

Episode 9 Ocean Vuong

[00:19:43]

Who's last candle?

Intro Music

Transcription Begins:

Koen: [Time:22] Hey, everybody. Welcome to you "Quote Me." I'm Koen.

John: I'm John.

Koen: And there's only two of us now.

John: Much shorter trip around the table today.

Koen: But at least we can both see each other behind our microphone stands.

John: That's right. That's right. We're really focused and intent today.

Koen: Yeah.

John: Welcome to the new Quote Me. You know, we're it's just the two of us. And we're going to we're going to mix it up and free-form a little bit on some things. So, come along for the journey. We're excited to take it, and we think we've got some good stuff for you guys.

Koen: Thanks. That was beautiful John.

John: No problem.

Koen: I was trying not to laugh.

John: You did a good job, I could tell.

Koen: Thank you. Okay, today I have once again forced you to read poetry. We were talking about Ocean Vuong.

John: Yes.

Koen: So,

John: Or more accurately, Koen will be talking about Ocean Vuong, and I will be contributing with the things that I have gleaned from my research.

Koen: Yes, I am very excited.

John: It's going to be good. We've been talking about Ocean Vuong for a while. This is one you've really been looking forward to.

Koen: Yes, I think he was on our list of people to do since the beginning.

John: Yeah, for sure.

Koen: We have a long list.

John: We, we do, guys. The content is there. We can do this for forever.

Koen: [Time 1:31] We really can. We will never shut up.

John: No. So, stick around. We got some good things coming up.

Koen: We love talking.

John: We sure do. All day, every day. Just blah blah, blah, blah.

Koen: Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

John: Blah.

Koen: We're so funny too. Let's move on.

John: Now that there's just two of us in the room.

Speaker3: Yeah.

John: We can fill the gaps a little bit more with nonsense like this.

Koen: Aren't you so happy you're listening?

John: Yeah.

Koen: So, Ocean Vuong.

John: Ocean Vuong.

Koen: He was born in what was Saigon, Vietnam. It is now known as Ho Chi Minh City. After the fall of Saigon during the Vietnamese War. He was born in 1988 and lived in Vietnam for about two years until him and his family left as refugees and stayed in the Philippines for quite a while. I don't know the exact time he left with about seven other family members. He had his mom, his grandmother and his aunt. I don't know the others, but I know those for sure. One of my favorite stories about him being in the Philippines was that they got rations of rice and they often used rice and food as currency. So, the picture on the first book we're going to talk about today, "Night Sky with Exit Wounds" is actually a picture of Ocean and his mom and grandmother, and they paid three bowls of rice for it.

John: That's really interesting.

Koen: Yeah, I thought it was fascinating.

John: [Time 3:03] While we're, we're kind of talking about the Philippines and them as refugees. I had some background information on that because...

Koen: Oh, I love that...

John: That's, that's one thing that we don't really cover in depth. And, well, at least in any history class I've ever taken.

Koen: Oh, for sure.

John: So, after the swift fall of Saigon in 1975 signaled the end of America's intervention in Southeast Asia, it marked the beginning of what will become one of the largest and longest refugee crises in history. So, over the next 20 years, more than 3 million people fled Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Thousands died at sea. They were the victims of pirates or overcrowding, and the boats were makeshift in a lot of cases, so not very sturdy, not really seaworthy, and the lucky ones made it to refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. More than 2.5 million refugees were eventually resettled around the world, including more than a million in the United States.

Koen: Wow.

John: So, I guess that's kind of more the track that Ocean's family wound up on, but just kind of having that background information. What a harrowing experience that must have been for them.

Koen: Yeah, it must have been wild. His grandmother grew up essentially as a rice farmer, spent most of her life doing that. And when they when they moved from the Philippines and became refugees in America, they got to Hartford, Connecticut. I think originally his father was with them, but soon returned back to Vietnam. I'm not sure the circumstances around that. I know that at some point he was in jail. Don't know what for. Ocean Vuong is

relatively private about a lot of his family matters. So, we just know, you know, they ended up here. Yeah. And we're glad they did.

John: For sure. Super talented fellow, as you're going to come to know.

Koen: Absolutely. So his whole family was illiterate, both in Vietnamese and English. His mom and grandmother could not speak English at all. They could not write in Vietnamese. Their Vietnamese was pretty much as he is joked, was like the poor man's Vietnamese. So at some point in his life he did try to learn more in Vietnamese and found that when he was doing that, he was using words his mom didn't know and ended up deciding just to not learn more Vietnamese so that he could stay on his mom's level.

John: Oh, wow...

Koen: Yeah, it was really sweet...

John: That's really sweet...

Koen: [Time 5:29] Because that's I mean, that's the way that they communicated in Vietnamese. And even though he's like, incredibly intelligent and he shows that very well in the English language, which is usually the opposite for people whose first language is not English or usually like smart or sound smarter, they're not smarter. They can sound smarter in their original language, but that's not the case for him. He felt that he even at one point tried to teach her how to write but felt that that changed the power dynamic in their relationship and that he was like taking away her being a mother.

John: Okay.

Koen: Yeah. I think it's a cultural thing. I don't think that like, I've never considered thought of my mother in that sense and that, like, her power as a mother is, is her power.

John: Right, right.

Koen: But I think that this is, from what I've heard and understand, a pretty common experience with immigrants where when the children come to America, they end up going through the American school system and just learning a lot more than they would have and ended up learning a lot more than their parents. And a lot of times they become their parents' translators and their teachers. And he didn't want to take away what little she had.

John: Right, right.

Koen: Which just is the way that he thinks, like we're going to talk about this more as we go through. But the way that he thinks is super interesting.

John: It is. There's a degree of like empathy and compassion that a lot of other people just don't have. He's a very thoughtful guy.

Koen: Incredibly thoughtful. I think he spends a lot of time in his mind.

John: So, for sure.

Koen: [Time 7:13] Yeah. You know, just happen that way. So, when he was in America, he, when he started going to school, he was really struggling with school. He later found out he was dyslexic. Same with his brother. And I believe his mom was also dyslexic. I'm not sure how they found that out, but it was never really a barrier for him because he later found out that a lot of authors also have dyslexia, including Octavia Butler and call back first of all, goes to Octavia Butler episode. But that didn't stop them, so he didn't feel like it had to stop him either.

John: Right.

Koen: So, yeah, he didn't learn how to, he knew how to read when he was 11, but like, he didn't learn to read on his level until he was 11. So, he was really, really behind until that age.

John: Right.

Koen: [00:08:04] But like a lot of articles are going to say, he couldn't read until he was 11. He's like: "That's not exactly true, like I could read, just not well."

John: Yes, yes. Couldn't consume to the degree that he was able to.

Koen: Yes.

John: But after that, I guess that's when that voracious appetite for learning kicks in.

Koen: All right, let's talk about his schooling.

John: All right. Nice segue.

Koen: Thank you. I really just jumping around so much information.

John: It's a lot. It really is.

Koen: So he started at Manchester Community College and ended up at Pace University. He wanted to do something that would bring money into the family. He wanted to be successful. So he tried to do International Marketing and dropped out during the first term.

John: International Marketing sounds like the thing that a kid would like gravitate to because it sounds like it would be very lucrative, just like prestigious and stuff.

Koen: It's like all kids, all kids who are like a kid when I was a kid wanted to be a marine biologist. You know, it just sounds exotic, interesting.

John: It does. Man. Marine biologist. You must be, like, really smart and successful and stuff.

Koen: Yeah, absolutely. And meanwhile, they're like, I like fish.

John: Yeah, dolphins are cool.

Koen: I mean, same with we're librarians, and it's all because we like books.

John: So, it really is simple.

Koen: [Time 9:25] Yeah.

