Lincoln in the Bardo

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE SAUNDERS

George Saunders was born in 1958 in Amarillo, Texas, but he grew up in Chicago. When he was eighteen, he attended the Colorado School of Mines, where he graduated with a geophysical engineering degree in 1981. Upon graduation, he worked as a field geophysicist in the oil-fields of Sumatra, an island in Southeast Asia. Perhaps because the closest town was only accessible by helicopter, Saunders started reading voraciously while working in the oil-fields. A year and a half later, he got sick after swimming in a feces-contaminated river, so he returned to the United States. During this time, he worked a number of hourly jobs before attending Syracuse University, where he earned his Master's in Creative Writing. While studying at Syracuse, he met Paula Redick, one of his peers in the writing program. Three weeks later, they were engaged to be married. Within three years of their marriage, the couple had two daughters, and Saunders took a job as a technical writer. At this point he began writing books, eventually publishing his first short story collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*. Known primarily as a master of short fiction, Saunders also writes travel and profile pieces for well-known outlets like *The New Yorker* and *GQ*. In 2017, his long-awaited debut novel was published and won him the Man Booker Prize. He has also won Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships, as well as the PEN/Hemingway Award. He currently teaches at Syracuse University's Creative Writing Program.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lincoln in the Bardo takes place in February 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln's third son, William Wallace Lincoln, died of what historians suspect was typhoid. As the president and first lady grieved over their loss, the Civil War was only nearing the end of its first year, meaning that the nation was just beginning to fully grasp the magnitude of the conflict. Indeed, the war would last for another three years, totaling roughly 620,000 deaths (and perhaps even upwards of 750,000, as it's difficult to estimate the death toll of a war fought before modern recordkeeping). Nearly a year after William's death, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the nation's slaves. This is of historical significance to *Lincoln in the Bardo*, since the novel ends with the soul of a former slave entering Lincoln's body and traveling back to the White House with him—an image that alludes to Lincoln's resolve to end slavery.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lincoln in the Bardo borrows the term "Bardo" from *The Bardo Thodol*, a Tibetan text more widely known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Tibetan Buddhists use the word "Bardo" to refer to any transitional period, including life itself, since life is simply a transitional state that takes place after a person's birth and before their death. Written in the fourteenth century, *The Bardo Thodol* is supposed to guide souls through the bardo that exists between death and either reincarnation or the attainment of nirvana. In addition, *Lincoln in the Bardo* sometimes resembles Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, since Saunders's deceased characters deliver long monologues reminiscent of the self-interested speeches uttered by condemned sinners in *The Inferno*. Taken together, these two texts inform Saunders' look at the afterlife, combining these Eastern and Western theological writings with a comedic look at spirituality.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Lincoln in the Bardo
- **When Published:** February 14, 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction, Historical Fiction, Magical Realism, Experimental Fiction
- **Setting:** As the title suggests, the majority of *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes place in the Bardo—a liminal space between death and rebirth—but this particular Bardo is set in Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, D.C.
- **Climax:** The Reverend Everly Thomas sacrifices himself by moving on from the Bardo, thereby summoning a shock of "matterlightblooming" energy that blasts through a hellish tendril wrapping around Willie Lincoln.
- **Antagonist:** A tendril made out of hellish souls. This tendril wraps around children who remain too long in the Bardo, securing them in place for eternity. In a more general sense, the true antagonist of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is the Bardo-dwellers' inability to accept that they've died.
- **Point of View:** *Lincoln in the Bardo* is narrated as a series of monologues, as well as excerpts from both authentic and invented historical sources documenting Abraham Lincoln's presidency.

EXTRA CREDIT

Film Rights. The actors Nick Offerman and Megan Mullally—who are married to one another—purchased the film rights to *Lincoln in the Bardo* shortly after the novel was released in 2017.

Audiobook. When George Saunders decided he wouldn't be able to serve as the sole reader for the audiobook version of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Nick Offerman and Megan Mullally offered to become involved, eventually bringing on an array of famous actors and authors, such as David Sedaris, Rainn Wilson, Carrie Brownstein, Lena Dunham, Mary Karr, Miranda July, Ben Stiller, Susan Sarandon, and many more.

PLOT SUMMARY

Narrated in a series of monologues, *Lincoln in the Bardo* begins with the voice of Hans Vollman explaining how he died, though he won't admit he has actually passed away. Just when he was finally about to make love to his much younger wife for the first time, he was struck by a light beam, rendering him unable to consummate their marriage. Since then, he has been dwelling here, in the Bardo, where he lies in what he calls a "**sick-box**." Each night, he rises from this "sick-box" and joins people like Roger Bevins III, a friend of his who now interjects to help him narrate his story, having heard it so many times. Bevins eventually tells his own story, too, explaining that he slit his wrists because Gilbert, his lover, ended their furtive relationship. As soon as he cut himself, though, Bevins regretted it, realizing that life is a beautiful gift. Like Vollman, he doesn't think he's dead—rather, he insists that he's lying on the kitchen floor in a puddle of blood and waiting for his mother to find him.

Like all the souls in the Bardo, Vollman and Bevins physically represent their attachments to the real world, attachments that ultimately keep them in the Bardo, a transitional space meant to be a stopover for souls moving from life to the afterlife. Vollman, for his part, has an eternal (and very large) erection, which he must drag around wherever he goes. Bevins, on the other hand, has many eyes, noses, ears, and hands, all of which multiply when he thinks about the vast sensory pleasures of being alive. As these two souls explain their physical appearances, they take note of Willie Lincoln, a young boy who has just arrived in the Bardo. Children, they say, aren't meant to "tarry" here, so they encourage him to "go on," saying he must surely feel the urge to leave. Despite their attempts, though, Willie merely says, "I feel I am to wait."

As Vollman and Bevins try to convince Willie to move on from the Bardo, their friend arrives. The Reverend Everly Thomas is an older man whose hair sticks straight up and whose face is in a permanent state of shock, though Saunders doesn't yet reveal why. Like Vollman and Bevins, he too tries to get Willie to leave, and the three men take the boy to see the Traynor girl, the only other young person they know to have stayed in the Bardo. Apparently, she "tarried" so long that tendrils crept up from the earth, wrapped around her, and hardened into a "carapace," permanently affixing her to a ghastly **iron fence** that marks the limit of where souls in the Bardo can "venture." Since then, she has been unable to move, constantly "manifesting" as various horrible things. As Vollman, Bevins, the Reverend, and Willie approach, for example, she has taken the form of a "horrid blackened furnace." At first, she's unwilling to speak, instead "transmuting" into a series of dismal objects. When the group almost leaves, though, she turns into her human form and tells Willie her tale, explaining that she always wanted a baby but never grew old enough to have intercourse, despite the fact that many suitors were interested in her. Her speech is very strange and punctuated by strong expletives, all of which she has learned in the Bardo and now can't keep herself from using.

Listening to the Traynor girl has the intended effect on Willie. When he leaves the fence behind, he tells his older guides that he now wants to move on, if he's fated to become like her. Relieved, Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend prepare to say goodbye, but Willie's eyes suddenly fix on something behind them. Turning around, they see Abraham Lincoln walking toward them.

Throughout the novel, Saunders intersperses the text with excerpts from various historical accounts of Lincoln's presidency, including biographies, letters, and other archival writings. Though too numerous to list here, these snippets provide a look at the President's public life, his private life, and the wide-ranging national opinion of him as a man and leader—an important perspective, considering that *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes place during the first year of the Civil War. Using this method, Saunders describes a grand reception held at the White House several weeks before Willie's death. As politicians made merriment downstairs, Willie was upstairs succumbing to his illness. All the while, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln fretted over their boy, though the doctors assured them he'd make a fully recovery. This, of course, proved false, and Willie died several weeks later—a fact that invites equal parts criticism and sympathy from the nation.

Lincoln makes his way toward Vollman, Bevins, the Reverend, and Willie, though he can't see them. Coming to Willie's mausoleum, he opens the door and goes inside, where he slides his son's casket from the wall, sets it on the floor, and opens it. As he does so, Willie and his Bardo-dwelling friends drift into the mausoleum and watch him reach down and cradle his son's lifeless body. All the while, Willie tries to talk to his father, but Lincoln can't hear him. In an attempt to get his attention, Willie slips back into his body, and, in doing so, accidentally goes into his father's body, too. Suddenly he knows what it's like to be an adult, and he can feel Lincoln's thoughts and feelings. Beside himself with grief, Lincoln tells himself that he can return to the mausoleum whenever he wants. "Dear boy," he thinks just before leaving, "I will come again. That is a promise." With this, Lincoln exits the mausoleum, leaving Willie sitting in the corner. At this point, Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend urge the boy once again to leave the Bardo, but he says he can't because his father is going to return.

Because it's incredibly rare for a human to interact with (let alone *touch*) the people in the Bardo, many curious souls approach the mausoleum. Vying for Willie's attention, they tell their stories and hope he'll relay their messages next time Lincoln comes, though nobody knows of a surefire way of communicating with living humans. This, it seems, is a hotly debated topic, as Vollman and Bevins claim to have once influenced two people by entering them, but their exact methods weren't particularly reliable.

Suddenly, "light-blobs" descend upon the Bardo-dwellers. These "blobs" are beings sent to convince each soul to "move on." Taking the form of loved ones, they lure the souls into leaving. When a soul succumbs to this, the entire Bardo echoes with a "familiar, yet always bone-chilling, firesound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon," a beam of light that takes away the soul who has decided to leave.

