veal are children.

Related Characters: Little Dog, Trevor (speaker), Trevor's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Little Dog is flooded with a series of memories while writing his letter, and it is significant because it again underscores Trevor's struggle with his sexuality and further highlights the narrow view of masculinity in 21st-century American society and the hate and deprecation reserved for the queer community. Trevor can't admit, despite his sexual relationship with Little Dog that he is queer. "I don't wanna," Trevor says in reference to his sexuality. He "pants" and "shakes" as he begs Little Dog to tell him that he isn't queer, and he even cracks his knuckles and takes a step away, as if he is nervous for the answer and trying to distance himself from both it and Little Dog.

Trevor doesn't just ask Little Dog if he is queer, he asks if he is a "*faggot*," arguably the most offensive and derogatory name for a queer body in existence. Trevor can't be queer, he thus implies, because he is the epitome of masculinity—he is a "redneck," a "hunter," and he eats meat, as long as it isn't veal. Veal, the meat coming from a young calf, is tender and soft, and it offends Trevor's masculine sensibilities. Popular assumptions are that to be queer is also to be a "pansy," "fruit or fairy," which Trevor refuses to be. Trevor's struggles with his sexuality bring such ridiculous and offensive assumptions to the surface and prove that such closeminded stereotypes are categorically false.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ Trevor was into *The Shawshank Redemption* and Jolly Ranchers, Call of Duty and his one-eyed border collie, Mandy. Trevor who, after an asthma attack, said, hunched over and gasping, "I think I just deep-throated an invisible cock," and we both cracked up like it wasn't December and we weren't under an overpass waiting out the rain on the way home from the needle exchange. Trevor was a boy who had a name, who wanted to go to community college to study physical therapy. Trevor was alone in his room when he died, surrounded by posters of Led Zeppelin. Trevor was twenty-two. Trevor was.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Trevor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Trevor dies of an overdose of heroin and fentanyl, a moment that reflects the drug crisis of 21st-century American society and highlights the true cost of drug abuse and addiction. Little Dog describes Trevor as just an average young American—he likes movies and video games, eats candy, and loves his dog. Trevor could be anyone, and he is the face of the thousands of Americans who die each year from drug addiction. This quote drives home the fact that Trevor is dead and never coming back. Little Dog often speaks of Trevor in the present tense, even after his death; however, in this passage, he uses the phrase "Trevor was."

Trevor's joke under the overpass is certainly off-color, but it draws attention to the fact that Trevor and Little Dog are *under a bridge* in the middle of a winter storm, which illustrates just how bad Trevor's addiction is. The image of a homeless drug addict under a bridge is a popular trope in American society, and with it, Trevor has reached the height of his addiction. What's worse, Trevor and Little Dog are on their way back from a "needle exchange," a public service in which addicts can exchange dirty needles for clean syringes to decrease their chances of contracting a disease from used needles. Trevor had a future and people who cared about him, but his life was ruined by drug addiction.

One afternoon, while watching TV with Lan, we saw a herd of buffalo run, single file, off a cliff, a whole steaming row of them thundering off the mountain in Technicolor. "Why they die themselves like that?" she asked, mouth open. Like usual, I made something up on the spot: "They don't mean to, Grandma. They're just following their family. That's all. They don't know it's a cliff,"

"Maybe they should have a stop sign then."

Related Characters: Little Dog, Trevor, Lan, Kyle, Kevin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 179-180

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of the book, when Little Dog and Lan are watching television together, and it is significant because it introduces Little Dog's buffalo analogy, which serves as a metaphor for the drug epidemic that grips American society in the 21st century. Little Dog juxtaposes the image of hundreds of buffalo running full-bore off the edge of a cliff to certain death with the image of thousands of American succumbing to drug addiction after watching others, in some cases their parents and siblings, die from the very same addiction. In Little Dog's view, addicts are drawn to the edge of the metaphorical cliff in one long and dangerous line of follow the leader.

Lan and Little Dog watch the buffalo file off the cliff in "Technicolor," but Little Dog's real-life view of drug addiction is just as vivid. He loses five friends to drugs, including Trevor, and two brothers from his neighborhood, Kyle and Kevin, die within five years of each other. Lan is surprised that the buffalo willingly run off the cliff, but Little Dog insists they don't know they're going to die, they are just "following their family," following the herd. Lan thinks there should be stops signs in such cases, and Vuong's book serves as that stop sign. Through *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong warns that when it comes to drugs and the opioid crisis, many Americans are fast approaching the edge of the cliff.

I never did heroin because I'm chicken about needles. When I declined his offer to shoot it, Trevor, tightening the cell phone charger around his arm with his teeth, nodded toward my feet. "Looks like you dropped your tampon." Then he winked, smiled—and faded back into the dream he made of himself.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Trevor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, too, is one of Little Dog's memories of Trevor, and it is significant because it highlights Trevor's drug addiction, but it also reflects the narrow view of masculinity in 21st-century America. As Trevor sits shooting up heroin, he appears like a seasoned addict; yet, at this point, he is only a teenager. He is resourceful in his addiction—he uses a phone charger to tie off—and he injects himself in a matter of seconds, all while making a joke. This is an action Trevor has clearly done many times before, and this underscores how pervasive and accessible drugs are in American society.

Little Dog doesn't do heroin, not because he doesn't do drugs, but because he is afraid of needles, which Trevor sees as an occasion to insult Little Dog's masculinity and question his manhood. Real men, Trevor implies, aren't afraid to shoot heroin. "Looks like you dropped your tampon," he says, a crass comment that suggests Little Dog might as well be a woman if he is going to be so "chicken about needles." This rather limited view of masculinity implies that men can never be scared, and if they are, they forfeit their identity as true men. This passage reveals the narrowmindedness of such assumptions and suggests that healthy fear is evidence of being human, not feminine.

"Is it true though?" His swing kept creaking. "You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean," the swing stopped, "I think me . . . I'll be good in a few years, you know?"

I couldn't tell if by "really" he meant *very gay* or *truly gay*.

Related Characters: Little Dog, Trevor (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs near the end of *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, in one of Little Dog's final memories of Trevor, and it is important because it further reflects Trevor's struggle with his sexuality and what that means for his masculinity and identity as a man. Trevor asks Little Dog if he thinks he will be "really gay, like, forever" while swinging on the playground, which reflects how young they really are. Trevor and Little Dog are just teenagers, and while Little Dog seems to know who he is, Trevor is still trying to figure that out.

Trevor talks of his sexuality like it is some sort of phase he will outgrow in time. "I'll be good in a few years," he says. Not only does this imply Trevor isn't sure who he truly is, it also suggests he won't be "good" until after he outgrows his gay tendencies. Trevor's comment here is vaguely insulting; he'll be "good" soon enough, but Little Dog won't. Little Dog knows Trevor sees a difference between "*truly gay*"—someone who is genuinely queer and not just messing around or going through a phase—and "*very gay*"—a queer man who embodies all the negative tropes of an effeminate homosexual—and Trevor doesn't want to be either. Trevor's struggle demonstrates the connection between society's narrow view of masculinity and the general animosity with which the queer community is regarded.

> I'm not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck—the pieces floating, finally legible.

Related Characters: Little Dog (speaker), Ma/Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which appears near the end of *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*, sheds light on the unusual structure of Vuong's book. *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* is a letter from Little Dog to his mother, Rose, and it is comprised of what at first seems to be random memories and thoughts. Little Dog is a writer, and in his letter he attempts to explain to his mother what that means. When direct words fail him, he decides to show her, and the result is his letter, which often switches back and forth between poetry and prose.

Little Dog's description of his letter and the story within it as "a shipwreck" perfectly reflects the randomness of *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*. This "shipwreck" in turn is a reflection of Little Dog's thoughts and memories, which are often just as scattered and random. Little Dog maintains that there is much to be learned from his stories and experiences, and through his letter, the pieces of his life and history are "floating, finally legible." This act of recording experiences highlights the importance of writing and storytelling in Little Dog's life, and within the novel as well.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Little Dog begins again. "Dear Ma," he writes. Little Dog is writing a letter to his mother, Rose, to go back in time. He wants to go back to the time in Virginia, when Rose was shocked to see a taxidermy head of a deer hanging near the bathroom of a rest stop. She couldn't understand why anyone would want to hang a corpse on the wall. She thought it was like "death that won't finish." Little Dog is writing, he says, because he was always told never to begin a sentence with "*because*." But Little Dog isn't really trying to write a sentence; he is "trying to break free."

Little Dog begins again, which means he has made more than one attempt to write his letter, implying that his message to his mother is somewhat difficult to express. He wants to go back in time, an act which will rely on Little Dog and Rose's memories. Rose's surprise at seeing the mounted deer head—a common sight in American society and culture—implies that Rose is an immigrant and not well versed in American customs. Little Dog also draws attention to writing and the structure of sentences, a theme which is revisited throughout the novel.

During the fall in Michigan, thousands of **monarch butterflies** begin their seasonal migration. From September through November, butterflies from Canada and the United States fly to Mexico for the winter. During this time, butterflies are everywhere—on cars, buildings, and clotheslines. One night of cold is enough to kill an entire generation of monarchs, Little Dog writes, so their survival depends on the right "timing."

As Little Dog implies at the very least that his mother is an immigrant, his reference to the migrating butterflies has increased meaning. The butterflies must migrate to survive, and they must do it at a very specific time. This analogy implies that Little Dog's mother was also forced to migrate to the United States to save her own life.

When Little Dog was just five years old, he hid behind a doorway in the hall to prank Rose. "Boom!" he shouted, jumping out at her. She screamed, her "face raked and twisted," and grabbed at her chest. "I didn't know that the war was still inside you," Little Dog says to his mother, "that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes." In the third grade, Little Dog read a book called *Thunder Cake* by Patricia Polacco. His ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, Mrs. Callahan, helped him. She stood behind him, whispering the words into his ear.

Rose's reaction to Little Dog's harmless prank suggests that she is coping with some sort of posttraumatic stress related to surviving a war. From Little Dog's need for an ESL teacher, the reader can infer that Little Dog is an immigrant, too, since English is his second language. Readers can also infer that wherever Little Dog and Rose emigrated from was greatly affected by war.

The first time Rose hit Little Dog, he was just four years old. "A hand, a flash, a reckoning," he recalls. Another time, Little Dog tried to teach Rose to read like Mrs. Callahan taught him; however, this reversed their roles as mother and son, which were already strained, and Rose grew impatient. "I don't need to read," she said, slamming the book closed. There was also the time she hit him with the remote control, leaving a welt on his arm. Little Dog told his teacher he fell during tag.

Obviously, Rose frequently abuses Little Dog, since he has so many memories of her violence. Rose's illiteracy suggests she didn't have much, if any, education, and it is clearly a sore spot for her. Little Dog's ability to read and his attempts to teach her give him power over Rose, which adds even more stress to their difficult relationship.

When Rose was 46, she was struck by a sudden urge to color, so she went to Wal-Mart and bought crayons and coloring books. She colored countless pictures and hung them around the house. There was also the time, Little Dog remembers, when Rose threw a Lego box at his head, and his blood spotted the floor. While coloring a landscape, Rose asked Little Dog if he "ever made a scene" and put himself inside it. "How could I tell you what you were describing was writing?" Little Dog asks her. After Rose bandaged Little Dog's head, she apologized and took him to McDonald's. "You have to get bigger and stronger," she said as he ate his chicken nuggets.

Rose's urge to color and insert herself into "a scene" suggests she is trying to escape some trauma or stress. Little Dog again references writing, and he implies here that like Rose's coloring books, writing is an outlet that allows Little Dog to escape the trauma and stress of his own life. Rose's comment that Little Dog must get "bigger and stronger" speaks to American ideals of gender and masculinity—as a boy, Rose expects Little Dog to grow up and be a strong man.

Little Dog read Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* again yesterday and decided to write to Rose. "You who are still alive," Little Dog says. He remembers Saturdays growing up in Hartford. If there was enough money after paying the bills, Rose and Little Dog would dress up and go to the mall off the interstate. They would buy gourmet chocolates and walk around until closing and then go home emptyhanded. One morning, Little Dog looked out his window before the sunrise and saw a deer in the fog. There was a second deer nearby that looked almost like a shadow. He wishes Rose could color that scene. She could call it: "The History of Memory."

Roland Barthes was a French literary critic and theorist, and he wrote Mourning Diary *in the late 1970s to cope with the pain of losing his mother after her death. Rose, of course, is not dead, so Little Dog writes her a letter instead of putting his feelings into a diary as Barthes did. Rose and Little Dog clearly don't have very much money, since they only buy chocolates while shopping. Little Dog's reference to the deer again relates to memory—the second deer is almost like a memory of the first—and it also harkens to the mounted deer head at the novel's open.*

Once with a gallon of milk, Little Dog recounts, Rose struck him and milk spilled to the floor. Years ago at Six Flags, Rose rode the **Superman** rollercoaster with him, and then she threw up in a garbage can. "I forgot to say *Thank you*," Little Dog writes. Once in Goodwill, Rose tried on a dress for her birthday. "Do I look like a real American?" she asked. The dress was too fancy for her to have a reason to wear it. But, Little Dog says, there was "a *possibility* of use." Once, in the kitchen, Rose picked up a knife, shaking. "Get out. Get out," she said to Little Dog. He ran.

Rose clearly has the potential to seriously hurt Little Dog, and she even threatens him with a knife. Rose asks if she looks "like a real American," which again suggests that she is an immigrant, and since there is a "possibility of use," Little Dog implies that Rose has the potential herself to be a "real" American. Little Dog's recollections are scattered and often unrelated, which mirrors the random nature of memory.

Little Dog is 28 years old. He stands five feet, four inches tall, and he weighs 112 pounds. He is writing to Rose from a body that used to be hers. "Which is to say," Little Dog says, "I am writing as a son." He hopes to begin at "the end of the sentence," where there is "another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron." According to Little Dog, that is the part of the story that really matters.

Little Dog again draws attention to the power of writing and its ability to bring people together and express truth and build or maintain connections. Little Dog is hoping that his letter will bring him closer to his mother through a more personal "alphabet."