John: I guess if you get right down to it.

Koen: Yeah. So, after he dropped out, he went to Brooklyn College and got a bachelor's degree in 19th century American Literature. And later, when he learned about MFA programs and how in-depth they were and how much they could support him as a writer, he ended up going to NYU for poetry. Some of my favorite stories from his schooling days: At one point, he heard some students talking about Shakespeare in the hallway and they were laughing about it, and he was like: "I don't I don't get it. Like, I don't I don't understand what they're laughing about." And if you know, you've ever read Shakespeare, especially original Shakespeare in like the medieval English.

John: Yes

Koen: It makes no sense. It's, it's garbled words. It's nonsense.

John: Having done a full class on Shakespeare, I can attest it was difficult at the time, we had maybe 15 to 20 folks in the class, maybe two were kind of like picking up like a half of it, you know, just.

Koen: And he makes up words, so.

John: Oh, yeah.

Koen: Just made it harder.

John: We have an episode on Shakespeare we're going to get into, and I compiled a list.

Koen: of words he made up.

John: Yeah, words. Phrases.

Koen: Yeah.

John: A fair bit of the English language seems to be traceable to Shakespeare. So, you can either celebrate him or blame him for the language, I guess, depending on your POV.

Koen: But after witnessing this interaction, he was like: "I, I need to understand." So, he just started studying Old English so that he could, like better have a better grasp on the Western canon. And then he just like got really into the Western canon and has read probably all of the classics, and we'll talk a little bit later, and how about how some of those classics have been important to his novel, but one of them was "Moby Dick."

John: Yes.

Koen: Which I've never read. I have a Bachelor's in English and I've never read "Moby Dick."

John: We've talked about this before. I was very, very young and I got like an abridged copy of it before I even knew what abridged was and read. I was like, Man, I read Moby Dick. I mean, that's, that's a big kid book, you know, like, I did something.

Koen: Yeah.

John: So, I got to know "Moby Dick," but, you know, like.

Koen: All I'm saying is that Ocean Vuong, whose first language is Vietnamese and was born in Vietnam, is smarter than us and has read more of the Western canon than we have as people who have grown up in America.

John: Yes. And he did all of this because he did not understand a Shakespeare joke one time in the hall at school.

Koen: Yes.

John: All of that was in response to that very simple, banal thing.

Koen: He's, he's so dedicated.

John: He is he really commits to something.

Koen: He really is.

John: Credit where credit's due. He puts in the work.

Koen: But after he dropped out, he did not tell his mom he was couch surfing until he found out about MFA programs. And he finally got back into school so that he didn't have to lie to his mom anymore about being in New York.

John: That's always nice. Nice when you can be on the level with your parents.

Koen: Yeah, absolutely.

John: Everything really is as fun as I'm making it out to be. We're good.

Koen: Yes. So, he was the winner of the 2019 MacArthur quote Genius grant, which if you remember our Octavia Butler episode, the genius part was just kind of thrown in, so

John: That's true.

Koen: But it is true. They are geniuses.

John: They are. They're just modest as well.

Koen: Exactly. He also won the Whiting Award and the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. He's a Ruth Lilly fellow from Poetry Foundation. He also won a fellowship from the Lannan Foundation, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, and the Pushcart Prize.

John: Anything else?

Koen: No, I got it.

John: You sure that's all of it?

John: Yeah, I'm sure. Okay.

John: Okay.

Koen: Is that enough?

John: Can you do it again in alphabetical order?

Koen: No.

John: [Time 13:38] Again, you have to give the man credit. Credit where it's due.

Koen: Absolutely.

John: That is dedication. I mean, he puts in the work.

Koen: My prediction is that he's going to be the next poet laureate for the United States.

John: I could totally see that. It'd be extremely well deserved.

Koen: Because, yeah, the last two was Joy Harjo, who is an indigenous Muskogee Creek poet. And then now it's Ada Limon, who I just adore. But I think he's he's right up there.

John: Strong choice for sure. Such a thoughtful person. I mean, just the strength of his poetry. What I have read, I will fully admit to all of the listeners now, I'm not as well read on Ocean yet as you are.

Koen: That's fine.

John: What I have read is spectacular work.

Koen: We'll get there.

John: We'll do a follow up eventually.

Koen: All right. But nowadays, he is a tenured NYU professor. He lives with his partner, Peter, and their two dogs, Tofu, who is an old police dog. He is a Shih Tzu poodle. And their puppy, Rosie.

John: I don't know. Well, a Shih Tzu police dog.

Koen: Yeah, it's a poodle mix. Poodles are the smartest breed of dog.

John: I don't know what I thought for, like, a police dog, but like a shih tzu.

Koen: Like a German shepherd.

John: Probably isn't more like that. Yeah, Just, something with, like, a reputation for being, you know, like, tough, you know? But, like.

Koen: Have you met a poodle?

John: No.

Koen: They're big and scary.

John: Are they? I just never would have thought, you know, like, for a police dog. Like poodle. Poodle Shih Tzu. That's an interesting mix. Cool, cool, cool, cool.

Koen: A few more things. A few more facts. So, he is a Zen Buddhist, a vegan and a pacifist. He meditates five times a week, sometimes probably not all the time. He did say that sometimes he's a good Buddhist and sometimes he's a bad Buddhist. But I really like this quote from him after he was talking about all of his awards as I just listed. And he says "I bring him (him being the person that fell in love with writing) to the present, not the person who won the awards. He has nothing to teach me. So, when people ask what is the secret of my success, I say Submittable." Same, my dude.

John: That's nice. Just nice, well said sir, well said.

Koen: Later on in his career, he partnered with the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center to launch the Center for Refugee Poetics at the Asian Arts Initiative. And, I did not smoothly say this, but anyway, he has agoraphobia and failed his driver's test five times.

John: Hmm.

Koen: Which is why Peter, who used to be a lawyer, just drives him around now.

John: [Time 16:33] Is that Peter's full-time job?

Koen: No, I don't think so. I'm not sure what Peter does on also, but he does help Ocean with all of his travel and when he does his readings and his appearances, so.

John: I mean, that's not a bad gig if you can just, like, chauffeur your partner,

Koen: Being Ocean's boyfriend and chauffeur.

John: That's a pretty sweet deal.

Koen: Yeah.

John: You know, like. Yeah.

Koen: Yeah.

John: Good for you, man. Live the dream. Cool, cool cool cool.

Koen: Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool. All right, well, let's get into.

John: Yeah, let's.

Koen: The first one.

John: Sure. Which one would you like to dig into first?

Koen: Let's talk about "Night Sky with Exit Wounds."

John: "Night Sky with Exit Wounds."

Koen: All right, so "Night Sky with Exit Wounds" was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2016. It was The New York Times top ten book of 2016. It was the winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award, Tom Gunn Award, and the foreword prize for Best First Collection.

John: Remember when we were talking about all those awards he got earlier?

Koen: Yes.

John: Like, man. Consistent.

Koen: I know.

John: Just. Just racking them up.

Koen: Some of those. I said twice, to be fair.

John: Okay. Okay. But, hey, I mean, that's twice. Now we've read this impressive list of laurels.

Koen: Can't wait till we get to the other two books. So, this being his first collection, talks a lot about his journey in America as a young, queer Vietnamese-American. So, a lot of the poems will touch on being an immigrant, living in a very diverse part of Connecticut. He actually said once that he didn't know that the majority of America was white people.

John: Oh.

Koen: [Time 18:26] My point about that is that living in Hartford, Connecticut, he was surrounded by poverty, people of color. He had a lot of, you know, he knew a lot of black folks and, I feel like there's I think it was black and Latino was most of his neighborhood. He was one of the only one of the only Asian families in that neighborhood was his.