When the attack subsides, Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend assume one of the "firesounds" must have been Willie leaving the Bardo, but they find the boy sitting atop the mausoleum, looking gaunt and weak. They then notice that tendrils have started wrapping around him, trying to fix him in place forever. While the Reverend tries to uproot these tendrils, Vollman and Bevins sneak off to find Lincoln again, hoping to convince him into returning so that Willie can enter him. If they can do this, they think, surely Willie will see that his father wouldn't want him to stay in such a dismal place. Finding the man sitting down on a path of grass, they inhabit his form, suddenly understanding everything about his life, including that he's president. Thankfully, Lincoln has forgotten to lock the mausoleum, so Vollman and Bevins focus their attention on the lock lying in his pocket. Before long, he wraps his hand around it and realizes he must return.

While weeding the tendrils, the Reverend admits that he's not like his friends, because he understands that he has died. Indeed, after a life of priesthood, he peacefully died, at which point he found himself walking along a path with two strangers. One, who walked in the front, was wearing a yellow swimsuit. The second was wearing a funeral suit. Before long, the group came upon a diamond palace where a Christ-emissary sat before a large bejeweled door. Calling the bathing-suited man forward, the emissary and two helpers considered at how the man lived. Finding the results quite favorable, they danced forth and sent him through the diamond doors, giving the Reverend a glimpse of heaven. The doors then shut, and the second man went forward. Unfortunately, he wasn't as lucky as the first, and when the doors opened for him, the Reverend saw into hell itself. The doors shut again, and the Christ-emissary and his colleagues went about evaluating the Reverend's life. When their initial reaction suggested that the Reverend had lived even more disgracefully than the second man, the Reverend turned and ran. Thankfully, nobody pursued him, but several beings whispered in his ear as he fled, telling him he must never tell anybody about what he's seen, or else his judgment will be harsher upon his inevitable return. After running as far as he could, the Reverend collapsed, and when he woke up, he was in the Bardo, where he has remained ever since.

Lincoln returns to the mausoleum once again, wanting one more look at his son. Realizing that the tendrils only prevent Willie from moving forward, backward, or side to side, the Reverend, Bevins, and Vollman push the boy through the mausoleum roof to be with his father. Unfortunately, the groundskeeper, Manders, appears in this moment to check on the president, and the two men agree to go back together once Lincoln takes a moment alone with his son. Manders agrees and waits for him outside, but Willie is now held to the wall by tendrils, preventing him from going into his father. As Bevins sets to work untangling the boy, Vollman tries to delay Lincoln, who is in the midst of saying goodbye for the final time while also feeling guilty, for he now knows the pain of losing a child—a form of grief he feels he has inflicted on thousands of people because the Civil War rages on at his command.

Before Willie can break free from the tendrils, Lincoln leaves, walking out into the masses of Bardo-dwellers (whom he can't see). Trying to get him to turn around, Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend jump into his body and convince all the spectating souls to do the same. Suddenly, then, Lincoln holds an entire mass of souls, including black men, white men, black women, and white women. "What a pleasure it was being in there," says Bevins, explaining that the experience of inhabiting not only Lincoln, but so many other Bardo-dwellers is deeply satisfying, "expand[ing]" each soul and allowing them to better understand one another. Despite this elation, though, Lincoln keeps walking, and the souls start dropping out one by one.

Returning to Willie, the Bardo-dwellers find that he has been overtaken by the tendrils. At this point, a bassy voice with a lisp asks if they'd like to move Willie to the roof of the mausoleum so he can remain there for eternity instead of inside the dark building. Taken aback, the Reverend, Vollman, and Bevins realize that the tendril is comprised of bean-sized people "writhing" and "twisting" their faces. These beings, they learn, are in hell, though not in the worst level. Although they all admit they've done bad things, they insist that their evilness was never their fault, since they were always "predisposed" to do terrible things. The Reverend—who still doesn't know why, exactly, he deserves eternal damnation—is disgusted by the hell-beings and their apathetic, "passive" attitude regarding their own sins. When the tendril-souls ask again if they should move Willie to the roof, the Reverend says yes. When they release the boy, the Reverend says he will carry him to the roof. Taking Willie into his arms, he dashes out of the mausoleum, running away from the tendril and setting off for the cemetery's chapel, thinking that God's influence will keep such vile beings at bay.

The tendril chases after the Reverend, catching up to him and tripping him. In the tendril's effort to secure Willie, it also wraps around the Reverend, threatening to secure him in place forever. Knowing what he must do, the Reverend shouts in fear, saying, "That palace. That dreadful diamond palace!" before succumbing to the beam of light. This successfully frees Willie from the tendril, and Vollman grabs the boy and runs into the chapel, where, to their surprise, they find President Lincoln.

The tendril reforms and waits outside the chapel, warning Willie and his helpers that it's merely regaining its strength before coming inside. Meanwhile, Willie enters his father while many Bardo-dwellers flood into the chapel through its walls. Inside Lincoln's body, Willie learns that he has died, a fact that helps him accept the fact that he must move on. When he exits, he looks around at the many souls and tells them what they don't want to hear: they're all dead. As soon as he convinces them of this, the Bardo-dwellers start succumbing to the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" in great numbers, and Willie himself does the same. Vollman and Bevins, for their part, are hesitant to admit that they're dead, but they help one another come to terms with this staggering truth. Before they leave, though, they go to the Traynor girl and situate themselves so that the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" breaks through her incapacitating tendrils, effectively setting her free.

Once Willie leaves, Lincoln feels a sudden release. In keeping with this, he stands up and leaves. As he does so, Thomas Havens—a former slave—jumps into his body and matches his strides, delighting in the feeling of being inside such an important man. In fact, Havens enjoys the experience so much that he mounts Lincoln's horse and rides away inside the president, contentedly moving "past the sleeping houses of [their] countrymen."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hans Vollman – A former printer who now exists in the Bardo. When he was still alive, Hans became a widower at a relatively young age, at which point he started drinking heavily and visiting prostitutes. Then, during a party on New Year's Day when he was forty-six, he fell in love with Anna, a much younger woman whom he eventually married. On their wedding night, Hans couldn't bring himself to consummate their marriage because Anna was so visibly nervous, so he proposed that they simply behave as friends instead of lovers. Before long, though, the couple's affection for one another grew, and Anna revealed that she wanted to have sex with Hans. The next day, Hans was struck by a beam while working at his desk. Indeed, he died on the very day he was to make love to Anna, though he maintains for the majority of the novel that he's merely "sick," upholding that he's merely waiting to recover so that he can return to Anna. Because his lusty excitement is what keeps him in the Bardo, he manifests as a naked man with an enormous erection. When Willie Lincoln arrives in the Bardo, Vollman bands together with his friends Roger Bevins III and the Reverend Everly Thomas to encourage the boy to move on from this liminal realm. Along with his companions, he does everything in his power to convince Willie that children aren't meant to "tarry"—he even enters President Lincoln's body in the hopes that the president will be able to sway the child into leaving. By the end of the novel, though, it is Willie who convinces Vollman that *he* should depart, and Vollman succumbs to the matterlightblooming phenomenon in a valiant attempt to free Elise Traynor—a girl who stayed too long in the Bardo—from her eternal captivity against **the iron fence** that marks the limits of where the Bardo-dwellers can roam.

Roger Bevins III – A young man who, before coming to the Bardo, slashed his wrists with a butcher knife because he was heartbroken. Bevins explains early on that he has a certain "predilection"—namely, a romantic preference for men over women—that society deems unacceptable. When Bevins's lover, Gilbert, broke up with him because he wanted to "live correctly," Bevins went home and attempted suicide. Right when he started to bleed out, though, he realized that life is a wonderful gift that shouldn't be wasted or taken for granted. As such, his time in the Bardo is characterized by his frequent overtures to the world's beauty. Whenever he waxes poetic about the plentiful sensory pleasures of existence, his body parts multiply, engulfing his form with thousands of eyes and ears and noses and mouths. Although it's clear that he has succeeded in taking his own life, he himself believes for the majority of the novel that he's simply lying on the kitchen floor in a puddle of his own blood, waiting for his mother to find him, at which point he will heal and set forth into the world, finally following his "predilections" with "gusto" rather than hiding his true self from society. Like his friends Hans Vollman and the Reverend Everly Thomas, Bevins takes an interest in Willie Lincoln when the boy arrives in the Bardo, doing everything in his power—including entering President Lincoln—to convince the child to move on from this transitional realm.

The Reverend Everly Thomas – A Reverend who exists in the Bardo. Unlike his friends Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III (and everyone else in the Bardo), the Reverend has no misconceptions regarding the fact that he is dead. Indeed, he understands that his time among the living has ended, but he still refuses to leave the Bardo. When he died, he very quickly passed through the Bardo and into the afterlife, where he witnessed two people receive their final judgments. The first person, a man in a yellow bathing suit, was admitted to heaven. But the second person, a man in a funeral suit, was sent to hell. When the Reverend stepped up to receive *his* judgment, he watched the beings deciding his fate respond quite negatively

when they examined him—even more negatively, in fact, than they had responded when judging the man in the funeral suit. As such, the Reverend turned and ran, stopping only when he reached the Bardo. Since then, he has remained in this transitional space, never speaking a word to his friends about this experience because several ethereal beings whispered in his ear as he ran that he would be judged even more harshly upon his return if he ever repeated what he saw. Because of this experience, his face is frozen in a look of terror and surprise, though he speaks calmly, often giving his friends and Willie Lincoln sound advice. Indeed, he tries to convince Willie to leave the Bardo, though he's hesitant to go along with all of Vollman and Bevins's ideas regarding ways to do this, since he doesn't want to act against God's will and nullify the "grace" by which he is allowed to remain in the Bardo. By the end of the novel, though, the Reverend is the one who fights the hardest to save Willie, ultimately sacrificing himself and departing from the Bardo in order to keep the boy from getting stuck there forever.

