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On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous

On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous is a tale of the pursuit of identity amid crises about war, sexuality, masculinity, and immigration. The story revolves around a Little Dog, the protagonist whose perspective the reader adopts. The Little Dog narrates the story in retrospect. He looks back into the various life events that have marked his existence, revealing memories. Ocean Vuong narrates the story in the form of a letter that Little Dog is writing to his mother, even though he knows she will never read it (Slopek). The relationships in Little Dog's life are marred by his struggles through which he carves an identity for himself. Through Little Dog's losses, joy, and misery, the reader can detect an undertone of melancholy that seeps through even the most joyous recollections in the story. Little Dog only follows his train of thought as he narrates his story, but the train of thought continues to lead each joyful memory to more melancholic ones, laced with disappointment and loss (Slopek). While the topics of war and abuse implement a melancholic tone throughout the novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong's recollections of Paul's Garden illuminates the story through the use of descriptive colors and shades, ultimately supporting the significance of regrowth and renewal one attempts to find after dark and blinding traumatic experiences.

The first recollections Little Dog narrates are mostly related to his interactions with his family. Most of these memories relate to Little Dog's experience of loss and pain as he grows up as a Vietnamese immigrant. He portrays his mother as a woman damaged by the traumatic events

of her childhood when she grew up amid the Vietnam war. The story, in many ways, is a tale of the absence of identity for immigrants who have seen war in their countries of origin (Vuong). The trauma experienced by Little Dog's mother makes her harsh and rigid. She is a single parent to Little Dog who cannot provide her son the warmth he needs. She often lashes out at her son and does not display an empathetic attitude towards life. The first hint of melancholy arrives in the form of memories of his mother that Little Dog narrates (Vuong). He remembers being hit by her, disapproved of, scolded, and neglected. All his recollections of his mother are linked to emotions that elicit traumatic memories. The story's tone changes when the writer delves into an explanation of his grandfather's garden.

When the author alternates his rueful memories with his recollection of Paul's garden, he switches from melancholy and misery to the hope he seems to see in his grandfather's garden. Throughout the novel, Paul's garden is the only inspiration for the narrative to become colorful and joyful (Ricks). Through a description of vivid details, colors, and butterflies, Little Dog understands Paul's Garden to be an opportunity for redemption and regrowth. The novel's garden is significant as a symbol of creativity, happiness, and hope. Paul creates the garden because he wants another chance to live his life. Through his garden, Paul rebuilds himself and the life he had lost due to the years he spent fighting in a war he did not comprehend (Ricks). Paul's optimism seems to seep through his hands into every flower and detail of his garden, eventually reflected in his grandson's approach to life. The garden has been treated as a symbol of rejuvenation in the wake of incalculable loss.

There has been much that has been lost to Little Dog. He is someone who has never been able to establish his identity. His childhood has been devoid of warmth and affection as he receives frequent and ruthless disapproval from his mother. The damage to his self-esteem is

exacerbated by the fact that he has never been able to fit into the society that he and his mother have immigrated to (Ha and Tompkins). Through his grandmother, he has experienced the utmost horrors of war. Little Dog's family has been marred by their harrowing experiences of death. For Little Dog and his family, the prospect of creating a wholesome identity and life is alien, as his mother tried to fend for herself and her son while trying to assimilate into the American culture. The story also problematizes the inequality faced by immigrants and first-generation Americans. Little Dog has not been able to take pride in his identity as he and his family have never felt "American enough" (Ha and Tompkins). The identity crisis, when viewed from the perspective of Paul's garden, becomes an opportunity to learn the deeper and more significant life lessons. The garden disillusioned Little Dog as well as spellbound him. Yet, it is understandable to him due to the very phenomenon of creation, color, and beauty. Through the garden, his life becomes contextualized as all the paths he has crossed lead him to a new life.

There is sadness waiting for Little Dog yet again when he becomes involved in a romantic relationship. His choice of a partner depends largely on the extent to which his partner can be considered quintessential American. The things he likes about Trevors are revealed to be confidence (Neumann). Trevors is everything Little Dog is not because the former is not awkward or hesitant. Also, he does not seem to face issues with being able to fit in. For Little Dog, Trevors presents an opportunity to gain access to life and identity he has never known. When he seeks interaction with Trevors, he aims to erase the harshness of his childhood, but his intimate relationship with Trevors is anything but wholesome. Throughout the relationship, Little Dog feels inadequate and humiliated (Neumann). He cannot seem to understand Trevor and his treatment of Little Dog. The sadness that seeps through this narrative is straightforward. It is almost as if Little Dog has taken the absence of a fulfilled life to be for granted. Yet, as he

accepts it, the vision of his grandfather's garden promises hope and strength when Trevors passes away (Eren). Little Dog lies beside his mother and cries, seeking comfort in his roots. Memories of Paul's garden are harbingers of glad tidings to come. Through Trevors's death, Little Dog teaches himself the art of closure.

For Little Dog, the garden is more than a promise, it is a respite and the last vestige of hope. While narrating Little Dog's loss, the author has skillfully alternated the memories of joy and ecstasy with those of death and misery. This has been done purposefully to retain a more dominant tone of dejection (Eren). Throughout the story, no recollection of outright joy or fascination remains untainted by the test of time and fate guided by war and immigration. This changes when the author describes the garden. The garden remains the only aspect of Little Dog's memory that has been referred to by using the most cheerful words. While describing the garden, the author uses references to colors, life, and hope. The garden is also the only aspect of the novel that remains untainted by misery (Vuong). It is important to note how each joyous memory recalled by Little Dog is followed by a negation of the happiness he previously felt. All his experiences seem to lead him to melancholy. The garden remains the only exception to this rule set by the author.

To conclude, through the use of descriptive colors and shades, the misery and hopelessness, the memories of Paul's garden remain cheerful and vivid, which depicts the significance of regrowth and renewaly.. One can see the bursts of color remembered by Little Dog as he delves into a garden description. He uses other symbols such as monarch butterflies he first beheld in the garden throughout the book. The butterflies tether him to the garden forever and they make their appearance at the least likely times. They do not necessarily follow joyful recollections; rather, they seem to be conjured up by Little Dog's memory when he describes the

most rueful scenarios and the most saddening details. Often, when he experiences a harrowing and irreparable loss, he remembers the garden and the butterflies. These recollections represent seeds of hope sowed by Paul as he plants his garden. The garden is a memory of hope that remains consistently and pervasively present. The memories of this garden are resilient, making the narrative less about sadness and loss, even when most of Little Dog's memories speak of failure and defeat. Images of the garden cut through the otherwise despondent narrative, morphing the novel from hopelessness to a tale of life lessons, growth, and rebirth. Through his sadness, Little Dog learns to hope for better times. Even in dire circumstances, he cannot bring himself to lose faith.

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