John: He kind of grew up that way that we describe America as the great melting pot. You know, this this this place of such diversity and like his experience, lived experience in Hartford seemed to reflect that.

Koen: Absolutely. He talks a lot about his experience in Hartford. And when we get to "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," we're really going to jump right in there because that's where it takes place,

John: Right?

Koen: So, one of the poems I want to focus on is called Self Portrait as Exit Wounds. We're going to have you listen to a little bit of it because first of all, I just want you, the listener, to hear Ocean Wong's voice because it is very soft and delicate, and I really want him to do ASMR so that I can listen to him forever.

John: He's so soothing. I mean, It's wild. It's beautiful.

Koen: So, Adam, play the clip.

Ocean Vuong: [Time 19:43] Instead. Let it be the echo to every footstep. Drowned out by rain. Cripple the air like a name flung onto a sinking boat. Splash the cap books, bark through rot and iron of a city trying to forget the bones beneath its sidewalks. Then through the refugee camp, sick with smoke and half sung hymns, a shack rusted black and lit with boy's last candle. The hogs faces we held in our hands and mistook for brothers.

Koen: So that poem follows the trajectory of a bullet, is what Ocean Vuong said. So, all of these things that he's describing. Are the things, the places, the people where bullets have been. And he's talking about his history with violence, his history of being a refugee, and he mentions in a lot of other poems, and, especially, in "Time as a Mother," that if there was no war, there would not be him, that he was a direct product of war and trauma.

John: That's true.

Koen: His grandmother had his mom with an American soldier.

John: Right, right.

Koen: So, without the Vietnam War, his mother would have never been born and he would have never been born. So, a lot of that experience is directly reflected in his poetry...

John: For sure, like you can--the more of him that you read and then the more that you listen to interviews he does and things that he's written, you can really see him like grappling with, with violence, like in every facet of life, even down into language, which I think we're going to touch on in a little bit. But it's fascinating to me, and he's absolutely right. You know, we're a product of all of our experiences, good and bad, and it's funny that such a thoughtful person who is so peaceful is really a byproduct of such great violence.

Koen: And I think it's that connectedness with his history and this violence is how he, he has come to be a pacifist, to be so empathetic and thoughtful because he realizes the damage that has been done. But at the same time, the world would be so different if one thing had changed.

John: Yes. Yes, very much so.

Koen: Um, just because we're on a really heavy note right here, So, let me lighten it up real quick,

John: All right

Koen: I do have a fun tidbit, actually.

John: What's your tidbit?

Koen: [Time 22:49] Okay. So, Vuong started writing poetry about the time that he started writing. So, when he was in, I believe, elementary school, a lot of the assignments that would be given out to the other kids he'd generally be exempt from, they would just have him like copy paragraphs from books so that he could like learn writing and language. Not the most intuitive way of learning,

John: No.

Koen: But he was so behind that they couldn't spend time with him on that like individual level. Or maybe that's an excuse they made. I don't know.

John: It kind of feels like a cop out to me just hearing it, you know, just like.

Koen: Now that I've said it, yeah.

John: It. Yeah, this is oh, this is going to be difficult. Just, just copy some paragraphs, kid. You know.

Koen: Kind of, you know, now that you say it. Yeah, you're right. But his refuge for his whole life has been the library. And when he went to the library in elementary school, they had, like, recordings that he could listen to. So, he listened to the "I Have a Dream" speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

John: Yes.

Koen: I forgot his name for a moment there. Sorry.

John: That's okay. We got there. You said it.

Koen: And so he listened to that and he sort of just got the cadence from it and listened to the way that it was spoken. And he ended up writing his first poem. And if you want the whole story of this, it's written in an article called "Surrendering." But just to sum it up, he wrote this poem because their assignment was to write a poem and he wanted to do it. And he brought it in. And the teacher was like: "where did you find this? Where did you get this?" And he said: "I wrote it," and the teacher just refused to believe him and ended up like dumping out his desk to try to figure out who he had copied it from because he just didn't believe that he could write it. So, and I don't think we actually have a copy of this poem. I don't know what the poem is.

John: Man, I'd love to hear it.

Koen: But he was. Ocean was saying how his, like, intelligence in that moment was feared and unfathomable by this teacher, and how like just writing a poem that was good was enough to, like, freak out his teacher.

John: Right.

Koen: He's like: "No, you can't possibly. You could not have possibly written this."

John: Right, you're immediately met with suspicion and to a lesser extent, derision, I would imagine.

Koen: Yeah. Yeah. And he goes on to talk about the stereotypes of Asian students and how often, you know, the stereotype of being an Asian student is that you're really good at math or you're really good at music, and it's because you're either like you're just born with superior genes or you have like really strict parents who have like, beaten it into you, which of course is not true. Like, no, not all Asian families are like that. Not all of any family is like that.

John: [Time 26:01] Generalities aren't real things. You can't just cordon off like whole groups of like "everybody is like this 100%."

Koen: That's wild. You can't do that.

John: No.

Koen: So, he kind of just talks about how even that stereotype is in service to Eurocentricity, because when they are really good at music, they play Bach and Mozart.

John: Right, right.

Koen: So, it doesn't even like consider the intelligence or the brilliance of Eastern musicians.

John: No, no. It's when you exhibit the skill and the talent, you're fully exhibiting things from the western canon and Western culture. And it's a celebration of that.

Koen: Exactly. Yeah.

John: Yeah.

Koen: But, his point here with this story is that poetry made him feel powerful, that words and language, he realized in that moment how strong they could be.

John: I would like to take a moment to point out that it seems like the library is kind of that gateway for a lot of creative folks when they're young. Like it's that haven. It opens up language and stories. Neil Gaiman has said that about the library in his town, that he was on a first name basis with the librarians because he was just in there all the time. He read all the books.

Koen: [Time 27:27] It was same with Octavia Butler. She wrote her first book in a library.

John: That's right.

Koen: They named their Sparkspace or sorry, their makerspace after her.

John: So, you know, the library and just having access to knowledge, and these different like ways that you can access it, whether that's through recordings or the books themselves, etc. Just taking a moment to plug the library, I guess, you know.

Koen: Come to the library.

John: Support your local library.

Koen: Read something you wouldn't usually.

John: Call me biased because I am. But the results speak for themselves. You get an Ocean Vuong, and you get an Octavia Butler, you get a Neil Gaiman.

Koen: Just so the listeners at home know, John just gestured vaguely into the air.

John: [Time 28:06] I did as if these people, were doing like, a 3D projection,

Koen: They're here in the studio with us.

John: Yeah, I forget. Sometimes I get caught up in the moment.

Koen: Yes.

John: I'm doing it now very emphatically, like

Koen: I'm telling you, this needs to be a visual show. We need to have a YouTube channel.

John: Let's okay, we'll work on a green screen.

Koen: We have a green screen, first of all.

John: Well, we need to make use of it.

Koen: Good point. Good point. Moving on.

Speaker3: I pointed again to the green screen, the hypothetical green screen that we have.

Koen: We must always point.

John: Yes. Anyway, I'm sorry.

Koen: So, a theme that comes up in pretty much all of his work is the body, and especially in "On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous." He talks about like the beauty of the yellow body and

those are his words. Yellow is often used to talk about Asian folks. The way that comes through in Night Sky with Exit Wounds, is he refers to his grandmother as a rice farmer. In interviews, he's talked about how he's not the first poet in his family, he's just the first one to write it down, and how a lot of the farmers, they would sing to each other, they would repeat couplets, and it was part of their work. So even like the act of farming is poetry and the songs were poetry, and poetry is in the body. I think that's, that's really beautiful and fascinating.