Willie Lincoln – Abraham Lincoln's son, who dies of typhoid during the first year of the Civil War. As Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln grieve, Willie goes to the Bardo, where he resolves to wait for his father, who visits his crypt a number of times on the night of his funeral. Indeed, President Lincoln even opens Willie's coffin and holds the boy's lifeless body, an act that stuns Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend, along with all the other Bardo-dwellers. Encouraged by his father's willingness to interact with his dead body, Willie ignores the advice of his new friends in the Bardo, deciding to stay in this realm even when a tendril creeps up from hell and wraps around him, threatening to fix him in place for eternity. Despite these dismal circumstances, Willie remains optimistic and good-natured, thinking that he will be able to interact with his father once again. Because of this attitude—and because Lincoln shows such an interest in his dead son—many of the Bardo-dwellers come to see the young boy as an emblem of hope, thinking he might be able to return to the living world. As such, they crowd around his crypt and tell them their stories, wanting him to relay their tales to their loved ones if he's able to go back to "that previous place." However, Willie eventually enters his father while the president remembers his funeral, and this experience helps the boy realize that he is dead. Exiting Lincoln, he tells the Bardo-dwellers the truth about their situation, yelling, "Everyone, we are dead!" As a result, souls begin departing in great numbers, and it isn't long before Willie himself succumbs to the "matterlightblooming phenomenon," which carries him away.

Abraham Lincoln – The president of the United States during the Civil War, and Willie Lincoln's father. When Willie dies of typhoid during the first year of the Civil War, Lincoln and his wife Mary are distraught. To make matters worse, he must find a way to forge forward in his duty as the leader of the Union, though many of the citizens he represents are vehemently against his efforts to keep the South from seceding and free the country's slaves. After Willie's funeral, Lincoln returns to the graveyard during the night and visits his son's crypt, where he slides the coffin from the wall, opens it, and holds his son. Unbeknownst to him, his son and many other Bardo-dwellers—including Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend—watch as he does this, shocked to see a living person interact so intimately with a dead body. As he fusses over his son, Lincoln wonders how he can possibly go on under the weight of his grief. Throughout the night—which he spends walking through the cemetery, returning to the crypt, and visiting the graveyard chapel—Lincoln periodically lets his mind turn to the Civil War, wondering if what he's doing is right and feeling guilty for inflicting so much violence on the country. Many of the Bardo-dwellers enter Lincoln's body at various points in the evening, and they feel this tension within him, a tension between his desire to fight for equality and his reluctance to bring violence upon the nation. Of course, the souls in the Bardo also witness the president's thoughts about his son, and Willie eventually discovers by inhabiting his father that he (Willie) is dead, a realization that finally encourages him to leave the Bardo. Upon Willie's departure, Lincoln feels as if a weight has been lifted. With this sense of closure, he leaves the cemetery, newly resolved to lead the country and "freshly inclined" to fight for equality, a sentiment perhaps instilled in him by Thomas Havens, a former slave who jumps into his body and refuses to leave, ultimately accompanying the president back to the White House.

Elise Traynor (or "The Traynor Girl") – A fourteen-year-old girl who cannot leave the Bardo. While she was still alive, Elise wanted nothing more than to have a baby, but she never got the chance to get pregnant, since she died so young. When she arrived in the Bardo, then, she couldn't bring herself to leave, focusing intensely on her wish to fulfill her dreams of becoming a mother. However, young people aren't meant to "tarry" in the Bardo, and so a hellish tendril emerged from the ground and fastened Elise to **the iron fence** that marks the boundary of where the Bardo-dwellers can roam. Since then, Elise has been unable to leave, and the tendrils have had a terrible effect on her. Indeed, she constantly manifests as dreadful and macabre objects. In addition, her linguistic abilities have deteriorated, though she has also learned a number of vulgar words that now pepper her sentences. Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend feel guilty for not helping the girl when they still could, since they were too busy focusing on themselves and the effort required to stay in the Bardo. When Willie arrives, the three friends take him to see Elise, hoping her situation will show him that he must leave. At the end of the novel, Vollman redeems his cowardice by using the matterlightblooming phenomenon—which occurs when a person leaves the Bardo—to free Elise from her constraints.

Thomas Havens – A former slave who now exists in the Bardo.

During his time amongst the living, Thomas never felt much anger toward his master. Telling Willie his life story, he explains that his master gave him free-time every once in a while—unless, of course, something needed to be done, in which case Thomas would have to give up his time of leisure. Interestingly enough, though, these moments of free time actually unnerved him, since they made him realize that some people enjoy entire lifetimes of this kind of freedom. When Lincoln leaves the cemetery at the end of the novel, Thomas jumps into the president and accompanies him home, remaining inside because he can sense that the man has "no aversion" to black people. Because of this, he decides to train his attention on the many injustices he and his fellow black countrymen and countrywomen have had to endure, hoping to influence Lincoln and cause him to fight against these inequalities.

Elson Farwell – A former slave who now exists in the Bardo. Throughout his life, Elson went out of his way to educate himself using whatever resources he could find. His master's family treated him relatively well, compared to most master-slave relationships, but he soon discovered that no amount of intelligence would get them to hold him in higher esteem. One day, while traveling with the family, he fell on the side of a trail and was unable to get up. Despite his cries, the family moved on. When one of the sons walked by—having lagged behind the group—he promised to send help for Elson. Much later, though, it became clear that the boy had forgotten, a fact that now enrages Elson. As such, he remains in the Bardo because he yearns to return to the living world and exact his revenge upon his master's family, scorning the years of uncontested servility he showed them. When Willie reveals to the Bardo-dwellers that they're all dead, the news does nothing to convince Elson to depart. Instead, he decides to stay because *somebody*—anybody, it seems—must pay for all the horrible things he had to put up with throughout his lifetime. As such, he starts fighting the racist Lieutenant Cecil Stone, tirelessly battling him in a physical match that seems as if it'll last for the rest of eternity.

Litzie Wright – A former slave who now exists in the Bardo. When she was alive, Litzie was raped countless times by many different men, especially the various masters she had. In the Bardo, she has no voice, though Mrs. Francis Hodge narrates her story for her when the two women approach Willie. Later, after she has jumped into President Lincoln—along with many other Bardo-dwellers—she finds her powers of speech restored and is finally able to talk once more. Not long thereafter, though, Willie reveals that everyone in the Bardo is dead, and so she and Mrs. Hodge decide to depart.

Mrs. Francis Hodge – A former slave who now exists in the Bardo. Mrs. Hodge kindly speaks for Litzie Wright, delivering the silent woman's life story to Willie. As for herself, Mrs. Hodge inexplicably has bloody stumps in place of her hands and feet. When Willie reveals to the Bardo-dwellers that they're all dead, she and Litzie decide to depart together.

Lieutenant Cecil Stone – A racist lieutenant who exists in the Bardo and brags to Willie—and anyone who will listen—that he used to rape his slaves and beat their husbands. Lieutenant Stone makes it his duty to keep the black Bardo-dwellers from mingling with the white ones. When Stone starts talking about his disgusting ventures, he grows as tall as a pine tree and equally as thin. At the end of the novel, Elson Farwell stands up for himself and his fellow black Bardo-dwellers by fighting back against Lieutenant Stone's racist vitriol, battling the man in a physical confrontation that seems as if it might continue into eternity.

Eddie Barron – A poor white man who exists in the Bardo with his wife, Betsy Barron. Eddie is vulgar and crass, even when he speaks to Willie, a mere child. Despite his crudeness, though, he exhibits a capacity for empathy that other Bardo-dwellers lack, since he considers black souls like Elson Farwell his friend. Indeed, he and Betsy have been buried in a mass grave and are the only white souls there. As such, they aren't as bigoted as many of the other people in the Bardo.

Betsy Barron – A poor white woman who exists in the Bardo with her husband, Eddie Barron. Like Eddie, Betsy is extremely vulgar and does not refrain from speaking lewdly when she addresses Willie. Also like Eddie, she considers Elson Farwell a friend and has no aversion to the black souls with whom she is buried in a mass grave.

The Three Bachelors – Three young men who never fell in love in the living world and are thus intent upon finding romance in the Bardo. The only Bardo-dwellers who can fly, the Bachelors detest commitment, refusing to do anything they don't want to do. In this way, they wait for love while simultaneously resisting the implications of what it might mean to be in a devoted relationship.

Jane Ellis – A woman who exists in the Bardo. Like many of the other souls in this realm, she makes her way to Willie's crypt to tell him her story, eventually entreating him to check in on her three daughters if he's allowed to return to the living world. Jane Ellis is one of the first people in *Lincoln in the Bardo* to depart, giving Willie—and readers—a glimpse of the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" for the first time.