Little Dog was 13 when he told Rose to stop hitting him. "Stop, Ma. Quit it," he said. "Please." She said nothing and left to get eggs, but Little Dog knew she would never hit him again. Surviving **monarchs** pass messages to their children, Little Dog writes, and memory is "woven into their genes." He wonders when a war truly ends and asks Rose when the meaning of her name will not include what she left behind. "I'm not a monster," she once said to him, "I'm a mother." Little Dog reassured her and said she wasn't a monster. "But I lied," he says

The monarchs serve as a metaphor for memories and messages handed down between family members, and Rose's message of trauma and violence has been handed down to Little Dog. Little Dog again implies that Rose left behind considerable trauma in the form of a war, and even though Little Dog seems to believe this trauma is at least in part the cause of her abuse, he still finds it difficult to accept.

The truth is, Little Dog says, being a monster isn't so bad. The word comes from the Latin *monstrum* and was adapted by Old French. The word is "a hybrid signal," and can mean many things. Little Dog thinks about Rose's childhood in Vietnam and says that he once read that parents with PTSD have a greater tendency to hit their kids. At the Goodwill, when Rose tried on the dress, she asked Little Dog if it was fireproof. He lied again and said it was, and she bought it. The next day, when Rose was at work, he tried the dress on, trying to be more like her. At school, the kids called him "*freak*, *fairy*, *fag*," and those words, Little Dog points out, are "also iterations of *monster*."

This is the first time Little Dog mentions that Rose came from Vietnam specifically, which suggests she likely lived through the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Little Dog draws a parallel between past trauma and abuse, which explains Rose's frequent violence. The hybridity of the word "monster" reflects the hybridity of Rose and Little Dog as immigrants (they are steeped in their own Vietnamese culture and that of America). Since Little Dog tries on Rose's dress, readers can infer that he does not adhere to stereotypical assumptions of gender, and the derogatory names the other children call him suggest that he is not heterosexual—or, at least, that he doesn't appear to be.

Little Dog claims that he explained how he became a writer in an earlier draft of the letter, but he has since erased it. He decided how he became a writer doesn't matter; what matters is what he writes now. Everything he has done before has brought him to this page—to tell Rose "everything [she'll] never know." When Little Dog was small, he watched his grandma Lan sleep. Lan's skin was much darker than Rose's, and she seemed like a different person when she slept. Awake, she was scattered, a product of her schizophrenia, which was made much worse by the war. But sleeping, Little Dog says, Nan was silent.

Little Dog's identity as a writer harkens to the importance of language and storytelling in the novel, and writing this letter to his mother is clearly a pivotal moment in Little Dog's life. Little Dog has already said that Rose can't read, which is why she will "never know" what is written in the letter. Rose will likely won't read the letter, which makes it seem somewhat like a confession—a way for Little Dog to get things off his chest without his mother finding out. Little Dog's mention of Nan's skin color draws direct attention to race, and it is clear that Nan has suffered lasting trauma due to the war as well.

Lan was on the one to give Little Dog his name. She named herself and her daughter, Rose, after flowers; however, she named him after a dog. In Vietnam, the smallest children are often named after "despicable things." Evil spirits take healthy and beautiful children, and a threatening name keeps the spirits away. To love someone, Little Dog says, is to name them something terrible so they are left alone. The name becomes a "shield."

Little Dog's name suggests that he is small (he has already said that he is relatively short and scrawny) and requires protection, as his name operates as a "shield." This description is at odds with stereotypical notions of masculinity, which expect men to be big and strong. As Little Dog's name is "despicable," he likewise implies that he is "despicable" too.

According to Little Dog, trauma affects the body as well as the mind. Trauma hits the muscles and joints, and it is reflected in posture. Lan was practically bent in half, Little Dog says. Once, on the Fourth of July, Rose woke from a sleep when the neighbors let off some fireworks. She crawled to Little Dog and covered his mouth. "Shhh. If you scream," she said, "the mortars will know where we are." At times, Lan didn't even seem to notice sound, Little Dog remembers. They once heard distant gunshots in Hartford (not an unusual sound), and Rose dropped to the floor. "What?" Lan said. "It's only three shots."

Both Lan and Rose are coping with lasting trauma from the war, albeit in different ways. Rose is terribly affected by loud noises—she thinks fireworks are mortar fire, and she believes random distant bullets are headed for her—which reflects her early life in Vietnam during the war. Lan, on the other hand, is indifferent to loud noises. She is so used to bombings and mortar fire, that a few gunshots and explosions aren't enough to frighten her.

One of Little Dog's chores as a child was to pluck the grey hairs from Lan's head. "For this work," Little Dog says, "I was paid in stories." She told him stories of the war, of their Vietnamese culture and history, and of their family. She told him about Rose's father, an American serviceman she met in Saigon while wearing her purple dress. Living during the war, it was Lan's "body, her purple dress, that kept her alive," Little Dog writes.

For Little Dog, stories are like currency—something his grandmother can use to bribe him—which also underscores the importance of storytelling in the novel, especially in the preservation of cultural identity. Little Dog's mention of Lan's purple dress and "body" suggests that she worked as a prostitute in Vietnam, and this further reflects the hardships Lan faced during the war.

Little Dog remembers the school bus, on which no one ever sat next to him. The boys gave him a hard time and shoved him into the window glass. "Speak English," a boy named Kyle said. He slapped Little Dog and made him say his name, and when Little Dog told Rose about it later that night, she slapped him, too. "You have to find a way, Little Dog," she said. "You have to be a real boy and be strong." The next day when Little Dog left for school, she called him "**Superman**."

Little Dog clearly doesn't speak English very well, and Kyle immediately assumes a position of power over him because Little Dog is Vietnamese, which reflects the racism that plagues 21st-century American society. Little Dog faces abuse at both school and home, which reflects his own personal trauma. Rose's reference to "Superman" and her comment that Little Dog must be strong to be a "real boy" again illustrates stereotypical notions of gender and masculinity, which assume "real" men and boys must be tough, not soft.

Some say history is circular, Little Dog claims, and that is how Lan's stories moved. Sometimes, her stories would change slightly—colors, the number of air raids that day, if Rose was laughing or crying—bur for the most part, her stories stayed the same. "[T]he truth is," Little Dog says, "I don't know, Ma." He knows lots of "theories" that he writes and then deletes. "What's your theory," Little Dog asks Rose, "about anything?" Little Dog knows Rose will say she doesn't know any and that theories are for those with too much time on their hands.

Lan's ability to retell stories with few changes implies that while stories grow and evolve over time, their core message remains the same. This implies a permanence to memory and suggests that what is really important is never forgotten. Little Dog is clearly an educated man—he talks about literary theory and prominent theorist like Roland Barthes—but he still doesn't know exactly what he is trying to say in his letter. This struggle again implies that Little Dog's message is heavy and difficult to express.

Rose has more money than words, Little Dog says. She once saw a hummingbird and said: "Đẹp quá!" Little Dog said it was "beautiful" because that was the only word he had, but she didn't understand. He remembers when he went with Rose to the butcher to get an oxtail. She told the butcher in Vietnamese what she wanted, but he didn't understand. Rose tried speaking the bit of French she still remembered from childhood, so the butcher went in the back and returned with another man who spoke Spanish. Rose told Little Dog to tell them what she wanted, but he didn't know that oxtail was called oxtail. They bought only a loaf of bread and a jar of mayonnaise and left. Their words were wrong everywhere, Little Dog says, "even in their mouths."

Here, Little Dog illustrates the limitations of language and its ability to isolate others. This passage also reflects Roland Barthes's theory of structuralism. Barthes maintains that one cannot understand culture without a grasp of what gives that culture structure, such as the spoken language. Without language, neither Rose nor the butcher can be understood, and Little Dog, who doesn't know that oxtail is called oxtail, is also struggling. This language barrier leaves Rose and Little Dog feeling like outcasts in their new country.

When she was a girl, Rose watched her school burn in a napalm raid, and she never went back to school again. To speak Vietnamese, Little Dog says, "is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war." He remembers when Rose worked at the clock factory, and he had to call her boss to get her hours cut. She was too tired, Little Dog told him. Little Dog even called the number on the Victoria's Secret catalogue to order Rose's bras and underwear. "I don't know if you're happy, Ma," Little Dog writes. "I never asked."

This again speaks to the trauma Rose suffered during the war, and it also explains why Rose never learned to read. Rose speaks only partly Vietnamese, "but entirely in war," which again reflects how deeply one is affected by the trauma of war. It seeps into everything, Little Dog implies, including the language. Little Dog has spent much of his life communicating for Rose, and it is highly ironic that he never asked how she was feeling, which he now clearly regrets.

Little Dog and Rose didn't buy oxtail that day, Little Dog remembers, but they did buy mood rings. According to Barthes, two languages cancel each other out and become a third. The "hand," Little Dog says, is the "third language that animates where the tongue falters." The Vietnamese rarely say "*I love you*," and when they do, Little Dog says, they say it in English. For the Vietnamese, love is expressed in service, not words. That night with the mood rings, Lan and Rose kept asking Little Dog if they were happy. He told them they were, which, Little Dog says, made them happy.

Lan and Rose are happy because Little Dog says they are, not because they truly feel it, which again speaks to their lasting trauma. Barthes was a semiotician, which means he studied the ways in which signs and signals either substitute language or augment it. This theory is reflected in Little Dog's use of his hands to "animate where the tongue falters," and it is seen in the Vietnamese expression of love through service—a signal or sign.

Vietnam is beautiful country, Little Dog says, "depending on where you look." A woman, nearly 30, stands holding her daughter on a country road, when two soldiers with M-16s approach her. "A woman, a girl, a gun," Little Dog says. "This is an old story, one anyone can tell." It starts to rain. Vietnam is a beautiful country, Little Dog says again, "depending on who you are." An airplane flies overhead, and the soldier raises his M-16, his finger on the trigger.

Little Dog implies that while Vietnam is aesthetically beautiful, war and violence have made it ugly, especially for those who don't have the means to escape. Little Dog is obviously talking about his mother and grandmother here, but he makes their story seem cliché ("it is an old story, one anyone can tell"), which implies many young Vietnamese women had the very same experiences and share the same trauma.

A door opens, and a **macaque monkey** is walked into a room. The animal, having been fed vodka and morphine all day, stumbles a bit. On the dirt road, the woman stares at the soldier, and he pushes her back with his gun. The monkey is led under the table, and its head is guided into a hole cut in the middle. The monkey, squirming about, is tied to the table. The woman says in Vietnamese that her name is Lan. The word means "orchid" in Vietnamese, and she gave herself the name at 17 after leaving an arranged marriage.

Again, the structure of Little Dog's letter is somewhat random and scattered—as one's memories might be—and it resembles a sort of stream of consciousness. Here, Little Dog weaves together a story from the war that was presumably told to him by his grandmother and the Asian practice of consuming macaque brains as a delicacy.

In Southeast Asia, Little Dog says, **macaques** are the most hunted primate. In the room, a man will soon cut the macaque's skull open, and the men will eat the animal's brain, as it struggles below the table, dipped in alcohol and garlic. They believe, Little Dog says, that it will cure impotence. On the dirt road, stopped by the soldiers, Lan's bladder releases. The brain of a macaque, Little Dog says, "is the closest, of any mammal, to a human's."

Little Dog draws a direct parallel between the monkeys and humans, and the fact that the men eat the monkey's brains to cure impotence again underscores stereotypical assumptions of masculinity and virility. The release of Lan's bladder again underscores the trauma she is being subjected to—a soldier has a machine gun pointed at her, and she is obviously very afraid.

"No bang bang," Lan says to the soldiers. **Macaque monkeys** have introspective thoughts, Little Dog says, and they even doubt themselves. They can recall the past and are capable of problem solving. "In other words," Little Dog says, "macaques employ memory in order to survive." When the monkey's brain is gone, and the men eat the last of its memories, the monkey dies. The soldiers step back and allows Lan to pass the checkpoint. "[T]he year is 1968," Little Dog says, "the Year of the Monkey."

Lan isn't able to effectively communicate with the soldier, which again underscores the limitations of language and the importance of language in understanding the human culture of another. Little Dog draws a parallel between humans and macaque monkeys because of the monkeys' ability to remember and problem solve. This connection is further reflected in the year 1968—"the Year of the Monkey."

Little Dog wakes to the sound of a distressed animal. He sits up in bed and listens. He gets up and walks down the hall, at the end of which is a slightly opened door. There is light coming from the crack in the door, so Little Dog moves closer. He can see the old while man sitting in the chair, and Little Dog knows exactly where he is. He is nine years old and in Virginia, and the man is his grandfather, Paul. Paul and Lan met in Saigon in 1967, where he was stationed with the US Navy. They were married a year later, and throughout Little Dog's childhood, Paul and Lan's wedding picture hung on Paul's wall in Virginia.

Little Dog often hears the sound of a distressed animal throughout the novel, which implies Little Dog himself is distressed in some way. Paul's identity as a white man complicates Little Dog's own identity. Little Dog is part white and part Vietnamese, and he does not fit neatly into either category. At this point in the story, not much is known about Paul and Lan's marriage, except that they are no longer together. The wedding picture that hangs on Paul's wall throughout Little Dog's childhood implies that Paul deeply loves Lan, even if they are no longer married.

One day while plucking Lan's grey hairs, Lan told Little Dog that she worked as a prostitute during the war. She had to feed Rose, Lan said, and she had little choice. She had a windowless room she rented in Saigon where she took the men. "Shhhh," Lan said to Little Dog. "Don't tell your mom." Paul and Lan met in a bar and immediately fell in love. Two months later, they were together in their Saigon apartment during the Tet Offensive. Paul spent all night shielding Lan, with his 9mm pistol aimed at the door, as the city fell down around them.

This passage again underscores the importance of stories. Little Dog better understands Lan and Rose's history in Vietnam through Lan's stories. Lan is clearly ashamed she was forced into sex work to survive, and this further reflects her lasting trauma related to the war. The Tet Offensive was a major invasion of South Vietnam by the Việt Cộng and the North Vietnamese, in which 8,000 soldiers attacked over 100 South Vietnamese cities and towns, targeting both the military and civilians.