John: It is. If you look across cultures like there's this this beautiful oral tradition that a lot of different folks have, you know, where things aren't necessarily written down, but everyone knows certain songs or certain stories, and they're sung during certain, you know, events or activities or functions, and, you know, it just it's a beautiful thing that creates this this chain from the past to the present to the future.

Koen: And that's, generally music and rhyme and rhythm. Poetry is how we have told stories for centuries. If you've ever read Beowulf, that was an oral history that was spoken for, for many, many years until it was written down. So there's no author for Beowulf...not really. There's lots of people who have translated it and,

John: Right.

Koen: And written it down, but the original creator like there isn't one because it's just a story that's been told for decades. And that's the same way with the rice farmers and the songs, and we see it also with the slave narratives like the cotton farmers, the slaves on the cotton farms. They would also sing.

John: Yes

Koen: And tell stories. And that has always been a part of being human and survival. And it's interesting and ironic that there's there's a poem in Night Sky that's called "A Body with Burning City" And it uses lines from "A White Christmas." A famous song.

John: Yes.

Koen: [Time 31:16] In the poem. As it's also speaking about violence. And that's because during the fall of Saigon, they played a "White Christma"s and it was like a secret message to the American soldiers to evacuate.

John: Yes. This is one of the ones that I was able to read. And I thought that was well, it was a wonderful poem, but just the juxtaposition of that song against all the action, the life that was happening in Saigon, all these different sorts of vignettes.

Koen: It's very chaotic and there's lots of juxtapositions with like the white snow, the red of blood, a dying dog laying on the road, people trampling over each other and running to escape, and people who are completely oblivious to what's going on. And it's, it's so like chaotic the way it's written. It's like all over the place on the page and you can really, like, see this devastation. And even though he wasn't even there.

John: Right.

Koen: He sort of like has this internalized trauma and this history of his place of birth, of this time where his grandma was alive.

John: Because I'm sure they've talked about, it like I mean that's

Koen: Actually, no.

John: No, they did not talk about it.

Koen: So, he was friends with poets Saeed Jones and Eduardo C. Corral. And they talk a lot about being the sons of non-English speakers, the sons of immigrants, and how I believe it was Eduardo who said he just wouldn't ask questions. It was sort of like that thing. You didn't talk about, that trauma like they've already been through enough.

John: Okay

Koen: You don't want them to have to relive it. And I think Ocean Vuong did talk about how he asked a lot of questions. I don't know how much he actually got directly from his mom and his grandmother. I know he also did a lot of research about the Vietnam War.

John: Gotcha.

Koen: And, I remember him talking about seeing the pictures and seeing the bodies and just the piles of these bodies. And they were all Vietnamese people, and that to him was just, I mean, horrendous and terrifying because they were just this thing in a textbook.

John: Yeah, yeah.

Koen: You know, like it was for him. The body is something that, you know, it's our body. It is something that tells a story, that holds a story, and it can be treated as human.

John: Right.

Koen: And treated as something that is beautiful. And it can also be treated as an object or a thing.

John: Yes.

Koen: And seeing he saw himself in those photos.

John: Right. Right.

Koen: I think that's. That's a lot. That's a lot.

John: For sure. The way the poem reads, it's so visceral and detailed. It almost could be a firsthand account.

Koen: Yeah.

John: What you're saying totally makes sense about the trauma not wanting to share. I get that. But he's. He's done such a good job of capturing it and making it just feel so real and grounded and gritty.

Koen: Well, there have been studies showing that trauma is generational. It can go from parent to child. It's interesting how that works.

John: Yeah.

Koen: I'm going to flip pages again. Flip, flip, flip.

John: [Time 34:49] Flippity flip.

Koen: Do you want another fun tidbit?

John: Yes. On the heels of I've already talked about the dead bodies. Please tell me something fun.

Koen: Let's do another fun one. Okay. So, at one of his first readings, he ended up reading at the Mark Twain house, which very cool. Goes into our Mark Twain episode. His mom came to see him. Even though she doesn't speak English, she doesn't understand English. And when he was done reading, everyone stood up and clapped. And he looks over at his mom and his mom is crying. And so, he goes over there and he's like, Mom, mom, what's wrong? What did I do? And she ends up saying. I never thought I'd see all these old white people clapping for my son. You've got to listen to him here, like, tell the story. It's so funny.

John: I mean, he's really great at storytelling, whether that's via poetry, prose or just speaking.

Koen: Absolutely. But he goes on to say that at first, you know, he just thought it was kind of funny, like he didn't really put two and two together. But his mom, when they moved to Connecticut, was a manicurist. She worked most of her life in a salon, and oftentimes she was below these older white folk. She was, you know, filing their nails, she was doing

their toenails. She was they were looking down on her, doing doing this work for them, serving them. And he realized that. In that moment, she got a chance to, like, be them, to, like, be like: "My son is a scholar. He is speaking to this room. He is above them. He's my son. I too am like, elevated to this level."

John: Vicariously.

Koen: Yeah. And so she just like for a moment got to escape her position. And that was really powerful for her.

John: Yeah. No, for sure. Just the context of, like, this woman's whole life experience, like everything she's had to go through and even coming to America and all the hardships and the working in the nail salon. And, I think there was a story, I think maybe he talked about it in a television interview where, there was a patron at the salon who would helpfully correct her on her pronunciation. Maybe you should say it this way.

Koen: Yes, this is a great story. This is a great story. This is how Ocean got his name.

John: Oh, well.

Koen: Well, there's a couple of different reasons. So originally,

John: Yes

Koen: Ocean's mom really wanted to name him after, like, a popular Western figure, like Jackie Chan or Michael Jackson. She did not do that. She did not do that. But at one point, she was at the salon and she was trying to say beach. Yes. And because of her accent, it didn't sound right.

John: No, did not sound like beach.

Koen: [Time 37:57] And so the woman was was, you know, trying to be nice. Say, hey, maybe you should say ocean instead. And so, she looked up ocean. She didn't know what it

was. She's figuring out what it was. And she realized it was this giant body of water that touched both America and Vietnam, and she, she just thought that was so beautiful, and that was like this amazing connection for their lives that she was going to rename her son.

John: And it is there's even in his name there was poetry.

Koen: His name was poetry. It's great.

John: I mean, what else could he have been other than a poet?

Koen: Honestly, he was bound to be a poet. It was his fate.

John: And what a beautiful story, you know.

Koen: Yeah.

John: Coming out of this kind of almost like microaggression moment, you know?

Koen: Yeah.

John: Maybe I'm being cynical.

Koen: But maybe I'd like to think she was really just trying to be like. You're saying a bad word.

John: Just, just after, like, the description of, like, the school experience that ocean had and everything.

Koen: [Time 39:01] I'm sure there are a lot of people who are not nice to them. And she does make a point to tell him, you know, you're already Vietnamese, you should keep your head down. That's already one strike against you. And he didn't like that. He's like: "What if I want to be heard? What if I want to be seen? How can I do that? And so, he started writing poetry." Gosh, I love this guy.

John: He's so great. And I haven't seen a clip yet you know, he's passionate, but it's always very measured.

Koen: Yeah.

John: He, he's never demonstrably angry. You know, like, I mean, even like, jumping up and down, you know, like, you know, I mean, he's always very measured and controlled and.

Koen: It's funny you should say that, because he does actually talk about anger as an energy. He, he does not like to write from anger. He thinks that anger is a destructive energy. And so, he lets you know, he not that he doesn't get angry, surely he does. And he gets sad, too.

John: We all do.