Abigail Blass – A very small, dirty, and frugal woman who exists in the Bardo. Mrs. Blass tells Willie her life story, explaining that she never got what she deserved while she was in the living world. Shortly after talking to the boy, Mrs. Blass succumbs to the "matterlightblooming phenomenon," becoming one of the first people in the novel to leave the Bardo.

The Man in the Yellow Bathing Suit – One of the two men the Reverend encounters upon dying. Having just passed away and left the Bardo, the Reverend finds himself on a trail with the man in the yellow bathing suit and a man in a funeral suit. The

man in the yellow bathing suit has just died while swimming in Maine. Because he walks in front of the funeral-suited man and the Reverend, he is the first one to step forth for judgment. As the Christ-emissary and his helpers run their tests on this man, the Reverend watches in awe. Eventually, the bathing-suited man is allowed into heaven, leaving the Reverend and the man in the funeral suit behind.

The Man in the Funeral Suit – The man who steps forth for his final judgment after the man in the yellow bathing suit is admitted into heaven. As the Christ-emissary and his helpers judge the funeral-suited man, the Reverend watches in horror, since the judgment does not go well. Indeed, when the large doors behind the Christ-emissary open for the funeral-suited man, the Reverend glimpses into hell itself. Having seen how badly this man fared, the Reverend runs away when the Christ-emissary and his helpers indicate that he himself is bound for an even worse fate.

The Female Voice – A bean-sized woman embedded in the tendril that emerges from the ground and wraps around Willie to keep him from leaving the Bardo. This woman explains that she and the other bean-sized people on the tendril are in hell, though not the worst version of hell. She also offers to let the Reverend, Bevins, and Vollman move Willie from inside the crypt to the roof so that he can carry out his eternal internment outside. When the Reverend presses her for details, she reveals that she killed her husband because she found him irritating. Like the other hell-dwellers on the tendril, though, she insists that she can't be blamed for her immoral actions because she was born with certain evil "predispositions."

The Bass Voice – A bean-sized man with a deep voice who is embedded in the tendril that emerges from the ground and wraps around Willie. Like the other beings in the tendril, this man is in hell. He eventually reveals to the Reverend, Bevins, and Vollman that he was destined for eternal damnation because he and his wife conspired to kill their newborn baby. Despite this horrid act, though, he upholds that he can't be held accountable for his actions because he was born with certain "predispositions" that rendered him evil.

The British Voice – A bean-sized man with a British accent who is embedded in the tendril that emerges from the ground and wraps around Willie. Like the other beings in the tendril, this man is in hell. In his case, he was damned because he massacred an entire regiment of his enemy while in the military. Still, he insists to the Reverend, Bevins, and Vollman that he can't be held accountable for his actions because he was born with certain "predispositions" that rendered him evil.

The Vermonter – A bean-sized man with a Vermont accent who is embedded in the tendril that emerges from the ground and wraps around Willie. Like the other beings in the tendril, this man is in hell. In his case, he was damned because he engaged in sexual activity with children. Still, he insists to the Reverend, Bevins, and Vollman that he can't be held accountable for his actions because he was born with certain "predispositions" that rendered him evil.

Jack Manders – The groundskeeper who works at the cemetery where Willie Lincoln is interred. When President Lincoln arrives at the graveyard late at night, Manders lets him even though there are rules preventing him from allowing people to enter after dark. Lincoln doesn't return for hours, so Manders goes looking for him with a lantern, eventually finding him at Willie's crypt. Together, the two men walk back toward the front gate, but Lincoln confides in the groundskeeper that he feels like Willie is still with him in this place. As such, the president decides to sit a while in the chapel while Manders returns to the watchman's house. Manders records this story in the watchman logbook, addressing his account to a man named Tom. Later, when Lincoln finally leaves, Manders exchanges a few words with Isabelle Perkins—who lives across the street—about the tragedy of Willie's death.

Isabelle Perkins – A woman who lives across the street from the cemetery where Willie Lincoln is interred. Saunders quotes from Isabelle's (fictive) letter to her brother, in which she explains seeing not only Willie's funeral procession, but also the president himself exiting the graveyard late at night. Isabelle is quite sickly, though she's a young woman, and so she has trouble sleeping. As such, she waits up while sitting by the window, where she can see the cemetery and, in the foreground, the groundskeeper's house, where Manders lives.

Mary Todd Lincoln – President Lincoln's wife, and Willie's mother. When Willie dies, Mary takes to her bed, unable to get up even for the funeral. Lying under sedation, she has no idea that Lincoln leaves the White House in the night to visit Willie's crypt. In the Bardo, presumably heaven-sent beings visit Willie in Mary's form, comforting him and beckoning him to move on from this transitional realm, though Willie can sense that these beings aren't actually his mother.

Judge Carroll – A judge in Washington, D.C. who allows Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln to inter Willie in his crypt until the president and his family return to their home state of Illinois, where they plan to bury Willie on their own plot. This aspect of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is historically accurate, as Willie Lincoln lay in Judge Carroll's crypt until 1865, when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and transferred to Illinois along with his son.

Anna – Hans Vollman's second wife. Significantly younger than Vollman, Anna is incredibly nervous on their wedding night—so nervous, in fact, that Vollman tells her they don't need to make love. Eventually, though, Anna comes to love Vollman and suggests that they finally consummate their marriage. Unfortunately, Vollman dies the very next day. Although Vollman insists during his time in the Bardo that Anna is waiting for him to "recover," Bevins reminds his friend at the end of the novel that Anna visited the cemetery several years ago and told Vollman's grave that she has married another man, whom she

loves deeply. Once Vollman finally admits that he remembers this, he finds himself suddenly ready to move on from the Bardo.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Christ-Emissary – A representative of Jesus Christ who sits before a large diamond door and watches as his helpers judge whether or not the Reverend deserves to go to heaven or hell.

Gilbert – Roger Bevins III's lover. Gilbert ends his relationship with Bevins because he has decided renounce homosexuality. Although he says this, Bevins later sees him flirting with another man in a bakery—heartbroken, Bevins goes home and kills himself.

Tom – The name of a person Jack Manders addresses when writing in the watchman's logbook.

TERMS

The Matterlightblooming Phenomenon – A phrase used to refer to the rush of energy and light that occurs when a soul departs the Bardo. Whenever someone finally decides to move on from their transitional state, the matterlightblooming phenomenon claims their body, creating a "bone-chilling" "firesound" as it whisks them away.

THEMES

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

UNITY

At the outset of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, characters from many different walks of life exist independently from one another in the Bardo, a liminal space between death and the afterlife. Even though each character is in the exact same situation, these characters don't band together. Instead, they focus on themselves and their individual desires to remain in the Bardo. This dynamic changes when Willie Lincoln (the son of Abraham Lincoln) appears, as Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins III, and the Reverend Everly Thomas take an interest in encouraging the child to leave the Bardo, which is unfit for young souls. Working together with their fellow Bardo-dwellers, they do everything they can to convince Willie to leave. At one point, a large group of them even enter President Lincoln's body and try to influence *him* to help them persuade the young boy, but their plan doesn't work. However, though the Bardo-dwellers ultimately fail in their attempt to affect President Lincoln, each character is renewed and uplifted by the experience of having temporarily united as an undivided whole. In this way, Saunders suggests that unification is an intrinsically good and worthwhile aim—so much so, in fact, that it is rewarding even when it fails to bring about tangible change.

Although everyone in the Bardo occupies the same liminal realm, each soul thinks only of him- or herself. No one, it seems, ever stops to consider that they might have anything in common with another soul. To them, this kind of individualistic thinking is necessary if they want to remain in the Bardo. Roger Bevins III makes this clear when he says, "To stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one's primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else." This focus on the self naturally leads to a divided community—one that is unable to band together.

Saunders challenges this individualistic thinking when Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend enter President Lincoln's body and convince their fellow Bardo-dwellers to do the same. They do this because they hope to influence Lincoln, who is about to leave his son's mausoleum. As he walks away, the Bardo-dwellers enter him and try to get him to return to Willie's grave, hoping this will allow Willie to enter his body and see that Lincoln would want him to move on from the Bardo. In this moment, the true spirit of democracy comes to the forefront of the novel, as Lincoln suddenly houses "many wills, memories, complaints, desires, so much raw life-force." In the same way that Lincoln is subject to a cacophony of conflicting viewpoints in the real world—where people both criticize and praise him for his handling of the Civil War—here he literally embodies the spirit of unity. Indeed, a typically divided mass suddenly comes together in this moment, united with a common goal: to convince Lincoln to turn around. As they try to do this, Saunders provides a representation of the democratic process itself, in which a diverse set of people seek to inform the decisions of an appointed official by uniting to express a common will. Moreover, this takes place in a moment when the democratic process has all but broken down in the real world, with the Civil War being the ultimate manifestation of division and disagreement. As such, Saunders juxtaposes the Bardo-dwellers' spirit of unity with America's political discord, thereby showing readers what true democracy might look like.

When they come together inside Lincoln's body, the Bardo-dwellers are astonished by the effect the process has on them. As they endeavor to "harness" the "mass power" of their collective thoughts, they delight in their togetherness. "What a pleasure," Bevins rejoices. "What a pleasure it was, being in there. Together. United in common purpose. In there together, yet also within one another, thereby receiving glimpses of one another's minds, and glimpses, also, of Mr. Lincoln's mind. How good it felt, doing this together!" As he thinks this, the entire

group thinks the same, and feels the same kind of happiness. "My God, what a thing!" exclaims Vollman. "To find oneself thus expanded!" The word "expanded" in this sentence suggests that unity does more than simply help people achieve tangible goals by rallying behind a majority opinion—it also enriches and rewards those who participate in the act of coming together.

