

Ocean Vuong: Because It's Summer / Seventh Circle of Earth / Eurydice

"You've lied about where you're going..."

Part two of *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* mostly takes place during Ocean's adolescence and deals with growing up as a teenager in America. While the themes of this part are rich and varied, many poems touch on the theme of Ocean's sexuality as a young man who is attracted to other men. *Because It's Summer* is one of several poems that revolve around Ocean's romantic and sexual encounters. After telling his mother he's going on a date with a woman, instead he hooks up with a boy he has never met. The two share a sexual experience, something that, looking back years later, Ocean is thankful for.

Both *Seventh Circle of Earth* and *Eurydice*, in different ways, deal with the theme of being gay in America. *Seventh Circle* begins with an epigraph taken from a newspaper reporting the death of a gay couple who were murdered while they slept. The poem is presented as footnotes on an otherwise blank page. Vuong reimagines the scene between the two lovers, turning their final moments into a scene of love and tenderness, even as their house burns around them. By contrast, *Eurydice* is a poem that subtly evokes the difficulty of having a gay identity in a society that can be hostile, distrustful, and dangerous.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What time does Ocean bike to the baseball field to meet his date?

- (a) 6pm
- (b) 9pm
- (c) Midnight
- (d) 2am

2. What is his date wearing?

- (a) A plaid shirt
- (b) A baseball cap
- (c) Levi jeans
- (d) A leather jacket

3. You smear your neck with... what?

- (a) Aftershave
- (b) Soap
- (c) Lipstick
- (d) Face powder

4. *Seventh Circle of Earth* is a tribute to a gay couple who were murdered in which year?

- (a) 2000
- (b) 2011
- (c) 2016
- (d) 2021

5. Speak until your _____ is nothing:

- (a) Voice
- (b) Tongue
- (c) Words
- (d) Breath

6. How were the gay couple killed?

- (a) Beaten
- (b) Shot
- (c) Immolated
- (d) Drowned

7. What is the last word of *Seventh Circle*?

- (a) Live
- (b) American
- (c) Match
- (d) Shadow

8. Which animal dies at the beginning of *Eurydice*?

- (a) A dog
- (b) A doe
- (c) A bird
- (d) A giraffe

9. Silly me. I thought _____ was real:

- (a) Love
- (b) Fire
- (c) Death
- (d) My body

10. At the end of *Eurydice*, the grass is described as... ?

- (a) Wilted
- (b) Dying
- (c) Crisped
- (d) Frosted

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What are some of the ways you think Vuong capture the youthful energy of a forbidden sexual encounter in *Because It's Summer*?
2. What do you think this encounter meant to Ocean at the time? Why is it such a meaningful moment in his life?
3. Look carefully at the things that are burning in *Seventh Circle of Earth*. Can you comment on the symbolism or surreal imagery of one or two of the things that are being consumed by flame?
4. *Seventh Circle of Earth* was originally published as a blank page with footnotes containing the content of the poem. Can you comment on the choice of publishing the poem in this unusual way?
5. How can you interpret the death of the doe in *Eurydice*?
6. *Eurydice* is challenging because it is so vague. But vagueness and ambiguity are an essential part of this poem. For instance, Vuong writes about how people can look different depending on where you stand. He also writes about how the sound of a name can change. Why do you think ambiguity and change is so important to this poem?

Poetry Study: lyric poetry

“Frosted grass snapping beneath her hooves.”

Eurydice and, to a lesser extent, *Seventh Circle of Earth* and *Because It’s Summer* are written in the lyric style. **Lyric poetry** has the primary function of eliciting emotion, rather than with telling a coherent story. Many lyric poems do not have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Rather, lyric poems suggest events and craft images that convey emotions. Lyric poems can sometimes be ambiguous and even challenging to read. Elements do not always correspond to the conventions of storytelling. For example, in *Eurydice*, ‘gravity’, an invisible force, acts as if it has agency. First gravity touches the speaker’s companion... then suddenly turns against them, breaking their knees and forcing them to look up at the sky. Also, the appearance and even the name of Ocean’s companion changes ‘*depending on where you stand*’. The meaning of these events is less important than the emotions conveyed: anxiety, uncertainty, fear, and pain can be felt when reading these lines. In *Because It’s Summer*, Ocean alludes to events that are yet to happen from the point of view of the speaker in the poem. He says, ‘*it’s June until morning you’re young until a pop song plays in a dead kid’s room water spilling in from every corner of summer.*’ The chronology of this line is almost impossible to follow – but that’s not to say the reader cannot feel the urgency of a youthful summer that will be over too soon, and ends in tragedy.