Koen: As we've mentioned, he has agoraphobia. He's he has a lot of anxiety, you know, And sometimes when all that comes down on him, you know, he gets through it and he comes back up. And now that, you know, he's stable, so to speak, he asked himself: "What can I do with that energy?" And that's free therapy for everyone listening, because that's what my therapist tells me: "What do you do with your energy instead of just be mad, be sad", like he wants to take that and be better. And I think he does a really incredible job with "Night Sky with Exit Wounds", really talking about, his experience of trauma and stress and suffering and being queer and an immigrant. Like he's already got basically two strikes against him and he's powered through and made something beautiful out of that.

John: Yes.

Koen: [Time 41:07] Well, on that nice note, since we finally got one.

John: We were struggling there for a minute.

Koen: It was a little dark.

John: Yes.

Koen: We got through. Let's. Let's move on.

John: Okay

Koen: Let's go to his very first and only novel.

John: So far.

Koen: So far. "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous". So "On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous" we've already briefly mentioned how Ocean Vuong talks about bodies, and with this title he wanted to dare to call colored bodies beautiful and gorgeous, especially Asian bodies. So "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous", was also a New York Times bestseller. It was published by Penguin Press in 2019, was the winner of the 2019 New England Book Award for Fiction and was translated into 37 languages. Can you imagine writing something deemed so important? That they were like: "We need the entire world to read this book."

John: In my dreams yes. Maybe one day if I work really hard. But wow. I mean, just like-- no everybody needs. Everybody needs this.

Koen: Please read it.

John: What a compliment.

Koen: [00:42:26] Wow.

John: Is there a greater one? You're of global importance.

Koen: Translating it into 38 languages.

John: Can you ever walk through a door again with your overinflated head? You know? I don't know.

Koen: Your head's too big it can't fit through the door. No, He seems to be very, very humble.

John: No, he does. He does. That being said, you know, it's like, man, 38 languages if you know, 37 languages. My ambition came through a little bit.

Koen: Yeah you got to calm down. 38. That's too many.

John: Yeah. All right, let's dig in, shall we?

Koen: Yes. So, this whole novel is an epistolary novel, which, if you don't know, is often a novel written in letters or some other form that is not like direct narration. So in this case, it is several letters written to the character's mother. Much like Ocean his mother is also illiterate and doesn't speak English and will never read these letters. This book is semi-autobiographical, so some of it is true or based on Ocean's life. Not all of it. He does not say which is which. I think after doing some research, we can discern parts of it.

John: Sure.

John: But yeah, let's, let's get into it, so.

John: That was a brief and gorgeous description, by the way.

Koen: Thanks.

John: [Time 44:02] The intake of air that.

Koen: I've been watching, I'm going to, sorry, tangent real quick, I've been watching Blow it Away, and all they do is like bad puns. So, it's like, just not ready for that.

John: Everything's crashing together.

Koen: Yeah.

John: Sorry to catch you off guard there.

Koen: My life is just all one circle of puns. Yeah.

John: There's worse ways to go.

Koen: There are worse ways to go. You're right. So, the main character of this novel, his name is Little Dog. And here's why. So, in Vietnam, sorry, I just scratch my head and there's going to be like, weird noises because I hit my headset. So, in Vietnam, parents would often name their children, I think it was named the ugliest or the weakest child, something that is ugly itself or something that, like, dehumanizes them. I know this sounds horrible, like I'm going to explain why. They believed that demons would try to, like, take their children. So, if they named them something like Little Dog, they'd be like: "Oh, that's not a child. I can't take that. That's a dog."

John: Right? It would ward off the evil spirit. Bad luck.

Koen: [Time 45:19] Yeah. So, they were it was a protective measure.

John: Yes.

Koen: And it also says a lot about this character in the story. He is the only child. So, in a way, he is both the strongest and the weakest and the ugliest and the most beautiful, which is kind of interesting. But we hear a lot about just his life growing up, and most of this is written in stream of consciousness, which is a style of writing where it's not chronological, sometimes the order doesn't quite make sense it's very much just where your brain goes.

John: Yeah, you're just hopping around. Whatever thought pops into your head at that moment.

Koen: If you've ever read "The Sound in the Fury" by William Faulkner, that's a classic example of stream of consciousness.

John: Just think about your own life day to day.

Koen: Yeah, your own brain. How does your brain work?

John: One minute we think about what you want for lunch and you'll think about something from like, five years ago. You know.

Koen: If you were to just write that down, like your your literal stream of consciousness, that is what's happening.

John: Pretty disjointed stuff.

Koen: Yes. Which adds to just the very, like, chaotic nature of the novel. Another important factor of this book is that it's not written in the traditional Western style. So, a lot of our books are written like consider the "Hero's Journey," you know, you have like the inciting incident and then you'll probably have like a mentor character or like some sort of.

John: I think there's a journey to the underworld that's a part of Campbell's like cycle.

Koen: Yeah, the journey to the underworld, the like, great loss, and then, like, speaking with the metaphorical goddess and like, overcoming, and, you know, it's all about that conflict.

John: And you come back full circle.

Koen: Yes, full circle.

John: But you're changed.

Koen: [time47:18] You're, yes, you're change by the end, but you're still going on journeys through conflict specifically. In this novel, he uses a style or a technique called *Kishotenkatsu*, which is a Japanese style, where instead of conflict, it's just tension, so we're really focusing on the life of these characters and not so much like building action, climax or rising tension, climax, falling tension. Instead, it's like just things are happening and this is their life. And there's no villain. There's no hero. There's really just people in their relationships. So, it's just it's very realistic. I think it's very set in realism because your life, you know, you don't have a climax of your life.

John: No.

Koen: Things happen.

John: No. Sometimes you just have a string of days where it's just normal stuff.

Koen: Yeah. So, this this book is all just these letters of him describing things that happened in his life and his relationship with his mom and that tension and how there are really bad moments and there are really beautiful moments. And this whole time you're sort of debating with yourself, like whether or not this mother is abusive. But, by the end, you realize that, like, she just didn't have the tools to be what I personally might consider a good parent.

John: Right.

Koen: But she really does love him, Little Dog, she really does her best, but she is a survivor of trauma and abuse and her mother was a survivor of war. And they're doing the best they can with what they have.

John: The entire time I was like looking through this, it reminds me of "A boy named Sue", the Johnny Cash song.

Koen: I don't know that song.

John: Well, the gist of it, it's supposed to be a funny song, so it's like set in the Old West or whatever. And the protagonist of the song, his father named him Sue before he just left him, the boy and his mom, just vanished. And everybody picked on him because he was named Sue, but the point of it was it made him grow up tough. I think remember correctly, I'm paraphrasing, it's like whoever because of the "gravel in your guts and the spit in your eye, you know, you you thank me because I'm the one who named you Sue," something like that. So, absent father doesn't really have the tools to be what you'd probably consider a great dad, but using what he did have, he gave his his son this, and it helped him grow up tough and strong, you know, where you could make his way through the world?

Koen: [Time 50:08] Yeah, So maybe not. I mean, I wouldn't thank him for naming me Sue. Oh, no.

John: But at the end of the day, he didn't thank him. They had a big knockdown, drag out fight, like there's a whole chorus in the song, you know? I think it got really nasty. They reconciled by the end of it. I mean, there's a lot of trauma and like, you know, the point is him hunting the dad down, but.

Koen: Oh, that's that's nice.

John: But by the end of it, they kind of work things out. And he's like, maybe I'll name my son Bill or George anything, but, you know, like, yeah, something like that. So that, that was what was popping up into my head. It's like I don't have the tools to do this the way it probably should be done, but I'm going to do it the best way that I can interpret.

Koen: Gosh dang it, I'm going to do it.

John: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Koen: And you know, you realize through Little Dog that there is a lot of love there and that love awesome, awesome.

John: Awesome. It is.