Unfortunately, the Bardo-dwellers are unable to influence Lincoln. Instead of turning around to visit his son's grave once more, he actually speeds up, eager to leave the cemetery. As he does so, the souls exit his body, disappointed to have failed in their mission. At the same time, though, they find that the experience of uniting with one another has renewed them. "We found ourselves (like flowers from which placed rocks had just been removed) being restored somewhat to our natural fullness," Bevins says. This sentiment suggests that solitary, individualistic thinking is taxing and inhibiting. Banding together with others, on the other hand, brings a soul to its "natural fullness."

Although the Bardo-dwellers aren't able to convince Lincoln to turn around, they still benefit from their collective effort. In this way, Saunders shows that the act of coming together is worthwhile even when doing so doesn't result in a tangible victory. Unification puts people in the position to interact with one another in ways that ultimately "expand" their own lives, an idea easily applied to Lincoln's effort to bring the nation together during the Civil War. By endeavoring to keep the South from seceding, the president strives for a national togetherness that will not only benefit the Union, but also individuals throughout the country.

TRANSITION AND IMPERMANENCE

The characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are in a state of transition. Souls like Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins III, Reverend Everly Thomas, and Willie Lincoln are *literally* in transitional states, since they exist only in the Bardo, a Tibetan word Saunders borrows to refer to a transitory place occupied by people who have died but have not yet moved on. These souls refuse to admit that they have died, instead insisting that they're merely recovering. This highlights a deeply human quality in the characters: a fear and aversion to the fact of life's impermanence. Instead of accepting that life will end, they devise elaborate ways of tricking themselves into thinking they'll soon return to the lives they used to lead. These departed souls aren't the only ones to struggle against life's ephemerality. In fact, President Lincoln himself realizes that he has ignored the fleeting nature of life, allowing himself to think that he would be with his son "forever." Saunders shows this to be an unrealistic belief, and intimates that states of transition and impermanence define human life. By presenting lack of change as an inherently unnatural state for humans, he ultimately suggests that people should appreciate life by realizing that it is a gift—one whose value is not lessened by its impermanence, but rather increased.

The very way that the Bardo operates communicates to the souls therein that change is natural and, conversely, that stasis is unnatural. For instance, "light-blobs" bombard the Bardo-dwellers on a regular basis, trying to tempt them away from their resolve to stay. "You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore," they taunt, reminding these souls of a familiar rhythm of change, suggesting that, like a "wave" washing up on the "shore," life is a transitory, impermanent thing—something that will inevitably fizzle away. Although Bardo-dwellers like Vollman and Bevins refuse to admit they're dead, they *do* seem to be aware that transition is an inherent part of life. This awareness comes across in the language they use, since they frequently employ the phrase "that previous place" when referring to the world they lived in before the Bardo, inadvertently conveying a sense of succession. Unfortunately, though, they're unwilling to acknowledge that any transition has taken place, instead insisting to themselves that they must not be dead, since they can talk and listen and feel—a theory they think proves they're alive, though it really only suggests that there is some form of life after death (a form of life, moreover, which they would do well to embrace).

Another indication that lack of change is unnatural—and even harmful—is what happens to children if they don't quickly "move on" from the Bardo: they slowly become rooted to the place by a hardening carapace that strangles out the "light," "happiness," and "positive aspiration" so characteristic of young people. This suggests that children are especially negatively influenced by stasis. They are built, Saunders implies, to proceed, not to "tarry." This makes sense, considering that children, as their bodies and brains rapidly develop, are constantly undergoing change, always progressing to a new stage of life. The detrimental effect of stasis in the Bardo ultimately underscores the notion that children exemplify the inevitability of change and growth, life's most natural phenomena.

Amongst the living, President Lincoln also struggles to reconcile himself to transition and impermanence. Looking at his son's corpse, he realizes why it's so hard to accept Willie's death: he has, until now, failed to consider that Willie *could* die. He reflects, "*I was in error when I saw him as fixed and stable and thought I would have him forever. He was never fixed, nor stable, but always just a passing, temporary energy-burst. I had reason to know this. Had he not looked this way at birth, that way at four, another way at seven, been made entirely anew at nine?*" Lincoln expresses in this moment a sentiment the souls in the Bardo are apparently incapable of articulating—namely, that human life is "a passing, temporary energy-burst" and that nothing about life is "fixed" or "stable." Instead, everything is impermanent and in a constant state of transition, like Willie was as he grew up. "*He came out of nothingness*," Lincoln continues, "*took form, was loved, was always bound to return to nothingness*." This, readers come to

understand, describes the journey of all humans through life, though certain souls insist on denying the truth of impermanence, distracting themselves from the fact that they come "out of nothingness" and will someday "return to nothingness."

The souls in the Bardo eventually come to realize that they are, in fact, no longer part of "that previous place." Having entered Lincoln's body and witnessed his father thinking about his funeral, Willie announces to his fellow Bardo-dwellers that they are—all of them—dead. He then finally moves on from the Bardo. Having seen this, Bevins and Vollman are soon ready to do the same. Before he progresses into the unknown, however, Bevins stops to consider everything he loves about the world and life, cataloguing the many pleasures of existence until saying to himself: "These and all things started as nothing, latent within a vast energy-broth, but then we named them, and loved them, and, in this way, brought them forth." Soon thereafter, he finally leaves the Bardo. With these parting words, he echoes Lincoln's assertion that the things of existence (including people themselves) come "out of nothingness." Instead of becoming depressed about this, though, Bevins recognizes that being alive and loving that which is impermanent is a beautiful thing in and of itself. His life has passed from nothing to nothing, but he has loved along the way, and that has made it worthwhile. In turn, Saunders assures readers that ephemerality is intrinsic to life itself—a reality not worth fighting, and indeed, one worth celebrating.

VICE AND VIRTUE

The characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* exemplify the fact that humans are made up of contradictions. The Reverend Everly Thomas perhaps represents this best, since he has dedicated his entire life on earth to following God, and yet he discovers upon his final judgment that he has somehow not earned a place in heaven. When he flees—making haste back to the Bardo to avoid damnation—he tries to discern what, exactly, he did to deserve such treatment. Racking his brain, he finds himself unable to pinpoint the vice that cost him admission to heaven. In doing so, however, he *does* succeed in recognizing a number of flaws in himself. Similarly, when President Lincoln considers whether or not to forge ahead with the Civil War, he realizes that his decision to embark upon such a bloody battle encompasses both a virtuous concern for humankind (namely, the belief that slavery should be abolished) *and* a morally troubling resolution that those who support slavery must surrender or die. Through these two characters, then, Saunders suggests that humans are complex beings capable of embodying both virtue and vice. At the same time, though, the Reverend and Lincoln both examine their own shortcomings instead of ignoring them, which Saunders suggests makes them virtuous characters despite their moral failures.

When the Reverend Everly Thomas dies after a lifetime of priesthood, he arrives at a large diamond door, where he receives judgment from a "Christ-emissary." Much to his dismay, this judgment is quite damning, and just before the doors of hell open for him, he turns and runs away, eventually reaching the Bardo. As he flees, a being whispers in his ear that he mustn't tell anybody what he's seen, or else his judgment will be even harsher upon his return—a statement implying that his return is inevitable. Determined to wait for eternity in the Bardo, the Reverend desperately tries to piece together why he's been damned, reflecting "I did not kill, steal, abuse, deceive; was not an adulterer, always tried to be charitable and just […]. And yet was damned. Was it my (occasional) period of doubt? Was it that I sometimes lusted? Was it my pride, when I had resisted my lust? […] Was it some sin so far beyond my ability to comprehend it that even now I remain unaware of it, ready to commit it again?" He concludes that he can't know. The Reverend's utter confusion underlines the fact that humans aren't always capable of articulating their own vices. At the same time, it's worth noting that the Reverend doesn't simply push the matter from his mind and assume that the Christ-emissary has made a mistake. Instead, he examines his various shortcomings, admitting to himself that he has not led a perfect life despite the fact that he always tried to remain pious. This, Saunders insinuates, is all there is to do, since vice is seemingly unavoidable—after all, if even a well-behaved, lifelong reverend has earned damnation, it stands to reason that most people have serious vices of their own as well. Rather than providing a singular reason why the Reverend doesn't make it into heaven, Saunders lets the ambiguity sit with readers, thereby emulating the complex way virtue and vice coexist within a single person.