It is three in the morning as Little Dog crosses the room to Paul. Little Dog asks his grandfather if he is okay, and Paul says he was just thinking about the song Little Dog sang after dinner. "Ca trù," Little Dog says. "Do you remember it, Ma," Little Dog interrupts, "how Lan would sing it out of nowhere?" Little Dog remembers that Paul can speak Vietnamese and apologizes. Paul smiles and tells Little Dog that he is glad he is visiting.

Little Dog's interruption reminds the reader that Little Dog is writing to his mother, which can easily be overlooked during some of Little Dog's longer stories. Little Dog's interruption again draws direct attention to memories, which, in this case, are unlocked through the singing of a traditional Vietnamese song, another form of storytelling.

As a child, Little Dog could never understand why announcers on ESPN called Tiger Woods "black." Tiger's mother is Taiwanese, but Lan always thought he looked Puerto Rican. When Little Dog arrived in the United States with Rose and Lan in 1990, color was a pretty big deal. Lan, who was considered dark in Vietnam was now considered light, and Rose's skin was so light, she could nearly "pass" for white. Tiger Woods's father met his mother in Thailand when he was stationed there during Vietnam. They married in 1969 and moved to Brooklyn, but Tiger's father returned to Vietnam for another tour in 1970. Tiger's real name is Eldrick Woods, Little Dog says, and he is "a direct product of the war in Vietnam."

Like Tiger Woods, both Little Dog and his mother, Rose, are "direct product[s] of the war in Vietnam," which speaks to their unique hybridity. Both Rose and Little Dog are only partly Vietnamese, just as Tiger Woods is only partly Taiwanese. The fact that Tiger Woods looks Puerto Rican and Rose can "pass" for white implies that skin color can be a poor indicator of one's actual race. Little Dog's preoccupation with skin color reflects the racism that plagues both America and Vietnam.

Paul and Little Dog are in the garden harvesting basil for a pesto sauce. Back in the kitchen, Paul pours Little Dog a bowl of Raisin Bran and picks up a joint. Paul was diagnosed with cancer three years ago due to exposure to Agent Orange. He is in remission now, but he still smokes pot. Little Dog remembers when Rose came to his room, smoking a cigarette. "He's not your grandfather," Rose said, "Okay?" Rose's real father was just an "American john," and she never knew him. "Everything good is somewhere else, baby," Rose said to Little Dog, "I'm telling you. Everything." Paul looks to Little Dog now. "Hey," Paul says, "I'm not who I am. I mean…"

Agent Orange is a tactical herbicide sprayed by American forces over Vietnam during the war. The herbicide defoliated densely forested areas and killed crops that fed the enemy, but it is also a harmful toxin that has since caused cancer and numerous health problems in soldiers, civilians, and their children. Rose's real father was one of Lan's clients as a prostitute, not Paul. Paul's claim that he isn't who he is implies that one's identity is complicated and often at odds with outward impressions. Furthermore, Rose's comment that "everything good is somewhere else" again speaks to the lasting trauma of the war.

Little Dog remembers the first time Rose took him to church. They were the only "yellow" people there, but the song the congregation sang that day helped Little Dog to understand his mother. As the church sang "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," Rose put her head back and closed her eyes. "Where are you, Ba?" she yelled in Vietnamese. The church was so loud and full of singing and shouting to the lord that no one noticed Rose but Little Dog. In the church, Rose was able to express herself openly without judgement. The next day, Rose found a tape of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," and she listened to it over and over again as she practiced manicuring techniques on mannequin hands. The mannequin hands were "pink and beige," Little Dog says, "the only shades they came in."

It is clear that some of Rose's trauma is related to her not knowing the identity of her real father, which is again directly related to the war. Rose's father was just a random man Rose's mother slept with as a prostitute during the war, but not knowing his identity has left a mark on Rose. Rose's "pink and beige" mannequin hands reflect the racism that pervades 21st-century American society. As white is considered the default race in America, the mannequins reflect this, which disregards Little Dog and Rose's race as Asian, or "yellow."

In 1964, General Curtis LeMay of the U.S. Air Force said he was going to bomb the Vietnamese "back into the Stone Ages." So, Little Dog says, to destroy someone is "to set them back in time." In 1997, Tiger Woods won the Masters Tournament, and in 1998, Vietnam opened the country's first golf course. One of the holes, Little Dog claims, is an old bomb crater.

Little Dog is essentially setting himself and Rose "back in time" through his letter writing, which is to say that his letter has the power to destroy them—or, Vuong implies, bring them closer together. The bomb crater turned golf hole again points to the violence and destruction of the war, and it is further evidence of the trauma Rose and Lan suffered living through such destruction.

As Paul talks, Little Dog fights the urge to tell him everything. He wants to tell Paul that Rose, "his daughter who is not his daughter," was a half-white girl in Go Chang, who was called "ghost-girl" by everyone she knew. Lan was called "a traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy," and when Rose walked down the street, people threw buffalo feces at her "to make her *brown again*, as if to be born lighter was a wrong that could be reversed." Paul says that maybe Little Dog shouldn't call him "Grandpa" anymore, but Little Dog doesn't have another grandpa, so he says he prefers to continue. Paul agrees, and Little Dog looks to his cereal, which has become a soggy mess.

Rose is Paul's "daughter who is not his daughter" because he is not Rose's biological father, which means he isn't Little Dog's biological grandfather. Little Dog knows that his grandfather was a white American, and since Paul is a white American, he fills this void for Little Dog. Rose and Lan's treatment in Vietnam because of Lan's relationship with Paul and Rose's light skin suggests that discrimination and racism is just as prevalent in Vietnam as it is in America.

There is so much Little Dog wants to tell Rose, but what he wants to say is stuck behind a bunch of "syntax and semantics." Little Dog doesn't know exactly what he is trying to say. Sometimes he doesn't even know who he is. He feels more like a sound. "Can you hear me yet?" Little Dog asks. "Can you read me?" When Little Dog first starting writing, he couldn't stand how uncertain he was. He started every sentence "with *maybe* and *perhaps*," and he always wrote "*I think*" or "*I believe*." He wasn't sure about anything. Similarly, he isn't sure what to call Rose now. "White, Asian, orphan, American, mother?" Little Dog asks.

This passage reflects the importance of writing and language in Little Dog's life, but it also implies that language and writing are limited and can't fully express how Little Dog is feeling, which is why he is left feeling more like a sound—something indescribable and not related to language. Just as language—"syntax and semantics"—aren't able to capture Little Dog's feelings, language is limited in reflecting Rose's hybrid identity.

At times, Little Dog says, there are limited choices to choose from, like in an article he read from an 1894 printing of the El Paso *Daily Times*. A white man was arrested and accused of killing a Chinese man, but the judge let him go. According to Texas law, the murder of a human being was defined as the killing of a white man, an African American, or a Mexican. Since the Chinese man was none of those things, he wasn't considered "human."

This, too, reflects the racism of American society. As an Asian himself and an immigrant, Little Dog lives in a country that has not always considered his race "human." While modern laws have certainly changed, Vuong implies that such history has real and lasting effects on how race is viewed in the 21st century.

As a girl in Vietnam, Little Dog says, children would try to scrape of Rose's skin with a spoon. "Get the white off her," they said. "Get the white off her!" When Tiger Woods is asked to describe himself, he says he is "Cablinasian," because he is a combination of Chinese, Thai, Black, Dutch, and Native American. "To be or not to be. That is the question," Little Dog says. "A question, yes, but not a choice."

Rose's treatment again underscores the discrimination she faces because of race, and Little Dog's juxtaposition of Tiger Woods's race with Rose's story again reflects the unique hybridity of those who are products of the Vietnam War. For Rose, her skin color is a question of two different races, but how other people view and treat her isn't her choice.

Paul tells Little Dog about the time Paul visited them in Hartford, Connecticut. When Paul got there, he found Little Dog crying. Little Dog told Paul that the other kids "lived more," and Paul began to laugh. Little Dog was just five years old, Paul says. Later that night, Paul and Little Dog take Paul's dog for a walk, and a neighbor woman stops them to say hello. She comments that Paul has finally found someone to walk his dog. "Welcome. To. The. Neighbor. Hood," she says to Little Dog. "This is my grandson," Paul says to her. "Please remember that."

Little Dog's complaints that the other kids "lived more" again suggests that he is an outcast in American society because of his Vietnamese heritage, and this racism is further reflected in Paul's neighbor's assumption that Little Dog is the hired help because he is Asian. Paul's comment reinforces Little Dog's identity as Paul's grandson and as an American.

Little Dog is pulled into a dark space by two women, and until Rose screams, he has no idea who they are or where he is. He feels movement, and knows he must be in Rose's rusty Toyota. "He's gonna kill her, Ma," she says to Lan, talking about sister, Mai. Mai's boyfriend, Carl, has been known to beat her. The clock says 3:14, and Little Dog thinks that both his mother and his grandmother have gone insane. Rose speeds down the street and comes to a stop in front of a house. She gets out, ordering Little Dog and Lan to stay in the car.

This is obviously another one of Little Dog' memories from childhood. While little is known going into this story, it is clear that Little Dog is a very young boy and has been pulled from his bed in the middle of the night to go and save his aunt, who is being abused again by her boyfriend. This speaks to the repeated trauma Rose, Lan, and Mai are subjected to and implies that Little Dog's life isn't very stable living with his mother and grandmother because of this trauma.

"Come out, Carl," Rose screams in Vietnamese, banging on the door with the wood butt of a machete. "Come out, you fucker!" Suddenly, the door opens, and a man appears. He has a shotgun, and Little Dog and Lan begin to scream for Rose to get back in the car. The man advances and kicks the machete out of Rose's hand. Lan and Little Dog continue yelling, and Rose finally gets back into the car. Mai isn't there, she says, and neither is Carl. Lan tells Rose that Mai hasn't lived in the house for five years. "We go home," Lan says. "You need sleep, Rose."

Obviously, the man who answers the door isn't Carl, and Rose is lucky she isn't shot, especially since there is clearly a language barrier between her and the man. Rose's mistake in believing that Mai still lives in a house she moved out of over five years ago speaks to the extent of Rose's PTSD and mental illness. Rose needs much more than sleep—she needs to be reoriented to reality.

PART 2

"Memory is a choice. You said that once to me," Little Dog says to Rose, "with your back to me, the way a god would say it." If Rose would turn around, Little Dog says, she would see her son lying under a tree with a boy, both their faces smeared with blood. The taller boy, not Rose's son, is bleeding, and they are clapping and singing. It is November, and the wind is turning colder. The cut over the tall boy's eye opens again and bleeds, and Rose's son tries to forget. If Rose were god, she would tell them not to clap. "You would tell them that the most useful thing one can do with empty hands is hold on," Little Dog writes to Rose. "But you are not a god."

While it is not explicitly stated, Little Dog implies here that he is gay (he lays with a boy, and both their faces are bloody, as if they have been in close contact), and he further suggests Rose would probably know this if she turned around and really paid attention to him. Why the taller boy is bleeding is never revealed, but it is implied that there was some sort of accident, which the boys are laughing off when they should be holding on instead.

Rose will never meet the boy under the tree with Little Dog. Sometimes at night, Little Dog says, it feels as if a bullet is stuck deep inside him. It seems like the bullet has always been there, like it was the bullet, not Little Dog, which Rose carried in her womb. Little Dog asks the boy, Trevor, to tell him a secret—any secret, as long as it is "normal." Trevor agrees and begins talking. "Ma," Little Dog says. "You once told me that memory is a choice. But if you were a god, you'd know it's a flood."

Little Dog's reference to memory as "a flood" suggests memory is something uncontrollable that simply washes over without warning or reprieve. Little Dog's desire for Trevor to tell him a "normal" secret implies that they have many secrets that aren't considered "normal" by society's standards, which again hints at Little Dog's sexuality and the discrimination he faces as a member of the queer community.

As Rose's son, Little Dog knows about both work and loss. Rose's hands are "hideous," dry and wrecked after years of working as a manicurist. The nail salon is more than just a place of beauty; it is a place where children are raised, like Little Dog's cousin, who grew up with asthma from the chemicals and fumes. The nail salon is also a kitchen, where the smell of cooking noodles lingers with bleach and industrial cleaner. Manicurists spend hours at their desks, and when they don't have clients, they pour over English workbooks from ESL classes that take 25% of their wages. Little Dog both hates and loves Rose's mangled hands "for what they can never be."

Rose's "hideous" hands are proof of what she "can never be"—a white American. Asian immigrants often work as manicurists in American salons, and it has created an entire culture of new Americans. The nail salon is also proof of how hard Rose and other immigrants must work—their children included, who must practically live in salons and forfeit their health—to be Americans, which comes so easily to their white customers.

It is a Sunday, and Little Dog is 10 years old. It is Rose's job to open the nail salon on the weekends, and, as usual, Little Dog goes with her. He flips the sign to "*Open*," and a client, an older woman about 70 years old, limps into the salon. She asks for a pedicure, and Rose motions her to the pedicure chair and begins to fill the jetted tub with warm water and different solutions. When the tub is filled, Rose motions for the woman to put her feet in, but the woman hesitates. Then, the woman reaches down and, rolling up her pant leg, removes her leg from below the knee. It is a prosthesis, Little Dog realizes, as she places her other leg and foot into the water.

Many of Little Dog's memories are told in the present tense, as this memory is here, which reflects Little Dog's description of memory as a "flood" that washes over him uncontrollably. For Little Dog, his memories are frequent and vivid, and it is as if they are happening in real time. This flood not only allows Little Dog to tell his story, it also underscores the power of memory in the novel, which, Vuong argues, cannot be ignored.

Just as Rose finishes massaging the client's calf, the woman motions to the other side, to her missing leg. "Would you mind," she says. "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can." Rose says nothing and begins massaging the woman's missing leg. Little Dog watches as the "muscle memory" of Rose's arms work the woman's imaginary leg, her movements outlining what isn't there. Rose dries the woman's foot, and when she goes to leave, she hands Rose a hundred dollar bill. "The lord keep you," the woman says. Rose takes the money and puts it in her bra.