Koen: Love awesome. Love, love often shows itself in service. So there's a lot of scenes where Little Dog is plucking the white hairs from his grandmother's head, or is scratching his mom's back or just doing these things for them because that's how they've shown their love. I don't think at any point they actually say I love you to each other, but you still see it and feel it in the way that they treat each other.

John: Right.

Koen: And we also find out that this mother figure has some sort of either memory problem or PTSD or, perhaps some sort of delusion. There's this really powerful scene where she's suddenly very frantic and she's like: "We have to go save my sister," and they just go along with her because she's just so crazed. Like she's like: "we have to go save my sister from her abusive husband," and they get to this house and it's two strangers. And she has forgotten that her sister moved and that she's not even in this same town, the same scenario that like this situation isn't happening.

John: Right.

Koen: So, I mean, you get to see, like just how, I don't want to say broken, I don't think broken is the right word, but just how damaged and hurt she is and how hard she's trying.

John: Yeah.

Koen: For her son. And so, we get a lot of scenes at the salon. So, we see Little Dog working at the salon. We see his mom working at the salon. Later on, Little Dog gets a job at a tobacco farm where he meets Trevor, and when he meets Trevor, we really get into, like, the meat of the story because that's where the importance of queerness comes in. And also, the opioid epidemic. The opioid epidemic was mostly heroin, and it was something that, like people didn't quite understand the dangers of at the time, and just got completely addicted to it. And it was such a big problem that there were so many people

dying and there was so much shame around that kind of death that, like, they wouldn't even get a funeral. So, Ocean talks about Little Dog and Trevor experimenting with drugs and how that affected their relationship, because Trevor is also the son of a single man. He's not a very mentally healthy boy,

John: Right.

Koen: You know, they both have this history of abuse in their families and they're both trying to have a good, real relationship. But there's so many scenes where we see Trevor. Like, there's one quote that really sticks with me where Trevor says: "Do you think you'll be gay forever? And Little Dog says: "Yeah. And Trevor says: "That's crazy. Like. I think it's. I think I'm going to marry a woman someday." You know, he's he's sort of like, not allowing himself to be himself.

John: Right.

Koen: He's thinking of this as like a little secret or like a phase or something fun to do when he's a teenager. He's not taking it seriously. And the point that Ocean was making with that is that Trevor, as a white American, is supposed to have all of this freedom.

John: Yes.

Koen: And yet he's not free. He's not free to express himself or be himself or love who he wants to love. And so, they're realizing that, like their shame is different. Little Dog isn't really ashamed of his queerness.

John: No.

Koen: Not in the same way that Trevor is, so I think it's a really interesting juxtaposition with them. And there are really beautiful scenes where it's just very tender and intimate and it does seem like for a moment they're experiencing love for each other.

John: But Trevor has this expectation is just always there and it's always going to be kind of like his, his ultimate sort of outcome. He won't allow himself to have a different outcome.

Koen: Yeah.

John: So, there's a tragedy, there's a tragic element to it.

Koen: And I'm not going to spoil the ending because I really think you should read it, and it's a relatively new book, so I don't want to spoil anything, but it is just a really fascinating story about Little Dog and his relationships, and how he's trying to love and show love and the tension that is in all of these relationships, and it's just beautifully written. It was it's been called like a prose poem, which I think in many ways it is because it's a very poetic lyric language. And Ocean does have an article where he talks about the ten books that he needed to write his novel. And some of those are: "Moby Dick," Go Say [sic "Tell"] it on the Mountain."

John: [Time 56:22] "Beloved," I think.

Koen: Yeah, "Beloved," that's right. There was Toni Morrison. There's a couple of books that are outside of the literary canon, especially with "Beloved" he, he draws parallels between his mom and the characters in "Beloved." But, John, you had some information about "Moby Dick?"

John: Yes. So, Moby Dick, as I said, was one of the ten books. He said that he needed to write this novel. There's a lot pulled, a lot more pulled from Moby Dick than you might think on the surface. So, Moby Dick was kind of a radical sort of novel in its time, more than you might realize on the surface, and Ocean was really inspired by that. He said that Melville, in writing Moby Dick, embodied Walt Whitman's concept of American multiplicity better than Whitman had in any of his work. So. You have all these ideas like queerness, and polytheism and all these different modes of being as an American, like on display in this book--concepts that were much more radical and outside the norm within American culture and Ocean really gravitated towards that, and that's something he really wanted

to capture in his novel, just having this queer immigrant character who is grappling with, like opioid use and all these these things that, you know is going to be outside the realm of experience for, you know, a typical native born American, so. That was a big, big thing for him, and the metaphor of the whale itself, you know, this this elusive goal that's just, just out of reach. It's his, it's his relationship with his mother, you know, that's, that's what he's after, that emotional catharsis with her and--it's the kind of thing that you look at it at first. It's like: "Moby Dick. How did you how did you get there?" but once you really start digging in, you can really see that this was a huge touchstone. And I just thought it was really, really cool, really interesting.

Koen: He talks about the boldness of the narration in Moby Dick. He called it uncompromising in the way that it followed curiosity. And Moby Dick is also epistolary in that it is like a series of essays and logs. It's kind of like a journal, so it's not. It's not like a chronological story in the way that we're used to. It is very unique, you know we're getting bits and pieces of it through a singular lens. Another one of the important themes in "On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous" is masculinity, which is also tied to the queerness, so for Trevor, his masculinity is coming into question because he feels as if his queerness is antithetical to American masculinity.

John: Yes.

Koen: So, again, that comes in with like his shame and how that takes away from his freedom. But this is also something we see throughout Vuong's work in "Time is a Mother", which we're going to get to last, there's a poem called "Old Glory," which is essentially a list of phrases like: "Knock Em Dead" or "Total Overkill," and it just speaks to the violence in our language, especially when it's like masculine language.

John: Yes. Well, backtracking a second, like talking about like "A Boy Named Sue," the Johnny Cash song, that the whole song is kind of rooted in that idea, right? It's like you take a more traditionally feminine name, like Sue to make the boy tough, you know? And it causes them to get into fights, and have this this violent relationship with his father, etc..and just all the problems with something like that, that that paradigm. Why is that necessary? Why do we have to, like, set ourselves up that way?

Koen: Why is American masculinity so tightly bound to violence?

John: Yes, that was the idea, right? It's like I'm going to name him, I'm phrasing it better now: "I named him Sue, so he'll be tough. So, know how to fight and take care of himself and defend himself."

Koen: To make him more masculine. So, this make it feminine name is going to make him more masculine?

John: Yes.

Koen: And so it's interesting that usually in the Western ideology, if you are born a man, and you aren't masculine, somehow that's seen as like a failure and Vuong takes that and turns it on its head and how like in queerness and in becoming more yourself, your failure becomes self-knowledge.

John: Right.

Koen: [Time 1:01:34] So he has this quote where he says: "We fail into our future, fail into pleasure." So, he uses these moments of things going wrong in his relationship with Trevor and his relationship with his mom as moments of learning and overcoming and understanding himself better.

John: And this idea, it's something that he experiments with a lot. During the course of the research, something I saw is like, there's this idea that in Western writing, you know, that if you use the same theme for more than one thing, it's played out, you know, but coming at it from a more Eastern standpoint to revisit the same themes constantly is more celebrated because how can you possibly fully encapsulate everything that you could ever say with that theme in one go?

Koen: Yeah, and I think he's mentioned that, that he's still got all these thoughts. He still hasn't gotten it out. You know, and he talks, you know, all the all three of these books are

very closely related in searching and discovering his identity and himself better. And you can see that if you read from chronologically published books, you know, we start with "Night Sky,

John: Right?