Like the Reverend, President Lincoln can't deny his own failures, shortcomings, and immoral actions. His sins, though, are more tangible. Indeed, as he grieves over the loss of his son, he can't deny the fact that he—as the leader of the Union during the Civil War—has caused many people to die. "*He is just one*," he thinks, referring to Willie. "*And the weight of it about to kill me. Have exported this grief. Some three thousand times. So far. To date. A mountain. Of boys. Someone's boys.*" In this moment, Lincoln can't avoid the truth, which is that he is responsible for more than three thousand deaths—a fact that is hardly virtuous. However, he also knows that there's a reason why he's fighting this war: after all, if the Union doesn't stop the South from seceding, then slavery will continue, thereby elongating a humanitarian crisis of genocidal proportions. Because of this, Lincoln's otherwise indefensible support of violence and murder takes on a righteous quality. In turn, Lincoln himself comes to represent a clash of vice and virtue, a dynamic he recognizes while mourning Willie's death. As he thinks about the grief he feels, he realizes that he has brought this same hardship upon many parents, but he also remembers that he's doing so for an admirable reason. "Did the thing merit it," he asks himself. "Merit the killing. On the surface it was a

technicality (mere Union) but seen deeper, it was something more. How should men live? How could men live?" Asking himself this question, President Lincoln determines that he must "not be ruined" by his grief and indecision and feelings of guilt. Rather, he "must go on" with the bloody Civil War, since so many people have already died for the cause. By examining and weighing the vices and virtues related to his decisions, then, Lincoln finds a way to move forward with the war more surefootedly than before, suggesting that the best way to handle one's own vices is to acknowledge them and act with an awareness that they are there.

In keeping with Saunders's suggestion that people should examine their vices, the only souls in *Lincoln in the Bardo* who are portrayed as decidedly evil are the hell-beings who refuse to examine their sins. Indeed, the Reverend encounters this moral apathy when he listens to these condemned beings, who are physically embedded in the tendrils that wrap around Willie Lincoln, binding him to the Bardo and robbing him of his youthful "light." These souls explain that they're in hell, but they reject the idea that they deserve their punishment. For example, one of them—who's in hell for killing her husband—says, "Was I born with just those predispositions and desires that would lead me, after my whole preceding life (during which I had killed exactly no one), to do *just that thing*? I was. Was that *my* doing? Was that *fair*? Did I *ask* to be born licentious, greedy, slightly misanthropic, and to find [my husband] so irritating? I did not. But there I was." After she says this, her fellow hell-dwellers agree that they've all been "predisposed" toward evil, ultimately attempting to downplay their own agency and, thus, their culpability for whatever heinous things they have done. As they do so, readers see that the behavior of these souls stands in stark contrast to Lincoln and the Reverend, who periodically probe their own characters to uncover their vices and consider the ways they've failed to be virtuous.

As the Reverend hears these condemned souls blame their vices on their "predispositions," he finds himself disgusted by their refusal to take responsibility for their own actions. "To be grouped with *these*, accepting one's sins so passively, even proudly, with no trace of repentance?" he laments. "I could not bear it." Humans, he seems to understand in this moment, are full of contradictions: good and bad, virtue and vice, morality and immorality. To consider "one's sins so passively" without taking any responsibility for them is, in his eyes, the ultimate failure. Though he himself has perhaps failed to lead a fully virtuous life, he acknowledges and repents of his sins. Finally, then, he decides to own up to whatever judgment awaits him, for at least this means he won't be like the hell-dwellers. He scoops up Willie Lincoln and dashes away from the evil tendrils. When the tendrils catch up to him and wrap around his body—securing him to the earth—he decides to move on from the Bardo to return to the gate of his final judgment, knowing that when he does this a "matterlightblooming" ray will shoot down and take him away and, in the process, momentarily eviscerate the tendril. His courage and resolve in this moment clearly stems from his own refusal to be like the hell-dwellers, who deny the depravity of their sins. Unlike them, he acknowledges that he's comprised of both virtue *and* vice, and this consideration leads him to action. In the same way that President Lincoln's internal debate regarding the morality of his wartime actions enables him to proceed with the Civil War with a clear resolve, the Reverend's soul-searching regarding his own sins ultimately inspires him to move on with a new sense of resolution. In turn, Saunders implies that acting morally sometimes means embracing the fact that humans contain both virtue and vice—and that perhaps the greatest vice is the inability to acknowledge one's own flaws, while repenting may even bring redemption.

EMPATHY AND EQUALITY

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders examines how people frequently fail to see beyond their own differences. For instance, white souls like Lieutenant Cecil Stone occupy the same spiritual realm as black Bardo-dwellers, but they still find themselves incapable of embracing the idea of equality, instead clinging to their bigoted belief that there's a fundamental difference between white people and black people. Meanwhile, in the world of the living, President Lincoln fights this divisive worldview by leading the Union in the Civil War, though he himself also harbors certain prejudices. However, these prejudices "erode" once he stops to fully consider them. What's more, they drop away even further after he feels—in a firsthand, supernatural way—some of the many hardships that black souls like Thomas Haven have been forced to endure. In this way, Saunders proposes that bigotry begins to break apart when a person embraces empathy.

Many souls in the Bardo retain the racist views they held in life. *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes place during the first year of the Civil War, meaning that many of the Bardo-dwellers cling to the pro-slavery sentiment that whites and blacks are essentially different, and that white people should have dominion over black people. As such, the Bardo's ranks are starkly polarized, as characters like Lieutenant Cecil Stone work to confine African American souls to the mass grave in which they've been buried. Lieutenant Cecil Stone even goes so far as to suggest that black people are subhuman, saying that they can't "weep, since to weep one must possess human emotions." In uttering this hateful notion, Stone dehumanizes his fellow Bardo-dwellers, thereby framing himself as superior, though it's worth noting that this supposed superiority does nothing to change the fact that he—like the black people he wants to oppress—is also dead. Nonetheless, he subjects black souls like Elson Farwell (a former slave) to a constant stream of hateful language, often ordering them to return to the mass grave in

which they've been buried. Failing to see that he and these souls are in the same spiritual situation, he champions the kind of bigotry that has followed them throughout their entire life, extending an oppressive racial narrative beyond the grave.

Unlike Lieutenant Cecil Stone, President Lincoln overcomes his racial prejudices. While pondering the diverse nature of the United States, he thinks, "all of it, all of that bounty, [is] *for everyone*, for everyone to use, seemingly put here to teach a man to be free, to teach that a man *could* be free." His emphasis on the word "everyone" speaks to his commitment to fight for equality, and a recognition of the fact that there's nothing about black people that renders them less worthy of happiness and "bounty" than anyone else. It is perhaps because of this mindset that Thomas Havens finds himself wanting to stay inside Lincoln when he unexpectedly jumps into the president's body. "I was comfortable in there," he explains. "And suddenly, wanted him to *know* me. My life. To know *us*. Our lot. I don't know why I felt that way but I did. He had no *aversion* to me, is how I might put it. Or rather, he had once had such an aversion, still bore traces of it, but, in examining that aversion, pushing it into the light, had somewhat, already, eroded it." In this moment, Saunders shows that Lincoln is not a perfect man when it comes to empathy—in fact, he bears "traces" of racism and bigotry. However, Thomas Havens senses that Lincoln's "aversion" is eroding because the President has "examined" it, which ultimately suggests that bigotry quickly deteriorates under the "light" of reason.

Thomas Havens also notes that he and his fellow black Bardo-dwellers have influenced the president by entering him. This is an event that takes place when Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins, and the Reverend convince a number of souls to go into Lincoln's body with the hopes of getting him to return to Willie's grave. As Thomas Havens now rides along inside Lincoln's body—the sole inhabitant—he realizes the effect this moment had on the President: "He was an open book. An *opening* book. That had just been opened up somewhat wider. By sorrow. And—by us. By all of us, black and white, who had so recently mass-inhabited him. He had not, it seemed, gone unaffected by that event. Not at all. It had made him sad. Sadder. *We* had. All of us, white and black, had made him sadder, with our sadness. And now, though it sounds strange to say, he was making *me* sadder with *his* sadness." Since what Thomas describes in this passage is the way Lincoln has taken on the emotional quality of the black souls who entered him, it's worth looking at the word empathy, which Merriam-Webster's Dictionary refers to as "vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another." With this in mind, it becomes clear that President Lincoln has been "opened up" by souls like Thomas because they have caused him to "vicariously experience" their feelings. This, it seems, has further "eroded" any "aversion" Lincoln might have had to black people. By taking on the emotional qualities and experiences of these souls, the President finds himself expanded and suddenly even more disposed to fight for the abolition of slavery.

Thomas Havens, for his part, feels a similar kind of fondness for Lincoln and thus decides to stay in the President's body. In this way, *Lincoln in the Bardo* concludes with Lincoln riding back to the white house with a black man's soul inside of him. "And we rode forward into the night," Havens says, "past the sleeping houses of our countrymen." With these final words, Saunders suggests that Thomas and Lincoln have empathized so fully with one another that they've essentially become one person, a merging of identity indicated by Thomas's use of the word "our." Thus, Saunders argues that empathy "erodes" categorical divisions between people and ultimately fosters equality.

LOSS

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Saunders sets forth the notion that mourning is a process that ideally ends in acceptance. Loss is difficult, he upholds, because it denotes the end of something cherished. At the center of the book is the loss President Lincoln experiences when he's forced to say goodbye to his beloved child, Willie. Distraught, he finds the idea of carrying on without his son unfathomable. By the end of the novel, though, he begins to make peace with Willie's passing, riding off into the night with a sense that he's been made "less rigid" by this loss. In turn, Saunders shows that—though painful—the process of mourning can lead to acceptance and even, to a certain extent, positive growth.