The interaction between Rose and the client reveals Rose as a gentle and caring woman, but it also serves as a metaphor for the power of memory. Rose's "muscle memory" after years of pedicures goes through the motions even in the absence of the woman's leg, and the woman's phantom leg sensation implies that memories, especially important ones, are never really forgotten.

Later that night, Rose lays on the living room floor, and Little Dog massages her back. He takes a quarter, dips it in Vicks VapoRub, and pulls it firmly down Rose's sore muscles. Little Dog thinks of Barthes again. "*A writer is someone who play with the body of his mother*," Barthes says, "*in order to glorify it, to embellish it*." Little Dog looks to Rose's spine and thinks it resembles "a row of ellipses no silence translates." He wishes Barthes was right, but to Little Dog, writing about Rose is to "mar" her. "I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once," Little Dog says.

Here, Little Dog quotes Roland Barthes's Mourning Diary, *an examination of and tribute to his mother after her death. Little Dog's repeated references to Barthes reflects the importance of language and writing in the novel, as does the comparison of Rose's spine to an "ellipses"; however, Little Dog's claim that his attempts to write about Rose is to "mar" her again implies that the power of language is limited.*

The summer Little Dog is 14, he gets his first job working at a tobacco farm outside of Hartford. He knows that Rose won't let him ride his bike all the way there, so he lies and tells her that he is working at the church gardens in town. The pay is nine dollars an hour, and since he is too young to legally work, he is paid in cash. It is 2003. Bush has declared war on Iraq, and the Black Eyed Peas are on the radio. Tiger Woods has just become the PGA Player of the Year for the fifth year in a row, and Steve Jobs is still alive. Rose's nightmares are getting worse, and Little Dog often finds her sitting naked at the kitchen table in the middle of the night talking about "a secret bunker."

Again, Rose is very clearly suffering from posttraumatic stress and likely other mental illnesses. She is delusional, and her reference to "a secret bunker" suggests Rose still thinks she is in Vietnam, even though she has been in Hartford for over 10 years. Little Dog is clearly affected by Rose's trauma and illness. As he looks back on 2003, over 15 years ago, Little Dog remembers war, popular culture, and Rose's mental illness.

Little Dog gets up at 6:00 a.m. six days a week and rides his bike to the tobacco farm. Most of the workers there are illegal immigrants from Mexico, and nearly everyone speaks Spanish. The men sleep in camping trailers hidden from the road, just beyond the tree line, and when the work is over, they move to the next farm. The barn is empty now, but by September, it will be full of tobacco. Mr. Buford pulls up in his green Bronco and gives the workers a ride to the fields. When Little Dog jumps out of the Bronco, he sees a group of men working about 100 yards ahead. They are the "cut team," and it is their job to cut the tobacco down. Little Dog is part of the "spear crew," and he must pick up what the first crew cuts down.

Little Dog's job on the tobacco farm reflects the discrimination faced by immigrants—legal or not—in American society. Jobs that are available to immigrants often involve hard work (like a farmhand or manicurist) and offer little pay. The farmhands sleep in camping trailers hidden away, making them easier to ignore, and they go long periods of time without seeing their families. As many immigrants in America are also people of color, this treatment is closely connected to the racism that plagues society.

The first day on the job, Little Dog turns down a pair of gloves when they are offered to him, and his hands turn brown and sticky with sap and are full of splinters and cuts. The work is hard and tedious, but Little Dog enjoys it, and the men are pleasant. Little Dog doesn't speak Spanish, and they don't speak English, but Little Dog learns to speak to the other farm workers "with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, [and] hesitations."

Little Dog's gestures reflect Roland Barthes's work in semiotics, which explores the use of gestures and signs as a form of communication. Here, there is a language barrier between Little Dog and the men, which Little Dog bridges with gestures and symbols, and this again underscores the inherent limitations of language.

"*Sorry*," Little Dog says, is the most common English word said at the nail salon. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the manicurists say. "I'm so, so sorry." They say "sorry" even when they haven't done anything wrong. The word is a "tool," Little Dog says, and if repeated enough, it "becomes currency." To say "sorry" in the nail salon isn't to apologize; it is to remind clients that they are "right, superior, and charitable." In the nail salon, "sorry" is a completely different word, just as "Lo siento" (I'm sorry in Spanish) is in the tobacco field.

Little Dog implies that "I'm sorry" is the only English phrase many of the Asian manicurists speak. "I'm sorry" puts the customer, who is often white, in a position of authority over the Asian manicurists, further reflecting the racism and discrimination present in American society. This also reflects Barthes's theory of structural linguistics—the word "sorry" cannot be understood in this context without understanding the unique social structure of the nail salon.

At the Connecticut tobacco farm, "Lo siento" is the most commonly spoken Spanish word. The workers say "Lo siento" to Buford when they run into him in the field, and they say it to each other at the start of the day instead of "Good morning." When Little Dog is forced to miss work because Lan has a schizophrenic attack and tries to burn her clothes in the oven, Little Dog calls Mr. Buford and says "Lo siento." Little Dog thinks of the men he works with. One has almost saved enough money to buy his mother a house in Guadalajara, and one is trying to send his daughter to dental school in Mexico City. Another is paying for his sick mother's surgery. For these men, "Lo siento" keeps them working.

Just like "I'm sorry" in the nail salon, "Lo siento" places Buford, a white landowner, in a position of authority over his migrant workers, most of who are people of color. "Lo siento" again reflects Barthes's view of structuralism, as the phrase cannot be understood without knowledge of the unique social structure in which it exists. Lan's schizophrenic attack again illustrates the lasting effects of war and trauma. Lan's schizophrenia was made worse during the war, and she is still affected years later.

At the end of the work day, as Little Dog watches the farmhands return to their trailers, he wants to say, "Lo siento." Little Dog is sorry they never see their families, and he is sorry that some of them will never make it back to Mexico or South America. Little Dog wants to say "I'm sorry," but instead he says nothing. For Little Dog, the word "sorry" has become "something else." This is why, when Trevor first introduces himself in the tobacco field, Little Dog says, "Sorry."

Again, the word "sorry" reflects Roland Barthes's theory of structuralism. Little Dog's "Lo siento" means something else entirely than the way the farmhands use the same phrase, and this meaning can only be understood by grasping the social structure from which the word comes, in this case, from Little Dog.

The day after meeting Trevor for the first time, Little Dog runs into him in the barn. It is a cool day, and the air smells of cut tobacco. Little Dog stands by his bike, and Trevor drinks a sports drink. Trevor is "boyish" looking, but there is something pained in his expression, and his lips are sealed around the bottle in a "flushed, feminine pout." The day before, Trevor had watched Little Dog work in the field. Usually, no one ever notices Little Dog. "I who was taught, by you, [Rose]," Little Dog says, "to be invisible in order to be safe." In grade school, Little Dog was once sent to time-out for 15 minutes, where he sat forgotten for two hours.

Trevor is described later in the book as the epitome of masculinity, but here Little Dog describes him nearly feminine terms. His face is "boyish," and his lips are rosy and womanly. As an immigrant and a person of color, Rose has always taught Little Dog not to draw attention to himself, and he is thus easily ignored. Trevor notices him anyway, which implies Trevor is drawn to Little Dog for a specific reason and is likely attracted to him in a romantic or sexual way.

Little Dog and Trevor spend hours talking in the barn, until the late summer sun begins to set. Trevor tells Little Dog that the tobacco they are harvesting is headed to Africa and East Asia, where people still smoke. Trevor claims the crops are poor and have few seasons left before they stop growing all together. Trevor is silent, and after a moment, he tells Little Dog that he hates his father. Little Dog is quiet and then says he hates his father, too.

Trevor and his father clearly do not have a good relationship, and since Trevor draws attention to this out of the blue, this suggests that Trevor is deeply bothered by his poor relationship with his father and feels close enough to Little Dog to share his feelings with him.

"The boy," Little Dog says, is six years old and is wearing **Superman** underwear. "You know this story," Little Dog says to Rose. The boy is crying, but his cries are beginning to die down. His mother has locked him in the basement for wetting the bed again, even though he begged her not to. Now, he stands in the basement, a Superman near his crotch stained brown and urine wet between his toes. The boy closes his eyes and stops crying.

Little Dog is "the boy," which is how Rose knows the story he is telling. Little Dog does not admit to being "the boy," and this implies that he is deeply affected by Rose's abuse. Little Dog's Superman underwear again symbolize society's expectations of masculinity. Even as a small child, Little Dog is expected to be a "real" boy, which is to be big and strong and not wet his pants. When Little Dog fails to be Superman, Rose abuses him.

Sitting on top of a tool shed with Trevor, Little Dog feels the cool breeze and watches the late summer sun go down. They are done working for the day, but Little Dog is too tired to start the bike ride home. They sit talking, and Trevor talks about guns and dropping out of school. He thinks the Colt factory might be hiring again, since it has been months since the last mass shooting. Trevor talks about his father and his drinking, about video games, and cartoons, and Little Dog talks about Rose and her nightmares.

Trevor is described here in terms of stereotypical masculinity. He talks about guns, which connotes violence, and his desire to drop out of school makes him appear tough and macho. Trevor refers to current events and talks about his likes and dislikes—typical get-to-know-you conversation—but Little Dog talks about Rose and her trauma, which speaks to the effect Rose's trauma has on Little Dog's life, too.

"Cleopatra," Trevor says after a moment of silence. Little Dog is confused. Cleopatra, Trevor says, watched the same sunset. Everyone who has ever lived, has lived under the same sun, Trevor explains, so Cleopatra watched the same sunset. Trevor says he sometimes wishes he could just run away forever, and Little Dog says it must suck to be the sun. The sun can't see itself, Little Dog explains, and it doesn't know if it is round or square, ugly or beautiful. "Like you can only see what you do to the earth, the colors and stuff, but not who you are," Little Dog says. Trevor says he thinks it would suck to be the sun because it is on fire, and he is going to put it out, Trevor says, exposing his penis and urinating off the shed.

Trevor and Little Dog's interaction here is full of sexual tension, which seems to culminate when Trevor exposes his penis. The boys are clearly opening up to each other and talking about their deepest thoughts and desires. Trevor is telling Little Dog, albeit in a veiled way, that he is deeply unhappy in life and wants to hide, and Little Dog admits to Trevor that he isn't sure who he is and doesn't believe he is beautiful. Little Dog sees himself as society sees him—as a queer person of color—and he isn't able to see that is what also makes him beautiful.

The boy's mother comes home after working late at the clock factory. Usually, the boy picks up his toys before his mother gets home; however, today he has lost track of times playing with his toy soldiers, and the little men are scattered all over the floor. When she opens the door, he knows what is coming, and upon seeing the toys, she backhands him several times. The boy's grandmother runs in and shields him from his mother's blows. She eventually stops and walks away.

Again, this is obviously one of Little Dog's memories of Rose's abuse, the worst of which Little Dog seems not to want to own and refers to himself only as "the boy." The toy soldiers, which represent war and death, are symbolic of Rose's trauma, which Little Dog implies is at the root of Rose's abusive treatment of him.

After the day on the roof of the shed, Little Dog and Trevor drive around in Trevor's truck. As he drives, Trevor cuts a cigarillo lengthwise with a box cutter and empties out the tobacco and tells Little Dog to hand him two plastic bags from the glovebox. Little Dog reaches in and grabs the bags—one filled with marijuana, the other with cocaine—and hands them to Trevor, who fills the cigarillo with marijuana and sprinkles it with cocaine. He licks the cigarillo to seal it and lights it. They pass the cigarillo back and forth until Little Dog feels his head disconnect and float away. They talk for hours in the truck but somehow end up in the barn again.

Trevor's cocaine-laced marijuana blunt reflects the pervasiveness of drugs in 21st-century American society. Trevor doesn't just smoke pot, he smokes pot and *cocaine, and he doesn't just smoke a joint, he smokes a blunt, which, by comparison, requires considerably more marijuana. Drugs are readily available and accessible to Trevor and Little Dog, and they casually consume large amounts of them.*

"Don't be weird," Trevor says to Little Dog. Trevor picks up a WWII army helmet and puts it on. Little Dog is struck by the "impossibly American" image of Trevor in the army helmet and thinks that he couldn't have invented a more perfect symbol. Little Dog stares at Trevor and studies him, intensely and obviously. "Don't be weird," Trevor says again, snapping Little Dog out of his near-trance. Little Dog promises he wasn't staring, and Trevor checks to see if the radio is working. The sound of Patriots football fills the barn.

Trevor's "impossibly American" image in the WWII helmet paired with the sound of Patriots football only serves to make Little Dog feel more like an outsider because of his Vietnamese identity. Trevor's plea for Little Dog not to "be weird" is vague, and it is unclear whether Trevor is telling Little Dog not to be Vietnamese or not to be queer.


Little Dog knows very little about football, but Trevor tries to explain the rules. As the Patriots score the winning touchdown and Trevor celebrates, Little Dog moves closer to him, quietly saying Trevor's name. Little Dog tastes the salt and sweat on Trevor's cheek, and Trevor softly moans (or maybe Little Dog imagines this), so he continues, licking the length of Trevor's body. Little Dog can hear a heavy thud as the army helmet falls from Trevor's head, and in the background, the crowd goes wild at the Patriots game.

The WWII helmet and the Patriots football game are also powerful symbols of masculinity, as they both connote strength and violence; however, the sound of the helmet hitting the ground after falling from Trevor's head in a moment of sexual pleasure suggests Trevor is shedding this image of masculinity, even if just for a moment.

In a bathroom with green walls, the boy's grandmother gently rolls a warm boiled egg over the boy's welted cheek. The boy's mother has just struck him in the face with a ceramic teapot, and the grandmother swears the egg will heal all his bruises. The boy quietly thanks the grandmother, and she promises he will be fine. She then removes the egg from his face and tells him to eat it. His bruises, she says, are inside the egg now. If he eats the egg, the bruises won't hurt anymore.

Again, "the boy" in this memory is Little Dog, and in eating the egg, he metaphorically eats the pain his mother's abuse has caused him; however, Little Dog suggests that eating the egg did not stop his pain, as it has been several years and he is still affected by the pain of Rose's abuse.