Koen: And go through the books as they were published. You see how things are changing and how his voice is getting stronger and how he's understanding these themes better. And it kind of brings me back to a couple of episodes ago we mentioned Stephen Graham Jones and how he said: "We've only got one story and we just keep retelling it," And I think that's what's happening here. It's just maybe a little less subtle.

John: Yeah.

Koen: But it's still interesting to read and I learned something new from each book. It doesn't become redundant at all.

John: No. As you grow as an artist, you'll find new ways to kind of tackle the material or you'll see a new avenue to approach it that maybe you just didn't consider before.

Koen: Yeah.

John: So, it made total sense to me.

Koen: [01:03:49] Yeah.

John: Just again, like we don't have to get it all in one bite, and if you like a certain kind of story, why not let that author have another crack at it? You know, like.

Koen: Yeah, do it again. Yes.

John: There was an essay that he wrote with The Paris Review that kind of ties into this. It's called "Reimagining Masculinity," and in it, he talks a lot about the traditional idea of American masculinity, but how it's also reflected in language, kind of like what you were saying before you killed it. You crushed it. He's a beast, guns blazing. And within the course of the essay, he mentions that we need to come up with excuses for gentleness and tenderness because there's no room for that in American masculinity, how there's no room for someone like him and someone who is queer and more gentle and loving naturally. He talks about how in order to be close and tender with him, another boy had to say "no homo" in order to facilitate that, and it's like: we needed to have a magic word to facilitate something that should just be natural that you shouldn't even need to explain.

Koen: [Time 1:04:59] Right. How. Okay, let's do a little thought experiment. How would you rephrase those like, common phrases? So, you killed it.

John: You did a great job.

Koen: Okay, but like...

John: I'm proud of you.

Koen: Maybe some, but like, what really packs that punch, because "you killed it" has more of a punch than "you did great," like...

John: It does. But. But I guess the point, you know, it's just telling that it's all, like, rooted in, like, a violent thing.

Koen: Yeah.

John: I don't know how you would change it off the top of my head.

Koen: How do you, like, pack the same punch without the violence? That's an interesting question.

John: It is an interesting, I never considered it before until I read his thought on it. He does that so much with language.

Koen: Because he talks about how it becomes subconscious. If we think in all of these violent epithets, how does that affect our actions?

John: Right.

Koen: I just really like, I'm going to say this a million times, I love the way he thinks and the way he takes language and sort of turns it on its head. And another way that he does that is by addressing his mom directly. So, in in this book, you know, it's a letter to his mom, but also Little Dog's mom, and it's also a letter to the reader and to America, and he does this again in a poem called "Dear Rose", but he doesn't more directly where he actually says, like he's saying "you" throughout the poem and you assume the you is his mom. It's Rose, by the way her name was Hong, which was Vietnamese for Rose. But then he actually says: "You the reader" so, at some point in this narrative, you--the reader, you--the mother, you--America is all becoming conflated. It's I mean, how do you wrap your mind around that? It's like you, the reader are also the poet's mother. You are nurturing. You are in her mind, you are in his mind. You are like taking a step into I think, that's kind of his idea of like gentlemen, gentleness and intimacy and how masculinity can be those things you, as the reader, are doing those things.

John: Yes. This is why he got the MacArthur grant.

Koen: [Time 1:07:15] This is why he is a genius.

John: If you will. He wouldn't say that. But we can say that.

Koen: We can say because he is. All right. Let's talk about "Time is a Mother."

John: "Time is a Mother." Let's go.

Koen: First and foremost, it was published by Penguin Press in 2022. This is his newest collection of poems. And it talks mainly about grief and loss, especially about the loss of his mother, who died at the age of 51 due to cancer. And one of the poems that reflects that really simply but beautifully, is "Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon worker." And all it is a list of the month and what was purchased. And a lot of it is, you know, nail polish, bleach, hairpins, Advil, and we see all of these chemicals that she's been working with and we see more and more Advil being purchased. And then by the end, we see the scarf that she buys to cover her head after she's lost her hair, and then it just ends with November. wool socks. Grey One pair. It's something so simple and small.

John: It's a very creative, nontraditional way to tell a story in a was super impactful way.

Koen: Just, you know, letting the objects tell their own story.

John: Right. You can connect the dots and draw the conclusions.

Koen: It's, oh, I was so sad reading it.

John: There, there was a poem we had to read in college or it was shared or something like that. It wasn't even really a poem. It was like a short story, but it's like a "Baby booties for sale never used."

Koen: Was it like a two-sentence story? Yeah.

John: Yeah. I mean, just like, you know. Because, you know, you get it.

Koen: You get it right away.

John: It's just so impactful. And that is what he's doing here is evocative of that for me.

Koen: Yeah. But again, I want the listener to listen to his voice. So, Adam, we're going to play, "Not Even" so. Please enjoy.

Ocean Vuong: Hey, I used to be a fag. Now I'm a checkbox. The pen tip jabbed in my back. I feel the mark of progress. I will not dance alone in the municipal graveyard at midnight, blasting sad songs on my phone for nothing. I promise you, I was here. I felt things that made death so large it was indistinguishable from air.

Koen: Something I really like about this poem is it's very colloquial, very conversational. It just starts with, "Hey," period. And that's one stanza, by the way.

John: [Time 1:10:13] Done. Great day's work everybody.

Koen: Done. Moving on.

Koen: I remember him, Vuong, talking about the structure of this poem, and how in school one of his professors described the lines like branches in the tree, and how eventually they had to stop. You had to move on to the next one. And so, there were two parts of the poem, the part that was the line, the space that was taken up and the empty space. And so, his thoughts behind writing this poem was: "What if the tree branch just kept going?" And so, listeners, I advise you to actually look at this poem while you listen to it. I'm going to show John how it's just really long lines. The stanzas are all just really long lines and they just keep going.

John: It looks more like prose than poetry.

Koen: Like it does and it doesn't. It's weird how it does that. But he's talking about in this poem, again, we're back to queerness and how it has caused him, how it has been a struggle to be queer in America. And I really like this line where he says: "...our sorrow, Midas touched, napalm with a rainbow afterglow."

John: Oh, man.

Koen: Where he's talking about, like, if you know the story of Midas, he was very greedy and everything he touched turned to gold. So, sort of like the sorrow becoming. Solid and heavy, but also valuable.

John: Hmm. Hmm.

Koen: And so, in this poem, he goes on to talk about, like, it's very rhythmic. He talks about music and parties, and I think it's a reference to his time dealing with addiction. And this is also the poem where he says the title of the book, which is "Time is a Mother." And I want to briefly talk about that title because it's. It's so evocative. Yes. So, when you hear it, "Time is a mother," there's another word that you think of. I can't say it, but I think. I think. I think you get what I'm going for.

John: [Time 1:12:32] For sure. Maybe the title was cut short.

Koen: It's cut short. There's another word there. Yeah. So, in one way, time is, is cruel. It's a jerk. It keeps going even when you want it to stop.

John: Yes.

Koen: But also, time is a mother. It is nurturing. So, it's interesting the way that he's taking this title and he's referencing the time he's had with his mother. And he's sort of conflating these ideas. Time is like his mother. Complex. It's not simple, it's not straightforward. And regardless of what you want it's gonna keep going.

John: Yes.

Koen: His mom kept living her life and eventually lost her life. And despite not wanting to accept that. He has to move on.

John: Right.

Koen: And I think that's the idea that he's really struggling with there is that he's got to go. You know, you can't. Stop there forever.

John: No, but it's a hard thing to do.

Koen: Yeah.

John: A lot of things at play there.

Koen: There's a lot of good play with language there, too. He mentions the Vietnamese words for love and weakness are very similar. It's the only difference is like the way that you say it. I'm not going to say it because I don't know how to speak Vietnamese.

John: That's fair.