The title of *Eurydice* also provides a way to make meaning out of the lyric poem. Eurydice was a nymph, a semi-divine creature of the natural world, who fell in love with Orpheus, a musician of unsurpassable skill. They planned to marry, but on their wedding day Eurydice was fatally bitten by a snake. Her heartbroken husband travelled to the underworld and bargained with Hades for her life, singing of his love and sorrow. So moved was Hades by Orpheus’ music that he agreed to let Eurydice leave the underworld as long as Orpheus guides her out. However, Hades decreed that Orpheus must lead her without looking back; should he turn to find her, the bargain would be broken. Orpheus agreed and led Eurydice to the surface. Just as she was about to step into the sunlight, he turned to look at her. Too soon! Eurydice was yanked back, and the passage closed forever. In some ways, Ocean and his companion resemble Orpheus and Eurydice. References to music (‘*chord*’), song (‘*my voice crackling like bones inside the radio*’), and the tenuous connection between the two (‘*I thought love was real & the body imaginary*’) suggest ideas about what it means to fall in love in a society where same sex relationships are fraught with danger, uncertainty, and anxiety.

Activity

Pair up and discuss how the following elements of *Eurydice* convey emotion through **lyrical images** and **suggestion**:

- *It’s more like the sound a doe makes when the arrowhead replaces the day* – what is ‘it’?
- What is suggested by *the rib’s hollowed hum*?
- *We saw it coming* – what is coming?
- What do *green* and *pink brushstrokes of fire* represent?
- How can a *name sound like a full moon shredded in a dead doe’s pelt*?
- Why is gravity *breaking their kneecaps* and forcing them to look *at the sky*?

- The poem asks: *Why do we keep saying Yes*
- *My voice cracking like bones inside the radio* – what is conveyed by this image?
- *I thought a little chord was all it took* – to do what?
- Who is *the girl beside him*?

Literary Context: *heteronormativity in the USA*

“You want to tell him it’s okay... but he’s already fixing his collar...”

To a greater or lesser extent, the poems in part two of *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* can be read through the lens of Vuong’s identity as a gay man. He reveals the experiences of same-sex couples in America, a heteronormative culture. **Heteronormativity** is a term used when the state of heterosexuality is the regular and commonly accepted expression of sexuality. In a heteronormative culture, other sexualities are ‘abnormal’ or deviant. While it should be noted that some heteronormative societies are permissive of alternate sexualities, others control and circumscribe people’s sexual identity in many ways. These can manifest as: laws barring LGBTQ+ people from certain spaces; preventing LGBTQ+ people from displaying sexuality; restricting opportunities that would be offered to straight people; threat of violence; the lack of representation in media, culture and education, and more. Even permissive societies that do not overtly threaten gay people may be prejudiced in ways such as, for example, the common assumption of heterosexuality being the ‘norm’ or ‘default’ sexuality.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Ocean’s childhood and adolescence), the USA was a heteronormative culture. While gay rights undoubtedly progressed in America, the historical and present day culture of heteronormativity is hard to ignore. The lack of government intervention during the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s is possibly the most egregious example. Over a period of little more than a decade, this deadly virus wiped out a generation of gay men, leaving the surviving gay community bereft. Probably every gay person was touched by this tragedy and the following generation of young gay men were left without the role models and advocates who would otherwise have helped support gay identities. Later, smaller but no less painful tragedies continued to unfold. In 1998, a student called Matthew Shepard was tortured and murdered because of his sexuality in an incident that made national headlines and inspired the writing of the play *The Laramie Project* (by Moises Kaufmann and the Tectonic Theatre Project).

Having arrived in America in 1990, Ocean would have experienced the tail end of the AIDS pandemic and been exposed to homophobic hostility. In a 2020 essay (‘Reimagining Masculinity’), he recalls the undertone of the playground atmosphere in which the word ‘homo’ was flung around as a casual insult. Boys were very careful about how they treated other boys. Small acts of care and kindness could lead to danger. To take care of themselves, young gay men learned to hide, denying their sexuality to others – and sometimes even to themselves.

Analytical Writing Practice

How do the part two poems you have read create the impression that America can be a dangerous place for young gay men? Support your ideas with examples from at least one poem from part two.