Little Dog works on the tobacco farm for two more seasons, but he continues to see Trevor all year long. One October day—October 16, a Thursday, to be exact—Little Dog discovers for the first time that he is beautiful. He remembers the day perfectly ("how can you forget anything about the day you first found yourself beautiful?" Little Dog asks), and even Rose is smiling and happy. After taking a shower, instead of drying off and dressing immediately, Little Dog stands naked in front of a full-length mirror and waits for the steam to clear. Staring at his body, Little Dog is struck with the beauty of his body, and he is unable to pull his eyes away.

Trevor and Little Dog continue seeing each all year long because their relationship is more than just a phase or one of convenience. Little Dog and Trevor go out of their way to see each other, which speaks to their strong feelings. Little Dog is able to see himself as beautiful because he sees himself for the first time through Trevor's eyes. Little Dog sees himself as Trevor sees him, and, for the first time, he appreciates his worth and beauty. This memory is important to Little Dog, thus he remembers the exact date.

Trevor lives with his father in a trailer behind the interstate. In his room, Trevor turns up the stereo. A song by 50 Cent blares from the speakers, and Trevor asks Little Dog if he has heard the new song before. Little Dog has, but he lies and says he hasn't, giving Trevor a little power and knowledge over him. Trevor walks back and forth, singing along with the lyrics, and Little Dog looks around the room. Movie posters hang from the walls, and the desk is littered with receipts and various garbage, as well as scattered marijuana and fentanyl patches. In Trevor's bed together, Little Dog can again taste the salt and sweat of Trevor's body. Trevor, shaking, tells Little Dog to close his eyes—he doesn't want Little Dog to see him. Little Dog closes his eyes, but he remembers that Trevor is white and he is not.

Trevor and Little Dog's interaction mimics traditional gender roles. Trevor is the masculine one, and he sings aggressive rap songs and establishes power over Little Dog. Little Dog's role in this respect is more reserved and feminine—the opposite of how he is supposed to act according to society. However, Trevor's request that Little Dog close his eyes while they are intimate suggests Trevor is only comfortable in their relationship if he plays a masculine role and Little Dog plays a submissive, stereotypically feminine role. This passage again reflects the pervasiveness of drugs, which are quite literally all over Trevor's room.

It is impossible to tell the story of Trevor, Little Dog tells Rose, without talking about drugs. Little Dog can't tell the story without the "Oxy and coke," and he can't tell the story without talking about the rusted red Chevy truck that Trevor's grandfather, Buford, gave to his father. Little Dog remembers Trevor speeding along in the Chevy, a fentanyl patch on his arm. They have been smoking pot and snorting coke, and they laugh as Trevor loses control of the truck and smashes it into a large, dead oak.

"Oxy," or Oxycodone, an opioid painkiller, and "coke," or cocaine, are obvious references to drugs. Trevor is also wearing a fentanyl patch, another opioid painkiller that transmits medication via a transdermal route and is much stronger than oral opioids. Little Dog and Trevor have access to all these drugs, which, along with Trevor's car accident, speaks to the dangers of drug abuse.

The first time Trevor and Little Dog have sex, they don't really have sex at all. Little Dog tells Rose that he only has the courage to tell her all this because he knows she will probably never read the letter. He remembers a painting of a bowl of peaches hanging on the wall in Trevor's trailer. It is a cheap picture, something mass-produced and sold at the dollar store, but Little Dog is drawn to it. The painting isn't really a painting at all, but a computer print made to look like a painting. It is "a fake. A fraud." Which is why Little Dog loves it. Under the covers, Trevor slips his penis between Little Dog's legs, and Little Dog spits in his palm, taking Trevor in his hand. They do not talk, and afterward, Trevor lays with his back to Little Dog, crying "skillfully in the dark."

Little Dog is drawn to the cheap painting because he, too, feels like a "fake" or "fraud" in respect to ideals of masculinity and Americanism. Popular assumptions of masculinity say Little Dog must be strong and macho to be a "real" man, just as popular assumptions dictate that to be American is to also be white. Little Dog is neither masculine nor American in this sense, so he is drawn to the impostor painting. In this moment, Trevor, too, is at odds with traditional notions of masculinity. He hides his tears in the dark because he buys into the idea that men aren't supposed to cry, and he cries because he fears his sexuality means he isn't a "real" man.

The boy's first memory of his parents is in their Hartford kitchen. The blood runs from his mother's nose as red as *Sesame Street*'s Elmo, and his grandmother runs into the room, scooping him up into her arms. The grandmother runs out the door, screaming in Vietnamese. "He's killing my girl! God, god! He's killing her." The neighbors run out and pull his father from his mother, and soon the ambulance and police arrive. The police officers run in with their guns drawn, and the father, used to living in Vietnam, waves a bloody $20 bill. The officers tackle him, the money falling to the floor, and force him into the back of the police car. When no one is looking, a neighbor girl picks up the bloody money and leaves.

Again, "the boy" in this scenario is Little Dog, and his father is obviously an abusive man, too. That Rose's blood is described as being the color of Elmo reflects how young and innocent Little Dog is, and the fact that this is his first concrete memory of his parents speaks to how bad his father's abuse is. This abuse undoubtedly compounds Rose's trauma and stress, and it is yet another thing that she must live through and survive. This is one of Little Dog's only *memories of his father, which complicates Vuong's argument of the power of memory and suggests memory can sometimes fail in the presence of trauma.*

In his backyard, Trevor shoots at old paint cans with a .32 Winchester. "[T]o be an American boy, and then an American boy with a gun," Little Dog interrupts, "is to move from one end of a cage to another." Little Dog thinks about a hunting story Buford told him at the farm. In Montana, Buford came across a bull moose caught in a trap. The buck saw Buford and charged at him, ripping his leg off in the trap. It ran at him with three legs, cutting into the bush at the last minute. Buford was lucky, he said. Moose are dangerous, even with three legs. Now, Trevor and Little Dog sit, passing a joint laced with Oxy, on the bench in the backyard. The back of the bench has been blown off from years of shooting and appears much like four legs without a body.

Here, Little Dog implies that traditional notions of American masculinity—a macho man with a gun—are restrictive and confining, and that by embodying such masculine ideals, Trevor is reduced to an animal who paces "from one end of a cage to another." The bull moose serves as a metaphor for this idea. In this case, Little Dog is the moose, and he would rather rip his leg off and run than adhere to such a narrow understanding of manhood.

About a week after Little Dog and Trevor's first sexual experience, they do it again. This time, Trevor grabs a fistful of Little Dog's hair and yanks his head back forcefully. Little Dog is instantly excited by the violent action, and he tells Trevor to keep going. Little Dog never thought pain and violence would be part of sex. He wonders what an animal that gives itself up to the hunter is called: "A martyr? A weakling?" No, Little Dog decides, it is simply an animal who has found "agency to stop." It is like a period at the end of a sentence; it allows one to stop with the intention of continuing. Little Dog has learned, he tells Rose in his letter, that submission can be powerful, too. "Fuck. Me. Up," he says to Trevor. By now, violence is really all Little Dog knows of love.

Violence is all Little Dog knows of love because he watched his father beat and nearly kill his mother, and Little Dog's mother frequently abuses him, too. Thus, it seems to Little Dog that violence is a natural part of sex as well. Little Dog isn't giving up by submitting to Trevor—he has just momentarily stopped resisting. In this moment, Trevor freely chooses to be submissive, and there is power to be found in making that decision.

Trevor and Little Dog begin to refer to their modified sex as "fake fucking," and one day, Trevor asks Little Dog to be on top, like Trevor always is. They snuggle into the bed, and just as Little Dog slips his penis between Trevor's legs, Trevor stops him. "I can't. I just—I mean…" Trevor stammers. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—," Trevor stops. "It's for you," he says to Little Dog. "Right?" Little Dog pulls the covers up, and Trevor goes back to playing his video game. Little Dog watches the television screen as a little red Mario falls from a platform. "This was also called dying," Little Dog writes.

Little Dog is clearly mortified by Trevor's comment, since he feels like he is dying. Trevor equates being on top during "fake fucking" with a masculine role; therefore, whoever is on bottom fulfills the submissive, or female, role. Trevor can't bear to play the submissive, female role and must always be masculine, otherwise he isn't comfortable in their relationship. Trevor says the bottom isn't for him because he is not a "girl" or a "bitch," but in saying this he implies that Little Dog is.

As a child, Little Dog once ran away from home, he says. He didn't know what to do or where to go, so he packed a bag of Cheerios, an extra pair of socks, and two *Goosebumps* paperbacks and went to the park by the school. There, he climbed a huge maple tree and sat. Suddenly, he heard footsteps on the leaves below, and then he heard Lan's voice. "Little Dog," Lan said into the darkness. "Your mom, [Rose]. She not normal okay? She pain. She hurt. But she want you, she need us. […] She love you, Little Dog, But she sick. Sick like me. In the brains."

This short memory underscores the importance of writing and storytelling in the novel, as Little Dog packs only books along with food and clothing as if the stories will sustain him, but it also lends insight into Rose's abusive treatment of Little Dog. Lan suggests that in addition to Rose's PTSD, she is also schizophrenic, and at times her illness can turn violent against Little Dog.

Little Dog asks Rose if she thinks happiness and sadness can combine to create one feeling. Like "a deep purple feeling," Little Dog explains, "not good, not bad, but remarkable simply because you didn't have to live on one side or the other?" It is 7:00 in the evening on Thanksgiving Day, and Little Dog and Trevor are riding their bikes down Main Street. Trevor's father is back at their trailer eating TV dinners and drinking whiskey. The boys decide they are hungry, so they go to a gas station, where they buy two frozen egg-and-cheese sandwiches. They sit across the street, eating their sandwiches, and listen as a man calls some neighborhood kids in for the night. The day is "a purple day," Little Dog says. It isn't good, and it isn't bad, just something in between.

Little Dog's special definition of "purple" again reflects Barthes's theory of structural linguistics. Little Dog's meaning of "purple" cannot be understood without first understanding Little Dog. The "purple" feeling Little Dog describes here is similar to how he describes race for him and Rose. They aren't "yellow" and they aren't white, but somewhere in between, and it is remarkable because they don't live exclusively on either side. The man calling his kids in for the night, and likely Thanksgiving dinner, reminds Trevor and Little Dog what they are missing—a stable family.

There aren't many second chances in life, Little Dog says. He opens his eyes and can hear Chopin, the only music Rose listens to, coming from somewhere in the house. Little Dog gets up and goes to the living room, but the record player is silent. He goes to the kitchen and finds Rose's small radio—the one she bought from Goodwill and slips in the pocket of her apron—in a puddle of spilled milk. He grabs the radio and goes outside, where he knows she will be. In the backyard, Rose is standing at the chain-link fence, her back to the house. Little Dog approaches her and stands beside her. "I hate you," he says. "You hear me? You're a monster." She returns to the house, and Little Dog chases behind her, crying. "Ma!" he yells. "I didn't mean it."

Little Dog's comment about second chances implies that he would like a second chance to go back to time and relive this interaction. Little Dog doesn't really hate Rose, and he doesn't think she is a monster. He suggests that her abuse is simply another symptom of her PTSD and mental illness, that it isn't really who she is at her core, and Little Dog wants a second chance to go back and tell her this. Little Dog's letter is that second chance, and it is his way of telling Rose that she isn't a monster.

It is a dreary Sunday when Little Dog tells Rose the truth. Despite the overcast day, it is bright inside the Dunkin' Donuts, where Little Dog and Rose sit drinking coffee. "I don't like girls," Little Dog blurts out, purposefully avoiding the Vietnamese word for gay—*pê-đê*, which comes from the French for *pédéraste*. Before the French occupied Vietnam, there was no word for queer people, who were seen as normal people like everyone else. Little Dog tells his mother that he will leave, if that is what she wants, and she asks if he plans on wearing dresses now. Queer people are killed for wearing dresses, she reminds him. She tells Little Dog that he doesn't have to leave, and then she asks him when all of this started. "I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy," Rose says. "I know that."

Rose's comment that she "gave birth to a healthy, normal boy" implies that being queer is neither "healthy" nor "normal," and that to be a queer man is to be the opposite of masculine and to wear a dress. These assumptions reflect the discrimination faced by the queer community in American society, as does the language used to describe queer men. The Vietnamese word for gay, pê-đê, *relies on the French word* pédéraste, *pederast in English, which makes Little Dog's sexuality appear criminal and sick by extension.*

When Little Dog was in the first grade, he sat down to eat his mushy school lunch in the cafeteria next to Gramoz, an Albanian boy whose family came to America after the fall of the Soviet Union. Instead of the slop served in the cafeteria, Gramoz was eating pizza bagels, and he offered one to Little Dog. Little Dog never spoke to him (Little Dog could barely speak English), but he began following Gramoz around after that day. To be near Gramoz was to be near to his small act of kindness, but that ended one day on the playground. "Stop following me, you freak!" Gramoz yelled. "What the heck is wrong with you?"

Little Dog weaves this memory into his story of coming out to his mother because it lends insight into the way Rose's comments make Little Dog feel. In calling Little Dog a "freak," Gramoz makes him feel like a freak, and that is exactly how Rose's comments make Little Dog feel in the Dunkin' Donuts. Rose implies that to be queer is to be, in a way, a "freak," and Little Dog's mind automatically goes back to a time when he was made to feel the exact same way.

Back at Dunkin' Donuts, Rose tells Little Dog that she has something to tell him, too. Little Dog had an older brother, she says, but he is dead. The boy had a name, Rose says, but she refuses to speak it, and she felt him growing and moving inside her. But there was nothing to eat, she says, and they were starving. Little Dog wasn't born until they knew they would live, Rose says.

Here, Rose implies that she was forced to have an abortion because of the war, which further speaks to the trauma she endured in Vietnam. Rose's trauma isn't just related to the violence of war, but to the many ways in which the war caused her pain.