Koen: But that's also interesting, is that we often see sadness and grief as a weakness, but it's really just a reflection of our love.

John: [Time 1:14:18] That's a beautiful way to look at it. Yeah. It's like the shadow of love.

Koen: The shadow of love? Yeah. And so, by the end of this poem. He just keeps repeating "enough," both in the sense that he is enough, he is worthy, and also that's enough. Enough of that. It's time to move on. So, I think there's a lot of dual meaning in this poem, and it can be read different ways.

John: All of them equally valid.

Koen: All of them equally valid. And also, Vuong would agree with me. He has said that part of art and making art and writing is that you can only portray so much and the rest is up to the reader, so part of art is your interpretation. I think I've said I've said this before. I think it was a, it might be an episode that's not out.

John: It could be.

Koen: It could be.

John: We talk a lot.

Koen: We sure do.

John: Outside of the podcast and, you know, within it, of course, and, you know

Koen: Gosh, we love to talk.

John: We sure do, and especially about this kind of thing.

Koen: Yeah.

John: This isn't just put on folks. We enjoy talking about literature and poetry and things, on the side.

Koen: On the side. You know. But grief is not stationary and it is something that Ocean Vuong has dealt with a lot in his life. And there's an article that we both read that we thought was very powerful where he talks about his uncle's suicide.

John: Yes.

Koen: [Time 1:15:57] And he talks about his Buddhist tradition and what they do after someone dies and how they offer them food because the ghost still needs to be nurtured. And they talk about the incense and going over to his house and the prayer and just, what they had to do in order for his spirit to move on. And that's always really fascinating to me because, you know, we're very familiar with like the Christian Western type of funeral where there's the casket and the pallbearers and the wake and then the lowering, and that's, you know, that's all we really know about death. And I often think about how death is different and in other cultures and how death can be a sort of knowledge rather than an ending.

John: Yeah, there's. Our conception of it, it feels like there's a much greater degree of finality.

Koen: Yeah.

John: Versus this where you have the hungry ghosts or like certain, like festivals and holidays.

Koen: The fluidity between life and death and spirits and. Yeah.

John: It's not as hard a stop for other cultures, which is really interesting. Just talking about his uncle's suicide. He talks in one particular article about what a blow it was, and, you know, he just he went out for a walk and, you know, he, he spent a lot of time grappling with the act itself. The, the violence of taking oneself out of the picture is how he referred to it. And while he was on his walk, he noticed fire escapes, fire escapes on the sides of the buildings, and it got him thinking as he does.

Koen: He does a lot of that.

John: He's, you know, just such a thoughtful fellow, always doing them. But he thought about fire escapes as a metaphor--fire escapes as a release valve for, of course, there's the physical application you get on the fire escape to escape the burning building.

Koen: [Time 1:18:16] Right.

John: But, the metaphor itself. The example he gives is: "Are you okay? Are you okay? People ask you that. Oh, yeah. Good, good, good, good, good, good." But very rarely do we probably, like, fully mean that we just shut down and don't want to communicate. So, he talks about how that language is a failure, how we don't really have that proper fire escape anymore to, like, let ourselves out and be vulnerable, that we need help.

Koen: I think. Yeah. So, in a way, what he's saying is that. We don't talk about mental health enough, first of all. But his uncle was trapped in the fire.

John: Yes.

Koen: And didn't allow himself to use the linguistic fire escape.

John: Yes.

Koen: Of discussing what was wrong. And again, that comes into like that masculinity that, that failure to be tough. Um, I don't know why we put this pressure--it's a very Western thing. We put this pressure on men to be tough. "You can't. You don't have feelings."

John: Yeah

Koen: [Time 1:19:22] That's just dehumanizing.

John: We all have feelings, you know?

Koen: You got them. Yeah. You got to talk about them.

John: That's right.

Koen: So, I guess this whole, like, ponderous that he has here is. Is what kind of linguistic fire escapes can we create or can we have? How can we communicate effectively instead of bottling it up and end up being violent against yourself?

John: Yeah, his, his precise phrasing was: "our 'How are you?' has failed us. Now we have to find something else."

Koen: Because, 'How are you' is that thing. It's kind of like. Hello? Yeah, it's sort of like a meaningless greeting now.

John: Yes.

Koen: Now, you know, you just say "good," you know, because you don't want to continue your conversation,

John: Right? I mean, you've got to keep moving. You've got to do your thing. You, you don't necessarily want to be vulnerable that way.

Koen: It's become meaningless.

John: Yes.

Koen: In that way. And so I think the way that he thinks about language is so different and unique because he has this background. And so, seeing him handle the English language with such grace and surprise. I'm always surprised.

John: It's like he really does. He stops and he steps to the side and he he analyzes it. He really like, kind of breaks it apart, looks at the pieces, the context of it, and in ways that we don't typically think about our day to day going through it that, we maybe have forgotten is the way that it should be approached, especially in this case.

Koen: I think what he's really doing with "Time is a Mother", is trying to bring us back to how to handle our emotions, how to how to handle the energy of grief, and how to turn that energy into something that is beautiful.

John: Yeah.

Koen: He also talks about his partner, Peter. In "Nothing," which is a prose poem. He talks about just the very mundane act of shoveling snow and. I just love the way he can take something so small. Something that you would easily forget.

John: Yeah.

Koen: And he makes something. Enormous out of it. Um. I don't have words. I just don't have enough words.

John: Like you said earlier, love is in service. Actions. There's that old expression. Actions speak louder than words. Like a simple action can be such a loaded thing.

Koen: I think he even says that there's not really a word for love in Vietnamese.

John: Oh?

Koen: Not exactly.

John: Right.

Koen: [Time 1:22:18] So. And it's just because that's not how they show it. It's it's very interesting. I love seeing into the mind of someone who is raised so differently from I was. I like being able to see how the world is reflected through their lens rather than my own. Yeah, I think he just he allows you to consider things in a way you may have never done before.

John: Yes. And just based on what we've talked about today and what little I've read, you know, there's a lot of value in it. I mean, just to, to stop and consider and,

Koen: Yeah

John: Be thoughtful about the things that we say, you know, we think nothing about it, but,

Koen: To throw in a little cliché, stop and smell the roses.

John: We've worked in quite a few of those tried and true little old sentiments to that.

Speaker3: Yeah, we did.

Koen: So, to close us out, I would like to share a fun little quote from Ocean Vuong himself. He talks a lot about the different poets and authors that he really enjoys, and he mentioned that he loves the romantics and their big ideas, their unrestrained lyricism. If you want to know more about the Romantic Movement, we do have an episode coming out about Percy Shelley, so tune in for that one. But he says: "for me it is like performing

literary drag. I've returned to the 19th century, taken the subordinate clause, and reused it to overexertion with earnestness." That's such a, writerly thing to say.

John: It is. I don't know if there's a better way to put that.

Koen: Just say I am an author.

John: [Time 1:24:18] Just like that.

Koen: Yeah, that's what I do all the time.

John: I am an author.

Koen: I am an author. I have published things.

John: And you have.

Koen: Thank you for acknowledging me.

John: You're welcome.

Speaker3: Thanks. Well, this has been Quote Me with just the two of us.

John: Thank you guys for tuning in to this first episode, and a very special one, because, again, Koen's been looking forward to this for a long time. I think the earnestness and the passion for Ocean really came through today.

Koen: Can you hear my brain moving? At least I didn't start shouting. I think I did that in one.

John: You've shown an impressive degree of restraint today.

Koen: Thank you. Thank you. All right, that's it, folks.

John: Thanks for joining us, guys. See you next time.

Koen: All right. Bye.

John: [Time 1:25:15] Bye.

Outro music

Transcription Ends:

JBD Jan 6, 2023 5:53 PM

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