

**Ocean Vuong's Unsent Letter:
A Review on On Earth We're Briefly
Gorgeous**

*Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like
the very proof that you've been ruined.*

Review by Joanna (Yuniang) Santoso (Liu)

Have you ever turned the final page of a book and felt as though you had become an entirely different person, the very nature of your soul rewritten by utter awe?

For me, that book is Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Since its publication in 2019, it has been translated into numerous languages, quietly taking the world by a storm.

I have never seen a writer/poet as rare and gifted as Ocean Vuong. I've read *Time is a Mother*, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, as well as his chapbook *Burnings*, and they all left me speechless because Vuong's voice is so naturally distinct, strong, and most importantly, unapologetic.

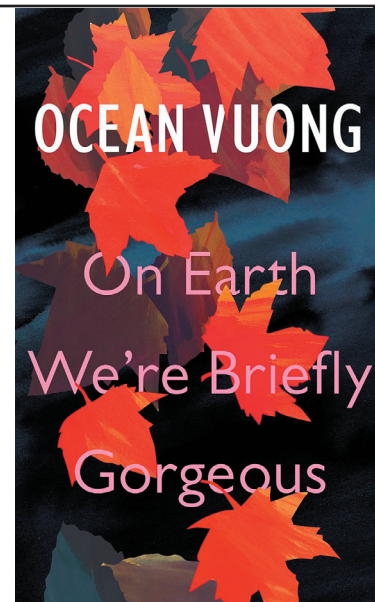
His poems are show-stopping, there's no doubting that. But his debut semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is one of a kind, a story that can only be written by Vuong himself and nobody else. To be honest, it reads like a very long prose poem, and I love it. I love it so much I made myself a ritual of rereading it at least once a year (this year is my third. And it still hits hard.)

The protagonist, much like Vuong himself, is a young Vietnamese-American man named Little Dog. Because the story is fleshed out by the memories of his adolescence, the monologue arising from the depths of Vuong's heart carries a profound, aching urgency throughout, and it's hauntingly beautiful, as if a spectre is narrating the story.

But don't get me wrong. This novel is not a story, or at least it's more than that. It is an unsent letter addressed to a mother who cannot read.

*"Dear Ma,
I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further
from where you are."*

This passage from the prologue sets the stage. As a young boy, the protagonist stepped into America, a brand-new world, alongside his grandmother, mother, and aunt. He is the only one who didn't live through the Vietnam War, yet he relives the lingering wreckage of that tragedy through his grandmother's bedtime stories and the tears that trace his mother's cheeks.



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His mother works as a manicurist and is constantly gasping for breath on the brink of poverty, and Little Dog can't help but be burdened by the self-interrogation at the essence of what a 'mother' is. While there is pure, innocent love for a mother from a son, the first chapter opens with the shocking scene of the first time she strikes him. A TV remote, Lego bricks, a jug in the kitchen that splits and splashes milk upon impact...scenes unfold where fragments of daily life suddenly transform into weapons of pain.

And yet, just as I braced myself against more memories of abuse, the very next paragraph pivots into a heartbreakingly warm scene of his mother gently taking him out for fast food after a long, terrible day.

In this novel, time does not flow linearly. True to its title, fragmented episodes rush forward like a torrent, everything passing by as a brief moment, similar to a blurred landscape from the window of a speeding train. Through the protagonist's eyes, the familiar everyday world sheds an entirely different light, taking on mystical hues.

Woven by an author who is a hopeless romantic, the prose is endlessly dazzling, enveloping the entire work in what feels like a dream. It lends a poetic sentiment that is at times nihilistic, yet somehow always warm enough to tug my heartstrings. The longer I read, the more I felt like my heart was going to break apart.

There are moments where time slows down to a suffocating crawl. Take, for instance, his grandmother's deathbed scene. The minutiae of her descent into death is vividly etched, drawing a brutally stark contrast between her vibrant memories in life and her quiet agony. As I turned those pages, I felt as though I, too, was holding my breath in the darkness alongside the three family members keeping vigil. What felt the most tragic was that, as a reader, I obviously couldn't do anything. But Little Dog was also just a boy—he couldn't do anything, too.

Alongside family being an essential part of this novel, another core of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* lies in the quest for identity. Being a Vietnamese-American immigrant, Little Dog's yearning for home verges on desperate thirst. To him, his homeland is synonymous with war. Even from the distant shores of America, Vietnam is a phantom homeland that constantly haunts the narrative, and also Little Dog's dreams.

He wants to go home, yet he cannot. This conflict carves deep scars into the boy's heart. Is home a place, or is it a person? If it's a home, where is it? The war-struck Vietnam, or the United States, a country whose language his mother couldn't even read? If it's a person, who is it? The mother who both hits and caresses his head, or the grandmother that tells stories until her last breath? Or is it the blonde boy at the tobacco farm?

Perhaps, 'home' takes three shapes for Little Dog: his homeland, his mother, and his first love.

In the summer of his fourteenth year, while working at a tobacco farm, he falls in love for the first time. He loves him, even if Trevor is ensnared by drug addiction. Their story is sweet, yet the reality looming behind: a violent father, addiction, discrimination, and a closed-off future—is incredibly cruel. In Little Dog's own words,

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A comma superimposed by a period the mouth so naturally makes. Isn't that the saddest thing in the world, Ma? A comma forced to be a period?

A continuation forced to an abrupt end. I am obsessed with that quote. Vuong's skills in crafting the most evocative sentences is unbeatable. Some people say the book is so good they can't put it down, but I do. 'A comma forced to be a period' made me stand up from my seat and pace around the room. I think it's impossible not to get your life a little ruined by this book.

Still, on earth, together with him, we are briefly gorgeous. I believe it.

In Vietnamese, the word for loving someone and remembering someone is the same. "Do you love me?" My mother sometimes asks me over the phone. For a second, I hesitated, wondering if she asked, "Do you remember me?" I remember you. And more than that, I love you.