After Little Dog's experience with Gramoz and the pizza bagel, Rose bought Little Dog a hot-pink Schwinn. As Little Dog rode the bike around the parking lot of their tenement house, he was stopped by a boy, who knocked Little Dog off the bike. The boy took a keychain and scraped the pink paint from the bike in long colorful sparks. Little Dog wanted to tell him to stop, but he didn't have the words, so he just sat there. Later that night, Little Dog watched as Rose painted the bike pink again with skillful strokes of nail polish. That was the day, Little Dog says, that he learned how dangerous color can be.

The neighborhood boy knocks Little Dog from the bike because the hot-pink color violates the boy's assumptions of gender and masculinity. Pink is traditionally viewed as a feminine color, thus the boy knocks Little Dog from the bike and scrapes the paint off. The boy assumes Little Dog is queer because his bike is pink, and it is a beacon for the boy's discrimination and abuse. Presumably, Rose knows why the boy scraped the paint from the bike, but she paints it pink again anyway, and in doing so resists these gender assumptions, too.

In the donut shop, Rose tells Little Dog about the pills she was given at the hospital. After a month of the pills, she was supposed to expel the baby on her own, but she could still feel him move and felt immense pain. She went back to the hospital, where nurses injected her with Novocain and "scraped [her] baby out of [her], like seeds from a papaya." She caught a quick look of the baby, she says, before they threw him in the garbage. Rose is quiet for a minute, and then she tells Little Dog that she first heard Chopin in Vietnam. She was just six or seven years old, and she could hear the man across the street—a pianist trained in Paris—playing his Steinway.

Again, Rose's abortion is evidence of the trauma she endured in Vietnam. Taking pills and expelling a fetus large enough to feel move must be a particularly traumatic experience, but the fact that Rose is prescribed the pills implies that it is common practice in Vietnam during the war. Rose's description of the abortion performed by the nurses is likewise traumatic, but her random memory of Chopin and the concert pianist implies that not everything in Vietnam is violet and ugly.

A few months before the day in Dunkin' Donuts, Little Dog interrupts, a 14-year-old Vietnamese boy in a rural village had acid thrown in his face for putting a love letter in another boy's school locker. Just last summer, Little Dog adds, Omar Mateen, a 28-year-old Florida man, walked into an Orlando gay club and opened fire with an automatic rifle, killing 49 people.

Both of the crimes Little Dog interrupts his letter to talk about reflect the extreme violence and hate faced by the queer community, in both Vietnam and the United States. In short, Little Dog's sexuality can cost him his life in either country.

The average placenta weighs about one and a half pounds, Little Dog says, and passes nutrients, waste, and hormones back and forth between mother and fetus. It is like a language—the first language spoken by anyone. Rose interrupts Little Dog's thoughts. Her baby came to her in dream once, she says. He wanted to see what his mother looked like. "I was a girl," she says. "Oh god…Oh god, I was seventeen."

The fact that Rose was just a teenager when she was forced to abort her baby again underscores the trauma she endured in Vietnam during the war. Rose was not emotionally equipped to handle such trauma at such a young age, and it has greatly affected her, so much so the pain is still present many years later.

When Little Dog was in college, a professor said during a lecture on Shakespeare's *Othello* that gay men are naturally narcissistic, and narcissism is often a sign of homosexuality in those who have not yet admitted their sexuality. This idea angered Little Dog, but the thought stayed with him. He wonders now if he followed Gramoz all those years ago because he was looking for a reflection of himself. Historically speaking, Little Dog says, beauty has "demanded replication." Poems, paintings, and sculptures are reproduced because they are beautiful. It wasn't pizza Little Dog wanted from Gramoz, he decides, "but replication."

Like Little Dog, Gramoz is an immigrant (his family came from Albania), and in Gramoz, Little Dog finds a reflection of himself—a feeling that Little Dog likely does not often have. In weaving this memory in with his coming out story, Little Dog implies there is something subtly sexual about it. This connection at least implies that Little Dog knew at a young age that he was queer, mistook Gramoz's kindness for affection, and was looking for a reflection of his sexual identity as well.

There is a reason that a comma looks like a fetus, Little Dog says. The comma is a "curve of continuation." Suddenly, Rose says she is going to be sick, and Little Dog helps her to the public bathrooms inside the Dunkin' Donuts. She bends over the toilet, and Little Dog places his hand on her back. He looks up, and, seeing to the urinals, he realizes they are in the men's room. Rose throws up again, and they leave the restaurant. Little Dog doesn't tell that her has worn a dress, and he will again in the future.

Little Dog's comparison of a fetus to a comma implies that they both connote a continuation or future, and therefore possibility. It is unclear whether Rose is vomiting because she is upset after telling Little Dog the story of her first son or because Little Dog has just told her he is queer. Regardless, Little Dog likely thinks his sexuality makes his mother physically ill, which again reflects the discrimination and hate faced by the queer community.

Trevor's living room is "miserable with laughter," as his father sits drunk in the recliner in front of the television. Trevor and Little Dog sit behind him on the couch, giggling and texting a friend. In the darkness, Little Dog can see the scar on Trevor's neck from when his father shot him with a nail gun. "Go ahead," Trevor's father says, "laugh." Trevor tells his father that they aren't laughing at him, but it is already too late. "I hear you," his father says. "I see things." He asks if "that China boy" is with Trevor. "He don't talk but I hear him," the drunk man says. He asks Trevor if he remembers his uncle, and Trevor says he does. "He whooped them in that jungle," Trevor's father says. "He did good for us."

The forced laughter—presumably some sort of laugh track—on the television is at odds with the oppressiveness of Trevor's living room, as is the laughter between the boys. Clearly, Trevor's father has a drinking problem, and he is very abusive if he has a history of shooting Trevor with a nail gun. Trevor's father's reference to Little Dog as "that China boy" is racist and insensitive, and he implies that Trevor's uncle did the world a favor by killing people like Little Dog during the Vietnam War. His comment that he hears and sees "things" implies that perhaps he really knows the truth about Trevor's sexuality and his relationship with Little Dog.

Riding their bikes along the Connecticut River, Trevor and Little Dog can see the city on both sides. Little Dog looks to his side of the river, the side Trevor knows nothing about having lived his entire life on the "white side." Little Dog can see Asylum Avenue, where there used to be an actual asylum but is now home to an Indian family from New Delhi. In India, the mother was a school teacher, but in America, she sells hunting knives door-to-door. There is also a Mexican family, but the father is in jail on gun and drug charges. And there is Marin, who walks to work every day in high heels, her Adam's apple just visible. The men in the neighborhood call her a "*faggot*" and a "*homomaphedite*," and they threaten to kill her.

The division of Hartford into a "white side" and, presumably, a nonwhite side reflects the segregation and racism of 21st century American society. Even in the absence of formal segregation, white flight—the movement of white people away from people of color—effectively ensures that segregation still exists, even if unofficially. The detail about Marin's Adam's apple implies that she is a transgender woman, and this blurring of traditional gender roles makes the neighborhood men uncomfortable. The derogatory names and threats Marin is subjected to further reflect the discrimination that the queer community faces.

Little Dog can see the tenement building where he used to live and ride his pink Schwinn, and he can see the parking lot of the church, where a friend's sister overdosed on drugs. There is also the parking lot of the auto repair shop, where a screaming infant was pulled from the trunk of a car during a blizzard. Little Dog and Trevor ride away from the river, towards Main Street, leaving the people on the other side of the river behind. They ride up a hill, from which they can see the sprawling houses of the wealthy beyond them. Trevor points and says a famous basketball player lives up there. If that guy was his dad, Trevor says, Little Dog could always come and stay at their house.

Just as Hartford is divided by race, it is also divided by wealth and class standing. The wealthy people live at the top of the hill, overlooking all the poor and lower-class people below. Little Dog's anecdotal stories from his city related to drug overdoses and child abuse or neglect again reflect the pervasiveness of drug abuse and addiction in 21st-century American society. Drug use is rampant, and no part of the city is spared the effects, either directly or indirectly.

Little Dog reminds Trevor that he already has a father, but Trevor tells Little Dog to ignore his father and not let him upset Little Dog. It is the alcohol that gets to him, Trevor says. Little Dog claims he isn't upset about Trevor's father and grows quiet and distant. "Hey, don't do the fuckin' silent thing, man," Trevor says. "It's a fag move." They sit for a few more minutes, get back on their bikes, and head for home.

Trevor suggests that Little Dog is bothered by his father, which implies Little Dog is sensitive and not stereotypically manly, but it is actually Trevor who is bothered by his father. To deflect his feelings, Trevor says that Little Dog's silence is a "fag move," which is highly offensive and meant to humiliate Little Dog and place Trevor in a position of power over him.

The structure of Little Dog's letter changes, and his writing turns to poetry. He writes of Trevor, driving a rusty pickup truck without a license. Trevor, his blue jeans covered in blood, waving from his driveway as Little Dog rides by on his old Schwinn. Trevor, who messes around with girls and then humiliates them. Trevor driving 50 miles per hour in his father's field, the comma shaped scar on his neck "syntax of what next what next what next."

Little Dog's switch to poetry reflects the romantic feelings he has for Trevor. Little Dog's poetry also reflects the importance of writing and language in the novel. His reference to Trevor's scar as "syntax of what next what next what next" again reflects Little Dog's theory of the comma representing continuation.

Little Dog writes of Trevor loading a shotgun, of Trevor in the rain, and of Trevor begging him. "*Please tell me I am not*," Trevor pleads. "*Please tell me I am not*," he stammers, "*I am not / a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?*" Trevor the "hunter," the "redneck," not Trevor the "pansy," "fruit or fairy." Trevor is not veal, not since his father told him what veal is. "The veal are the children," Trevor's father said.

Again, Trevor is deeply troubled by his sexuality and what that says about his masculinity. He is afraid that to be queer is not to be a "real man," like a "hunter" or a "redneck," who meet stereotypical gender expectations. Little Dog frequently refers to Trevor as beef, not veal, because Trevor is tough, not soft like a "pansy" or "fruit or fairy."

Veal are calves put into a box, Little Dog explains, where they are kept alive. They aren't permitted to move or put weight on their muscles, so they stay tender and better tasting. "*We love eatin' what's soft*," Trevor's father once said, staring Trevor "dead" in the eyes. "[E]very box will be opened in time," Little Dog says, "in language." There is blood in Little Dog's mouth, and the rusty truck is totaled under a tree. Trevor texting after two months of silence. Trevor, Little Dog's "all-American beef but no veal." Little Dog claims memory is "a second chance," and a calf sits in a "box tighter than a womb," waiting. Little Dog puts his head to Trevor's chest and listens "like an animal / learning how to speak."

Trevor's father's comment that "We love eatin what's soft" while looking Trevor "dead" in the eye again suggests that he really knows about Trevor's sexuality and his relationship with Little Dog. By implying he knows about Trevor's sexuality without expressly stating it, Trevor's father is clearly trying to make Trevor miserable and leave him wondering if he really does knows. Little Dog's poem is again like stream of consciousness, but he is still focuses on language, writing, and traditional notions of masculinity.

PART 3

Little Dog's writing switches back to prose. He is on a train from New York City to Hartford. As Little Dog watches the city lights fade away, he glances down at his phone. There are numerous messages on the screen, each of them about Trevor. "It's about Trevor pick up," one message says. "The wakes on Sunday," another reads. Little Dog decides to send Trevor a text. "*Trevor I'm sorry come back*," Little Dog types. He hits sends and shuts the phone off, afraid that Trevor will respond.

Obviously, Trevor is dead and his death is likely related to his drug use. The messages on Little Dog's phone are his friends calling and texting to give him the bad news from home, which is becoming all too common in Little Dog's neighborhood. Little Dog's switch from poetry back to prose reflects the gravity and sadness of the situation.

Little Dog gets off the train in Hartford. It has been over five years since he first met Trevor on the tobacco farm. Little Dog didn't bother to tell anyone he was coming to town. He was in his Italian American Literature class when he saw the Facebook post from Trevor's father on Trevor's page. "*I'm broken in two*," the post said. Little Dog left in the middle of the lecture and got on the train. He thinks about Trevor, about how Trevor asked him to stay in Hartford when he went to say goodbye before leaving. But they knew Little Dog wouldn't stay, and they knew he only came to say goodbye from a safe distance, "the way men are supposed to do."

Little Dog's comment that he went to say goodbye to Trevor in a "way men are supposed to do" implies that men are not supposed to show their feelings and emotions, and to do so is to not behave as a "real" man. Little Dog often refers to Trevor's scar as a comma that is symbolic of Trevor's continuation; however, Trevor's father's post that he is "broken in two" underscores that Trevor's life is over, and that his comma has become a period.

"You're gonna kill it in New York," Trevor said to Little Dog. "Don't be scared." At that moment, Little Dog knew Trevor was high. He glanced at Trevor's arms and saw the dark purple bruises in the bend of his arm, where he dug in his veins with needles. Little Dog didn't know it, but that was the last time he saw Trevor. He would never again see or kiss the comma-shaped scar on the side of Trevor's neck. "Isn't that the saddest thing in the world, Ma?" Little Dog asks. "A comma forced to be a period?"

Again, Trevor is displacing his own feelings and insecurities onto Little Dog. It is Trevor who is scared to be without Little Dog, not Little Dog who is scared to go to New York, but Trevor's traditional notions of masculinity won't let him admit he is scared. Trevor's drug use has obviously turned into a full-blown heroin addiction, which again reflects the pervasiveness of drug abuse and addiction in America.

Little Dog gets off the train and immediately heads for Trevor's house. Halfway there, Little Dog decides it probably isn't a good idea to show up and disturb Trevor's father's mourning, so he turns, by "habit," toward the park. When Little Dog arrives at his house, he slides his key into the lock and opens the door. It is nearly midnight, and the house is dark and quiet. The television is on but muted, and Little Dog is guided upstairs by the soft light.

Trevor turns by "habit" at the park because he lives in that direction, and his body is trained to turn in this direction automatically after walking home so many times from Trevor's. This also speaks to the power of memory—Trevor's body remembers the way home even if he doesn't consciously think it.

Little Dog opens the door to Rose's room. There is a bed, but she sleeps on the floor, her arthritis too bad from years at the salon to sleep on the soft mattress. Little Dog lays down on the floor next to Rose, startling her awake. She is confused, and she starts feeling around in the dark in search of injuries. Finding none, Rose lays back down. In moments like this, Little Dog says, he envies words "for doing what we can never do—how they can tell all of themselves simply by standing still, simply by *being*."