Using a collection of excerpts culled from various historical texts, Saunders describes just how incapacitating Willie's death is for his father, President Lincoln. "One feels such love for the little ones," states one essayist writing about the boy's death, "and then the little one is gone! Taken! One is thunderstruck that such a brutal violation has occurred in what had previously seemed a benevolent world. From nothingness, there arose great love; now, its source nullified, that love, searching and sick, converts to the most abysmal suffering imaginable." This passage likens the loss of "love" to "the most abysmal suffering imaginable," an idea that speaks to just how painful the mourning process can be for a parent. In keeping with this, Lincoln sits in the cemetery after having looked upon his son's lifeless form and thinks to himself, "*What am I doing. What am I doing here. Everything nonsense now.*" That "everything" has become "nonsense" after Willie's death implies that loss can bring a sense of meaningless to a person's life. Unsure of what to do now that he can't be a father to Willie, the president is shocked by the seeming pointlessness of life, wondering how he can possibly go on as usual. "*Lord, what is this?*" he wonders. "*All of this walking about, trying, smiling, bowing, joking?* […] *When he is to be left out here? Is a person to nod, dance, reason, walk, discuss? As before?*" Lincoln's loss, it seems, has depleted his investment in everyday life, rendering all normal proceedings unthinkably pointless. In this way, Saunders illustrates the

harrowing and depleting effect of loss.

Although loss can throw a person into despair and a sense that life is meaningless, it can also do the opposite. Indeed, Saunders implies that great sadness and loss sometimes reinvigorate one's appreciation for life itself. Roger Bevins III helps illustrate this point when he explains the way he feels after having attempted to commit suicide (note that in this moment he hasn't yet admitted to himself that he has actually *succeeded* in killing himself): "Having come so close to losing everything, I am freed now of all fear, hesitation, and timidity, and, once revived, intend to devoutly wander the earth, imbibing, smelling, sampling, loving whomever I please." For Bevins, the threat of "losing everything" suddenly enables him to embrace life and all its wonders in a way he couldn't before. Of course, this is a slightly different dynamic than Lincoln's experience with loss, since Lincoln mourns the loss not of his own life, but of his son's. Still, the President undergoes a similar realization that loss, though full of grief, provides a chance for growth. Indeed, he acknowledges that wallowing in meaninglessness will do nothing to help his situation. In other words, he recognizes that "there is nothing left to do" about his bereavement. "*Free myself of this darkness as I can, remain useful, not go mad*," he muses. "*Think of [Willie], when I do, as being in some bright place, free of suffering, resplendent in a new mode of being*." By reframing his son's death as something that has thrust the boy into some "resplendent […] new mode of being," Lincoln refigures his entire approach to loss, resolving to "remain useful" instead of allowing his grief to decimate what's left of his own life.

Lincoln's resolve to "remain useful" in the face of loss is important, since he's responsible for leading the Union in the Civil War. With countless Americans depending upon him, he can't afford to flounder in the wake of Willie's death. As he leaves the cemetery, he accepts that "the world was full of sorrow; that everyone labored under some burden of sorrow; that all were suffering; that whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering […] and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact." Simply put, his acceptance of the reality of loss and "sorrow" renders him capable of moving forward as a man who is uniquely "situated" (as president) to lighten other people's loads. Willie's death, it seems, has refreshed his outlook on the Civil War and the role he must play as someone fighting to diminish the amount of "suffering" in America. As he makes his way home once again, then, Bevins and his friend Vollman describe Lincoln as "ready to believe anything of this world," asserting that he has been "made less rigidly himself through his loss," a transformation that has ultimately rendered him "quite powerful." In turn, Saunders demonstrates that loss can become a catalyst for positive change, enabling a person to expand in unexpected ways despite the debilitating and demoralizing nature of the grief they might initially experience.

SYMBOLS

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

SICK-BOX

When Hans Vollman refers to his coffin, he calls it his sick-box. In doing so, he avoids admitting that he is dead, instead spinning a harebrained narrative that enables him to indulge his sense of denial. This evasive tactic comes to stand for the many ways in which the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* delude themselves. Rather than acknowledging that his inert form lies in a casket, Vollman goes to great lengths to uphold that he's simply "recovering" from an illness. He even says that he "took" to his sick-box "per the advice of [his] physician," a ridiculous claim, considering the fact that the only thing his physician has done is place him inside a wooden box because he is, in fact, dead. Nonetheless, Vollman goes out of his way to interrupt his friends whenever he senses they might use some other word when referring to the boxes that hold their physical forms. In this manner, the so-called "sick-boxes" that populate *Lincoln in the Bardo* represent the Bardo-dwellers' elaborate attempts to stave off the realization that their lives have ended.

THE IRON FENCE

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the majority of the characters are unable to go beyond an iron fence that marks the edge of their realm. Because they are otherwise unconstrained—capable of drifting through objects and even living people—this fence signals to readers that the Bardo-dwellers still have to face certain limitations. In the same way that they can't rejoin the living world, they can't float beyond the iron fence, which produces a nauseating effect when they approach it. Interestingly enough, though, the souls of black people in the Bardo remain uninfluenced by the fence's "noxious" qualities. In the Bardo, black souls unfortunately encounter the same kind of racism that plagued their lives as slaves in the real world, but their ability to roam beyond the iron fence symbolizes one tangible way that they finally are allowed to enjoy a modicum of freedom. While the white souls can't even approach the fence without recoiling, the black Bardo-dwellers can drift by unharmed by its sickening qualities. In turn, the fence comes to represent the fact that different people contend with different kinds of limitations, both in the Bardo and in the living world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the

Random House edition of *Lincoln in the Bardo* published in 2018.

Chapter 1 Quotes

And that is how we lived. We became friends. Dear friends. That was all. And yet that was so much. We laughed together, made decisions about the household [...]. To see her brighten when I came in, find her leaning into me as we discussed some household matter, improved my lot in many ways I cannot adequately explain. I had been happy, happy enough, but now I often found myself uttering a spontaneous prayer that went, simply: *She is here, still here*. It was as if a rushing river had routed itself through my house, which was pervaded now by a freshwater scent and the awareness of something lavish, natural, and breathtaking always moving nearby.

Related Characters: Hans Vollman (speaker), Anna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears at the beginning of Hans Vollman's first monologue, when he describes his relationship to Anna, his second wife. He explains that he assured his young bride that they need not consummate their marriage, instead suggesting that they live together as affable companions. Anna so appreciates Hans's kindness that they become "dear friends," something that greatly enhances his life. Indeed, he delights in seeing her "brighten" when he enters the room, and they slowly but surely grow closer. In this way, Saunders shows that Vollman's empathy—his refusal to force Anna into a romantic relationship—leads to a mutual sense of easy companionship. By empathizing with Anna's situation as a young woman who has entered into a loveless marriage, Vollman actually endears himself to her. In turn, Saunders demonstrates that empathy and thoughtfulness naturally foster an environment in which love might one day grow. And as he waits for that love to grow, Vollman simply remains thankful for the fact that Anna remains in his life, frequently "uttering," "*She is here, still here*."

Chapter 9 Quotes

Feeling nauseous at the quantity of blood and its sudden percussive redness against the whiteness of the tub, I settled myself woozily down on the floor, at which time I—well, it is a little embarrassing, but let me just say it: I *changed my mind*. Only then (nearly out the door, so to speak) did I realize how unspeakably *beautiful* all of this was, how precisely engineered for our pleasure, and saw that I was on the brink of squandering a wondrous gift, the gift of being allowed, every day, to wander this vast sensual paradise, this grand marketplace lovingly stocked with every sublime thing: swarms of insects dancing in slant-rays of August sun; a trio of black horses standing hock-deep and head-to-head in a field of snow; a waft of beef broth arriving breeze-borne from an orange-hued window on a child autumn—

Related Characters: Roger Bevins III (speaker)

Related Themes:

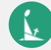
Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Roger Bevins III speaks these words while narrating the story of his suicide. After slitting his wrists, he feels suddenly "nauseous" and overwhelmed by the ghastly act. In his shock, he realizes that he has made a mistake. Indeed, he "change[s]" his mind. This abrupt change of heart most likely arises because it has just dawned on him that suicide is irreversible. Right when he's "nearly out the door," he finally grasps "how unspeakably *beautiful*" it is to be alive. Readers might note that this is somewhat of a grass-is-greener way of thinking, since Bevins only yearns for life once he's already committed himself to dying. As a result, he wants what he can't have: "to wander this vast sensual paradise," which he now believes is "precisely engineered" for human pleasure. Basking in the world's many joys, he convinces himself that what he has done is *not*, in fact, permanent. Instead of embracing that death lies ahead of him, he obsesses over everyday beauties, ultimately denying to himself that he has lost his life for good.

Will I follow my predilection? I will! With gusto! Having come so close to losing everything, I am freed now of all fear, hesitation, and timidity, and, once revived, intend to devoutly wander the earth, imbibing, smelling, sampling, loving whomever I please; touching, tasting, standing very still among the beautiful things of this world [...].

Related Characters: Roger Bevins III (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Roger Bevins III says this while reflecting upon his suicide and how it has influenced his view of life. Because he now relishes the many "beautiful things of this world," he yearns to return to his old life. In doing so, he is determined to "follow" his "predilection," meaning that he will no longer hide the fact that he's gay. Rather, he'll proceed in his romantic and sexual preferences without any sense of "fear, hesitation, [or] timidity." Indeed, he felt "fear, hesitation, and timidity" in the first place because he was too afraid of risking his reputation, too afraid of being himself in a bigoted society unwilling to accept gay people. Now, though, he understands that the only thing to "fear" is the prospect of living his entire life without ever allowing himself to "wander the earth, imbibing, smelling, sampling, loving whomever [he] please[s]." For him, the act of dying (or, as he thinks, his close encounter with death) is a clarifying experience, one that forces him to realize that life is fleeting and that he shouldn't waste his time on earth pretending to be someone he's not.