Again, Little Dog implies that there aren't words to express his feelings, which again underscores the limitations of language. If Little Dog was a word, how he felt and who he was would be apparent just by looking at him, but he can only express himself through language, which, in moments of great pain such as this, isn't enough.

"Dear Ma," Little Dog writes. "Let me begin again." Little Dog is writing to Rose because it is late, and he knows she is probably walking home from the nail salon. He isn't with her right now because he is "at war." What Little Dog means is that it is only February and the president is already trying to deport Little Dog's friends. It is hard to explain, Little Dog says. Lately, he has been trying to believe in heaven, so they can be together after this "blows over" (the word "over" is crossed out and the word "up" is written next to it).

Little Dog's need to keep restarting his letter again speaks to the importance of his message. Little Dog's claim that he is "at war" implies that the discrimination he faces as an immigrant in the current political climate is just as traumatic as Rose's experience in actual war. Little Dog's replacement of the word "over" by "up" reflects how important one word can be. To "blow over" implies a resolution, but to "blow up" is to be completely destroyed. Clearly, Little Dog expects to be destroyed before racial discrimination is resolved in America.

Rose once asked Little Dog what it meant to be a writer. "So here goes," Little Dog says. Four of his friends are dead from drug overdoses. "Five," Little Dog corrects himself, "if you count Xavier who flipped his Nissan doing ninety on a bad batch of fentanyl." Little Dog doesn't even celebrate his birthday anymore. Trevor started taking OxyContin after he broke his ankle the year before Little Dog met him. The drug, which is basically heroin in a pill, was first produced in 1996. The "truest ruins," Little Dogs says, "are not written down." A girl Lan knew in Go Cong was "erased" just weeks before the war ended, and she is a "ruin no one can point to. A ruin without location, like a language." Within a month of first taking the Oxy, Little Dog says, Trevor was already addicted.

As Little Dog attempts to tell, or rather show, Rose what it means to be a writer, the structure of his letter again reads like stream of consciousness, and his thoughts become random and seemingly disconnected, much like memory can be. Xavier and Little Dog's four other friends who are dead because of drugs, either directly or indirectly, further underscores the ubiquity of drug use in America. Little Dog's reference to the girl in Lan's village who was killed during the war is explained in terms of language, which again reflects the importance of writing in the novel.

"The truth is," Little Dog says to Rose, he is really looking for a reason to stay. Often, the reasons he finds are small, like how Rose say "bahgeddy" instead of "spaghetti." When Little Dog lived in Hartford, he would walk the streets at night. Sometimes he could hear animals scurrying in the distance, but for the most part, he could only hear the sound of his own footsteps. One night, he heard a man talking. Little Dog heard the word "*Allah*," and knew the man was speaking Arabic. "Salat al-fajr," Little Dog writes, "a prayer before sunrise." Alone at night on the streets of Hartford, Little Dog likes to think he was praying, even if he doesn't know what he was praying for.

Little Dog is hoping his letter will connect him in some meaningful way to his mother. He loves her, even if their relationship is difficult, and that love is reflected in even the smallest, most insignificant things, like the way Rose mispronounces certain words. Little Dog's late night prayers are evidence of his struggles with his identity, as both a person of color and a member of the queer community, and his attempts to belong in a society in which he doesn't really fit.

OxyContin was first developed for late-stage cancer pain—the kind of excruciating pain that comes with chemotherapy and end of life. However, it was soon prescribed for all kinds of pain, from arthritis to headaches. Once, Little Dog and Trevor stopped under an overpass to get out of the rain on their way home from a needle exchange. Trevor wanted to go to community college and study physical therapy, but instead he died at 22 years old, alone in his room surrounded by Led Zeppelin posters. The cause of death was an overdose of heroin and fentanyl.

Little Dog implies that Trevor became addicted to heroin, at least in part because he was prescribed OxyContin for a broken bone, which was not an appropriate use of such strong medication. A needle exchange is a program in which addicts can safely exchange dirty needles for clean ones, therefore reducing the transmission of blood borne diseases, and it is evidence that Trevor is indeed an addict. Trevor was robbed of his dreams—to go to college and be a physical therapist—largely because of the inappropriate prescribing of OxyContin.

Little Dog remembers watching television with Lan one afternoon and seeing a program in which a herd of **buffalo** follow each other off a cliff, falling to their death. Lan is horrified and asks why they do such a thing, and Little Dog explains that the buffalo don't know they are running to certain death. "They don't mean to, Grandma," Little Dog says. "They're just following their family. That's all. They don't know it's a cliff." Lan says they should have stop signs. There were stops signs growing up in Hartford, Little Dog says, but they weren't always there. A woman named Marsha used to go door-to-door with a petition for stop signs. Her sons played in the neighborhood, she said, and she wanted them to be safe. Marsha's older son, Kevin, died of an overdose not long after, and her younger son, Kyle, died five years later the very same way.

The buffalo following their families over the sides of cliffs to certain death serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of drug addiction within families. Like the buffalo, Kyle metaphorically follows Kevin off the cliff. Kyle watches Kevin die from his drug abuse, but then Kyle does the very same thing. This analogy again reflects how common drug abuse is and suggests that it often runs in families. Furthermore, Marsha is unable to keep her children away from drugs, despite her efforts to keep them safe.

Little Dog asks Rose if she remembers back when "FAG4LIFE" was spray painted in red on their front door. Rose, of course, couldn't read and didn't know what the words meant, so Little Dog told her it said "Merry Christmas." That, Little Dog told her, was why it was red. Apparently, addiction may be associated with bipolar disorder. "I got the wrong chemicals, Ma. Or rather, I don't get enough of one or the other," Little Dog says. He doesn't want his feelings of sadness to be "othered" from him, just as he doesn't want his happiness "othered" either. What if Little Dog's feelings of happiness aren't really a "bipolar episode," but true happiness that he has earned and therefore has a right to enjoy?

The slur written on Little Dog's front door again reflects the discrimination and hate he is subjected to as a queer person in America. Rose doesn't understand because she doesn't speak the language, but she also, presumably, doesn't know that Little Dog is queer, which again reflects Barthes's theory of structuralism. Here, Little Dog admits that he has bipolar disorder and also struggles with his mental health and with problems of addiction, which he suggests are related. Little Dog's claim that he doesn't want his emotions to be "othered" reflect the ways in which Little Dog is "othered" by society for both his race and his sexuality.

Little Dog considers sadness his "most brutal teacher." Sadness is like a lesson, Little Dog claims, and it says: "You don't have be like the **buffaloes**. You can stop." Little Dog swallows his pills. He never did heroin with Trevor; he was always too scared to shoot up. "Looks like you dropped your tampon," Trevor would say. OxyContin was first marketed as "abuse-resistant," but, Little Dog says, that was a lie. By 2002, OxyContin prescriptions for non-cancer pain increased tenfold, and the drug's sales reached over $3 billion.

Little Dog again implies that the opioid epidemic in America is directly related to pharmaceutical companies and their efforts to make money at any cost, but the sadness Little Dog feels over Trevor's death is like a wake-up call before Little Dog himself goes over the cliff. One doesn't have to shoot up to overdose; it can happen when drugs are ingested orally, too. Trevor's comment that Little Dog "dropped his tampon" again reflects Trevor's narrow idea of masculinity, as Trevor reads Little Dog's fear of injecting drugs as feminine and not the behavior of a "real" man.

Little Dog wakes to a strange sound. His eyes adjust in the darkness, and he can see Trevor seizing on the basement floor. At the hospital, Little Dog is told Trevor will live—this is the second time. "Take a right, Ma," Little Dog says, at the bait shop where Trevor once shot and skinned a raccoon. "You and I," Little Dog says to Rose, "we were Americans until we opened our eyes." In the cemetery past House Street, Little Dog says, the oldest grave is of one Mary-Anne Cowder, who lived and died in 1784. In Vietnamese, the same word is used for both remembering and missing someone. "I miss you more than I remember you," Little Dog says.

Little Dog is still talking to his mother as if she is walking home from work, and he is sharing his memories of Trevor's past overdoses and directing her based on places he has been with Trevor ("Take a right [at the bait shop], Ma"). Little Dog implies that he and Rose are only Americans in their dreams, which again speaks to America's racist society. They will never be white like the Europeans who colonized America many years before. Little Dog again underscores the limitations of language, as the same word in Vietnamese represents two distinct feelings, only Little Dog doesn't equally feel these emotions. Thus, the word is useless to Little Dog.

To be political, Little Dog has been taught, is to be "*merely* angry, and therefore artless." Good writing, he is told moves beyond politics and brings people together through truth and honesty. This occurs through "*craft*," Little Dog says, but they ask for creation without considering the person who created it. As if, Little Dog says, a chair was created without thinking of the human body. It is unfortunate, Little Dog says, "that the word *laughter* is trapped inside *slaughter*." Cocaine and oxycodone makes things calm and busy simultaneously. Once, after shooting up, Trevor asked Little Dog if he was "really" gay. "You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean," Trevor said, "I think me…I'll be good in a few years, you know?"

Little Dog's writing is again random and scattered like memories. He implies that his writing is political, even though he has been taught that political writing is "artless." Little Dog can't describe his life without politics, as it is largely political ideologies that drive the racist and homophobic treatment Little Dog endures at every turn. To stand up and resist the status quo, Little Dog implies, will always be a political statement. In this way, Little Dog implies that art, especially art that reflects racial, cultural, and sexual identity will always be political. Little Dog's memories again reflect attention to language, drug addiction, and Trevor's limited view of masculinity. Trevor implies that his sexuality is just a phase, and therefore does not reflect negatively on his masculinity and status as a man.

Rose asked Little Dog to explain writing, and he knows he is giving her a "mess." He wonders if this is what art truly is. He searched Trevor's name online recently, and it told him that Trevor was alive and living 3.6 miles away. "[M]emory has not forgotten us," Little Dog writes. This letter isn't really a story, Little Dog says, it is more of a "shipwreck—the pieces floating, finally legible."

Little Dog's description of his letter as a "shipwreck" reflects the scattered and random structure of his stories and memories. Trevor's existence on Google is another metaphor for power of memory. Trevor was exceedingly important to Little Dog, thus he can never be truly forgotten.

Little Dog asks Rose who, or what, they were before they were themselves. Maybe they will meet each other again, in another life, and they will know everything except for the pain they have caused each other. "Maybe we'll be the opposite of **buffaloes**," Little Dog says. "We'll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of **monarchs**, heading home." Little Dog tells Rose that he misses her and that he is sorry he doesn't call more. He says he is sorry for always asking "*How are you?*" when what he really wants to know is "*Are you happy?*"

In Little Dog's buffalo analogy, families are damaging and lead the other buffaloes to certain death; however, in his butterfly analogy, families are supportive and ensure survival through teaching and sharing memories. Little Dog hopes he and Rose will be monarchs and learn from their past trials and pain, rather than ignore what their stories have to teach them and run off of the metaphorical cliff to their deaths.

The room is quiet and still. Lan is on the floor on a mattress with Rose, Mai, and Little Dog by her side. Rose says Lan's name again and she weakly opens her eyes. She has been lying here for two weeks now, the pain too much to move her. The bedsores she developed in the meantime have become infected, and the smell of rotting flesh lingers with the smell of the bedpan, which sits under Lan and is constantly overflowing. The doctor diagnosed her with stage four bone cancer. Most of Lan's femur had already been eaten away by then, and the doctor said she had two, maybe three, weeks to live. Take her home and make her comfortable, he said.

This memory is important to Little Dog, not only because it recounts the death of his grandmother, but because it recounts the death of Lan's stories as well. Lan represents stories in Little Dog's life, and she therefore represents Little Dog's connection to his Vietnamese culture and heritage, since this part of his identity comes largely from stories. A large part of Little Dog dies with Lan, which is why this memory is included in his letter.

Little Dog thinks of Marcel Duchamp's famous "*sculpture*." By taking a urinal—a well-known object—Duchamp placed it upside down and called it new. Little Dog hates Duchamp for this, but only because he knows Duchamp was right, because that is exactly was has happened to Lan. In this new state, Lan is unrecognizable—she is someone else entirely. Little Dog has always found such transformations beautiful, when something or someone becomes something or someone else through "evolution." Now, however, that beauty is lost on Little Dog.

Little Dog's mention of Duchamp's "sculpture" also harkens to Barthes's theories of language and semiotics. By changing the orientation of the symbol, the symbol, or sign, becomes something else, which changes its meaning as well. This implies that language and meaning is unstable and constantly in flux, which Little Dog did find beautiful, until Lan evolved into something so unbearably sad.

Little Dog thinks of Trevor, who has been dead now for seven months. He thinks about their time in the tobacco barn, the summer air thick and hot. Trevor pushes Little Dog back onto the dirt floor of the barn and kisses him. Trevor climbs on top of Trevor and says they should "just do it." Little Dog nods without speaking, and Trevor promises to be gentle. He slides his penis between Little Dog's legs and is just about to enter him and stops. He asks if Little Dog is okay, but Little Dog isn't sure. "Don't cry on me again," Trevor says. "Don't you cry on me now."

When Trevor says they should "just do it," he means they should have penetrative sex rather than the modified "fake fucking" they usually do. Trevor's insistence that Little Dog doesn't cry "again" implies that Little Dog has cried before. Since Trevor has a very narrow view of masculinity, he considers crying a sign of weakness and beneath the behavior of a "real" man.

As Trevor enters Little Dog, pain explodes throughout Little Dog's body. Trevor begins to move and the gold cross he always wears on a chain around his neck keeps hitting Little Dog in the face. Little Dog takes the cross in his mouth to keep it steady, and it tastes like Trevor. With each of Trevor's movements, torrents of pain rip through Little Dog. What Little Dog doesn't know, though, is that anal sex actually feels good if you make it past the pain. After about 10 minutes, Little Dog feels his bowels let loose and puts his head down in shame. Surprised, Trevor jumps up, and Little Dog couldn't feel more naked if he had been standing there without clothes.

The gold cross hitting Little Dog repeatedly in the face is a subtle reminder of religion and the fact that broader society largely considers Little Dog's sexuality some sort of "sin" that he should atone for. Discrimination and hate against the queer community is so deeply sowed in American society that Little Dog is unable to escape it, even in his own thoughts.

Trevor stands above Little Dog. Trevor, Little Dog thinks, who was "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" has been "tainted" with Little Dog's "faggotry," and the "filthiness of [their] act" has been "exposed" by Little Dog's inability to hold his bowels. "Lick it up," Little Dog thinks he hears Trevor say. "I said get up," Trevor says again. He leads Little Dog outside to the river. "Clean yourself," he says gently.

Again, Little Dog has internalized society's hate for the queer community, and he is convinced Trevor—who is the epitome of masculinity—has been tainted by his sexuality. Little Dog is used to be abused and bullied because of his sexuality, so he is sure Trevor is ordering him to "lick it up" instead of kindly telling him to go to the river to clean up.

In the water, Trevor tells Little Dog not to worry about what happened, and Little Dog nods, humiliated and still in pain. Trevor grabs Little Dog by the chin and asks if he hears him, and Little Dog nods again, moving in the direction of the shore. Trevor grabs Little Dog and stops him. He drops to his knees in the water and grabs Little Dog's thighs, taking Little Dog into his mouth. When he is done, Trevor stands and wipes his mouth. "Good as always," he says, climbing out of the water.

Little Dog is obviously mortified over losing his bowels in the barn, and it takes incredible courage for him to share his story (which he is likely only able to do because he is certain his mother won't read it). Trevor obviously cares for Little Dog, and he doesn't want him to feel bad, so he proves Little Dog is still attractive and desirable by engaging him in a second sex act.

It is 10:00 in the morning when Lan begins to die. Mai points to Lan's feet, which have turned a deep purple color. The feet go first, Mai says. Little Dog remembers back to years earlier, when Lan lifted him up over the chain-link fence that surrounded the highway to pick the purple flowers that bloomed near the shoulder of the road. As Little Dog picked the flowers, traffic whipped by him, and Lan was in the background yelling at him to hurry up and be careful. Beauty, Little Dog says, is what we risk ourselves for.

Lan's purple feet harken to Little Dog's earlier description of in-between feelings as "purple." In this way, Lan's purple feet reflect her current state of in between life and death. The story of the purple flowers and the risks one takes for beauty harkens to the beauty of Little Dog's relationship with his loved ones, like Lan and Trevor. There is always the risk of heartache, but the beauty is worth it.

Lan has been dead for five months, but today, Rose and Little Dog are in Vietnam so that they can bury Lan's ashes in the Go Cong District. After the ceremony with the monks and the saffron, Little Dog stands in front of Lan's polished tombstone and calls Paul in Virginia. Paul asks to see Lan's grave, so Little Dog takes his laptop, and, with Paul on Skype, holds the computer up facing Lan's grave. There is a picture of Lan on her grave from when she was in her 20s, about the age she was when she met Paul.

Lan's return to Vietnam in death represents a coming home. Lan's Vietnamese identity was a major part of who she was, and her burial in Vietnam reflects this. Rose and Little Dog observe traditional customs in Lan's burial, which again speaks to her cultural and identity. Paul is clearly still in love with Lan after all these years, and this again underscores the power of memory.

Little Dog thinks that he has lost Wi-Fi, then he hears Paul blow his nose and begin to talk. Paul is sorry that he left Lan in '71, he says. He was told his mother was sick, but it was just a trick to get him home. She faked tuberculosis, and once he got back to the States, Nixon started bringing the troops home. Paul's brother intercepted Lan's letters. By the time the Salvation Army called and said there was woman in a refugee camp in the Philippines who claimed to be his wife, it was 1990 and Paul had been married to another woman for nearly ten years. Little Dog looks at Paul's face and realizes he doesn't know anyone—not Paul, Lan, or Rose—and he knows even less about Vietnam.

The truth behind Paul's story and reason for leaving Lan in Vietnam again suggests he has been in love with her all these years. It is revealed here that he has another wife, but he still keeps his and Lan's wedding picture framed on his living room wall. The behavior of Paul's brother and mother also reflect the racism present in American society. Paul's family didn't want him married to a Vietnamese woman, so they tricked him into coming home, knowing it would be impossible for him to return to Vietnam.

Growing up in Hartford, locals greeted each other with "What's good"—not "Hello" or "How are you?" Little Dog says, but "What's good." It is Hartford's very own "lexicon," and it reflects the people living there. Many of Hartford's population are poor and working class people, and they know all about hunger and addiction. To ask another "What's good?" Little Dog says, is to immediately skip all the pain and move to the good in life.

Hartford's special greeting again reflects Barthes's theories of structuralism. The meaning of "What's good" cannot be understood without a grasp of the cultural context in which it exists. "What's good" has a unique meaning in Hartford, and this meaning does not translate to anywhere else.

Little Dog can remember the **table** and the fire (because Lan told him there was a fire in their Hartford apartment), and he can remember the Kentucky Fried Chicken coupons the Salvation Army gave to his father. Little Dog can remember Rose saying to him each morning as he left for school: "Remember, don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese." Little Dog can remember visiting Paul after his college graduation, and he can remember his father. Little Dog puts his father "back together" in his mind, and he remember happiness, but mostly he just remembers the table.

Little Dog repeatedly mentions a table he remembers from his childhood, and that table is intimately linked with his memories of his father, of which Little Dog has very few. Little Dog claims he remembers his father and has put him "back together" in his memories, but Little Dog doesn't actually remember anything about him, except for some coupons and a bloody $20 bill. Little Dog remembers the fire because Lan told him there was a fire, not because he actually remembers it firsthand, and the same goes for his father—Little Dog remembers his father simply because he was told he had one. Rose's reminder that Little Dog is Vietnamese again reflects America's racist society. As Little Dog isn't the default race (white), Rose encourages him to be invisible, so he doesn't draw negative attention to himself.


Little Dog remembers a butterfly landing on a blade of grass, its wings bent much like the cover of his dog-eared copy of Toni Morrison's *Sula*. It isn't a **monarch**, Little Dog says, but he knows there are monarchs nearby, getting ready to fly south. In Saigon, just two days after Lan's burial, Little Dog wakes in the night to the sound of music and children laughing. It is 2:00 in the morning, so he goes outside to investigate.

Again, Little Dog's memories seem completely random and unrelated. His reference to Toni Morrison's Sula further reflects the importance of writing and storytelling in Little Dog's life and in the novel, and the monarch again harkens to family and shared memories and lived experiences, such as those Lan shared with Little Dog.


Outside, there are people everywhere. There are colorful banners and clothing, and vendors have set up along the street to sell food and desserts. A man hands out roasted chicken to children, and lights line the crowded streets. Near the end of the street, Little Dog can see a stage, and the sounds of Vietnamese pop music fills the street. After a moment, Little Dog realizes that the people on the stage are singers dressed in drag.

The people on the stage are men extravagantly dressed as women, and they are singing and dancing and entertaining the crowd. This scene seems quite surreal, and it isn't immediately clear if this is an actual memory or if it is some sort of story Little Dog is telling his mother.



Little Dog will learn later that this celebration is a common one in Vietnam. When someone dies in the middle of the night, all of the neighborhood chips in to hire a group of drag performers in what is called "delaying sadness." The drag queens' colorful outfits and lively performances keep the spirit of the recently deceased from getting trapped in limbo. Despite this tradition, however, being queer is still a "sin" in Vietnam. As long as the dead is lying in the open, the drag queens are "an othered performance." They are "unreal," like unicorns—"unicorns stomping in a graveyard."

Vietnamese culture is only accepting of queer bodies in very limited circumstances, and even then the queer community is still "othered" and exploited for their differences. In the eyes of Vietnamese society, the queer community doesn't exist, much like a unicorn. In the case of "delaying sadness," the legendary "unicorn" (a queer body) can only be seen in the presence of death (the "graveyard").

Little Dog can remember the **table** and fire burning at its edges. He can remember his first Thanksgiving—turkey, mash potatoes, and Lan's eggrolls. Little Dog can remember is first year in American schools, when he took a field trip to a farm, and his teacher said upon returning to color a cow he saw there. Thinking that color meant happiness, Little Dog made a multicolored cow and was scolded by the teacher. "I said color what you *saw*," the teacher yelled.

Little Dog sees the world differently than others, as evidenced by his multicolored cow, and he has been scolded and punished for these differences for most of his life. Lan's eggrolls present during Thanksgiving further reflect the unique cultural hybridity in America because of the Vietnam War.

Little Dog thinks of Paul and why he volunteered to go to Vietnam when so many others ran north to Canada. Paul wanted to play the trumpet and be "a white Miles Davis," but his father ripped up the music school application. After that, Paul wanted to get as far away as possible, so he went to Southeast Asia. People always say that things happen for a reason, but Little Dog doesn't know why there are more dead than living, and he doesn't know why **monarchs** flying south suddenly drop to the ground, too heavy to continue, "deleting themselves from the story."

According to Canadian records, some 30,000 Americans dodged the draft and ran to Canada during Vietnam. According to British records, over 60,000 eligible soldiers fled the United States in total during Vietnam to avoid fighting in the war. Little Dog says earlier that monarchs pass messages and memories, and here he suggests that such memories can overwhelm the butterfly and drop it to the ground, essentially killing it ("deleting" it "from the story").

Little Dog can remember Rose grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. "Remember. Remember," she said, "You're already Vietnamese." He can remember walking down the sidewalk with her, and scores of beautifully colored birds flying around them. "Yes, there was a war," Little Dog says, and they came from the center of it. Little Dog has always thought they were born from the war, but now he understands that they were born from beauty. "Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence," Little Dog says, "but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it."

Little Dog's words here underscore the beauty that can come from the violence and ugliness of war. Not everything that came from the war is bad. The unique people and hybrid culture that came directly from the Vietnam War—Rose and Little Dog, Lan's eggrolls on Thanksgiving and Tiger Woods—are beautiful, Little Dog, and by extension Vuong implies, and they are worth recognizing and replicating in art.

Little Dog remembers a room and a **table**. He remembers Lan singing and fire crawling up the walls. He remembers a family hiding beneath the table. All Little Dog has is the table. Rose said there was a table, in Saigon, before Little Dog was born. Little Dog's father came home drunk and beat Rose for the first time at the table. Little Dog remembers the table anyway. It is real, and it isn't. He remembers Rose brushing the ash and soot from her pants and helping him to his feet, and together they "set the table."

Little Dog's memory of the table is symbolic of his memory for his father. Little Dog doesn't really remember the table—he has never even seen the table—he only remembers it because his mother and Lan said there was a table. This is much like Little Dog's father. Little Dog doesn't really remember him, either. This underscores the effect of suggestion on memory and implies that not all memories are created equal.

Little Dog can hear the sound of an animal crying in his dreams. He opens his eyes and is in the tobacco barn. It is August, and Trevor sleeps next to him. Little Dog stands up in his boxer shorts and goes outside, toward the sound of the animal. He walks through the tobacco fields, and, finding nothing, he thinks about the night before. Little Dog asked Trevor if he ever saw those **buffalo** on the Discovery Channel, the ones that just run off the cliffs. Trevor said yes. "Idiots," he added. But it isn't the buffaloes' fault, Trevor pointed out. "It's Mother Nature," he said. She orders them to run off the cliff and they do. Like a "law," Little Dog said. "Yeah, something like that," Trevor said. "Like a family. A fucked up family."

Little Dog again hears the sound of an animal, which harkens to the discrimination Little Dog faces on account of his race and sexuality. As a queer person of color, Little Dog is "othered," much like the Vietnamese drag queens, and he is viewed like an animal by society. Trevor's explanation of the buffaloes running over the cliff again harkens to drug use and addiction within families and communities. They each mimic each other's behavior in the form of drug use and jump off the metaphorical cliff to their deaths when they overdose.

Walking through the tobacco fields, Little Dog thinks of beauty. He thinks about how people only hunt what they think is beautiful. If life is truly short in the span of time, then one can be "gorgeous only briefly," Little Dog says. "To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted." He hears the animal sound again and walks deeper into the field. Suddenly, Little Dog can see Rose standing before him.

This passage is where Vuong gets the title for his book. Little Dog is beautiful for the exact same reasons he is "hunted"—his race and his sexuality. It is Little Dog's differences that make him uniquely beautiful. To be gorgeous implies visibility, which is a risk for people within marginalized community.

"Ma?" Little Dog asks. "Tell me the story again." He wants to hear the story about the **monkey**. "You were born in the Year of the Monkey," Little Dog says. "So you're a monkey." Mist rises in the field, and Rose is gone. Little Dog doesn't know if Rose has made it this far into the letter or not. She always said it was too late for her to learn to read. He thinks about reincarnation. Rose believes in reincarnation, but Little Dog isn't sure if it is real. He hopes it is, so he can see Rose again in another life. "Maybe then, in that life and in this future," Little Dog says, "you'll find this book and you'll know happened to us. And you remember me. Maybe."

Rose was born in the Year of the Monkey, which symbolically links her to the macaque monkeys and their ability to survive through memories and lived experiences. Little Dog hopes he and his mother can survive in the same way. This passage also reflects the power of memory. Little Dog suggests that some memories can't be forgotten, even after death and reincarnation.

Little Dog begins running. He doesn't know why, but he keeps running through the field. He is trying to outrun it all, to be a **buffalo**, somewhere in North Dakota maybe. He is a buffalo in a massive herd, and just as the first buffalo runs off the cliff, the buffaloes explode into **monarchs** and fly over Little Dog's head. Thousands of butterflies soar overhead, and Little Dog looks up to see Rose. He asks Rose why she wasn't trampled by the buffaloes. She's too fast, she says, and they laugh.

When the buffaloes burst into monarchs and explode into flight over Little Dog's head, it is symbolic of survival that is passed on from generation to generation through memories and lived experiences. In other words, the monarchs live because of stories and lessons learned, just as Little Dog does, and he will pass this knowledge on to the next generation.

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