Chapter 13 Quotes

I want ed so much to hold a dear Babe.

I know very wel I do not look as prety as I onseh. And over time, I admit, I have come to know serten words I did not formerly

Fuk cok shit reem ravage assfuk

[…] I did not get any. Thing.

Was gone too soon

To get

Only forteen.

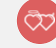
Yrs of aje

Plese do come again sir it has been a pleasure to make your

But fuk yr anshient frends (do not bring them agin) who kome to ogle and mok me and ask me to swindle no that is not the werd slender slander that wich I am doing. Wich is no more than what they are doing. Is it not so? What I am doing, if I only cary on fathefully, will, I am sure, bring about that longed-for return to

Green grass kind looks.

Related Characters: Elise Traynor (or "The Traynor Girl") (speaker), The Reverend Everly Thomas, Roger Bevins III, Hans Vollman, Willie Lincoln

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Elise Traynor says this to Willie Lincoln when Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend bring the boy to the iron fence to hear what she has to say about her time in the Bardo. Although she insists that staying in this liminal realm will eventually enable her to "return" to the living world, it's clear that the Bardo has taken a significant toll on her wellbeing. She herself even admits that she's no longer as good-looking as she used to be, and she also confesses that her vocabulary and various linguistic abilities have morphed while spending time in this realm. As if to illustrate this, she spews a stream of crass words, blurting: "Fuk cok shit reem

ravage assfuk." The monologue she delivers to Willie appears after she explains what she was like in "that previous place," so readers know that Ms. Traynor was a pleasant young girl who certainly didn't use words like these. If her crass vocabulary isn't evidence enough of how she's been corrupted by the Bardo, the disjointed orthographic oddities Saunders employs in this section suggest that this transitional space has corroded the young woman's diction as well. Nonetheless, though, she upholds that she's merely doing the same thing as Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend: waiting to "return" to the living world. The only difference, it seems, is that Elise is young, and young people aren't supposed to remain in states of stasis.

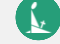
Chapter 21 Quotes

It has done me good.

I believe it has.

It is secret. A bit of secret weakness, that shores me up; in shoring me up, it makes it more likely that I shall do my duty in other matters; it hastens the end of this period of weakness; it harms no one; therefore, it is not wrong, and I shall take away from here this resolve: I may return as often as I like, telling no one, accepting whatever help it may bring me, until it helps me no more.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker), Willie Lincoln

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

This is what Abraham Lincoln thinks as he holds Willie's dead body for the first time. As he does so, Willie himself slips into his father's body and listens in on his thoughts, marking the first time in the novel that a Bardo-dweller occupies someone else. And this initial occupation is quite important to the novel's plot, because Lincoln's musings in this moment encourage Willie to stay in this transitional realm. As Saunders showcases the president's mourning process—illustrating that Lincoln needs something to "shore" him up so that he can manage his grief and thus fulfill his "dut[ies] in other matters"—he also reveals to Willie that Lincoln intends to "return" to the crypt "as often as [he] like[s]." In turn, the president unwittingly gives his boy's soul a reason to stay in the Bardo.

Chapter 29 Quotes

The lead angel took my face into her hands as her wing swished back and forth, putting me in mind of a horse's tail as that animal feeds.

Are you thriving here, Reverend? she said, wing extended lazily above her. Is He whom you served in life present here?

I—I believe He is, I said.

He is, of course, everywhere, she said. But does not like to see you lingering here. Among such low companions.

Her beauty was considerable and increasing by the second. I saw I must end our interview or risk disaster.

Please go, I said. I do not—I do not require you today.

But soon, I think? She said.

Her beauty swelled beyond description.

And I burst into tears.

Related Characters: The Reverend Everly Thomas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

This passage serves as a description of the torment the Reverend must endure when the (presumably) heaven-sent beings descend upon the Bardo and try to convince the tarrying souls to depart that liminal realm. For the Reverend, these beings take the form of beautiful angels who try to tempt him away by prodding at his insecurities. Indeed, they ask if he thinks God is "present" in the Bardo, an indication that the Reverend must often worry about the absence of religion and piety in this transitional space. This would make sense, considering that he has no delusions about where he is—indeed, the Reverend knows he is dead, since many years ago he ran away from his final judgment when it became clear that he would be sent to hell. Instead of treating him harshly, though, the angels actually insinuate that he might not necessarily be headed for damnation after all. The lead angel does this by saying that God "does not like to see [him] lingering" in the Bardo "among such low companions." Saying this, the angel implies that the Reverend is better than the other souls in this realm, thereby suggesting that he will perhaps not be sent to hell

after all. Indeed, if his friends are "low companions," then he must be somehow morally superior.

Chapter 36 Quotes

❝❞ We are here by grace [...]. Our ability to abide by far from assured. Therefore, we must conserve our strength, restricting our activities to only those which directly serve our central purpose. We would not wish, through profligate activity, to appear ungrateful for the mysterious blessing of our continued abiding. [...] We must look out for ourselves [...]. And, by doing so, we protect the boy as well. He must hear nothing of this rumor, which would only serve to raise his hopes. As we know, only utter hopelessness will lead him to do what he must. Therefore, not a word. Are we in agreement?

Related Characters: The Reverend Everly Thomas (speaker), Abraham Lincoln, Roger Bevins III, Hans Vollman, Willie Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

The Reverend speaks these words to Vollman and Bevins, sensing that his two friends want to occupy Lincoln's body in order to convince the man to return to Willie's crypt. As he lectures them, he reveals his own mindset regarding the nature of a person's existence in the Bardo. Apparently, he sees the "ability to abide" as conditional, not something that is "assured." Whereas most of the other souls think the Bardo is merely a place to rest and recover from various ailments—a place where they go to wait to rejoin the living world—the Reverend worries that certain behavior might ruin the "mysterious blessing of [his] continued abiding." Because of this, he counsels his friends to "restrict [their] activities to only those which directly serve [their] central purpose," which is to remain in the Bardo. In other words, he advocates for individualistic thinking, urging Vollman and Bevins to refrain from interfering with Willie's situation. At the same time, though, he only does this in order to *help* the boy, since he thinks it's imperative that Willie experience "utter hopelessness" regarding his situation. This, he believes, is the only thing that will convince the youngster to leave the Bardo. As a result, the Reverend tries to act empathetically—with Willie's best interests in mind—while also safeguarding his own existence, thereby advocating for a brand of individualism that might actually benefit others, too.

Chapter 45-46 Quotes

❝❞ *Why will it not work. What magic word made it work. Who is the keeper of that word. What did it profit Him to switch this one off. What a contraption it is. How did it ever run. What spark ran it. Grand little machine. Set up just so. Receiving the spark, it jumped to life.*

What put out that spark? What a sin it would be. Who would dare. Ruin such a marvel. Hence is murder anathema. God forbid I should ever commit such a grievous—

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker), Hans Vollman, Willie Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, President Lincoln ponders the nature of death and existence as Hans Vollman sits inside his body and listens to his thoughts. By thinking of Willie's mortality in terms of a "machine," he attempts to better understand the "spark" of life. Unfortunately, though, this is an impossible task—although the body is "machine"-like in many aspects, it also operates in mysterious ways. As such, Lincoln must think of life not only in terms of a "machine," but also in terms of "magic" and theology, wondering what or who makes the body "work." Since this is such a vast and unanswerable question, he turns his mind to more practical matters, wondering what, exactly, "put out [Willie's] spark." Unfortunately, though, this consideration of life's impermanence leads him into thinking about murder as a "sin," a thought that ultimately makes him feel guilty. "God forbid I should ever commit such a grievous—" he says, cutting himself off because he suddenly remembers that, as president of the United States during the Civil War, he *has* committed the "grievous" sin of murder (even if vicariously). In turn, Saunders shows that Lincoln can't even mourn his son without addressing the insecurities he has about his role in the Civil War.

Chapter 48 Quotes

Everything nonsense now. Those mourners came up. Hands extended. Sons intact. Wearing on their faces enforced sadness-masks to hide any sign of their happiness, which—which went on. They could not hide how alive they yet were with it, with their happiness at the potential of their still-living sons. Until lately I was one of them. Strolling whistling through the slaughterhouse, averting my eyes from the carnage, able to laugh and dream and hope because it had not yet happened to me.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker), Hans Vollman, Willie Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

As Hans Vollman sits inside the president, Lincoln remembers Willie's funeral, ultimately considering the difference between sympathy and empathy. The "mourners" who approached him with their "hands extended," it seems, merely sympathized with the president, but did not empathize with him. Although the difference between these two words might seem slight, it's worth considering that sympathy denotes a sense of compassion and pity, whereas showing empathy for somebody else involves actually putting oneself into that person's position and experiencing the pain in a more firsthand manner. The people who attended Willie's funeral and shook Lincoln's hand "could not hide how alive they" were with "their happiness." Although Lincoln notes this discrepancy—between his sorrow and the funeral-goers' inability to empathize—he understands that this is only natural. In fact, he himself has behaved the same way while walking through "the slaughterhouse" and "averting [his] eyes from the carnage"—a phrase that references the president's reaction to the mounting violence of the Civil War. Before Willie died, it seems, Lincoln couldn't quite grasp the gravity of what it means to lose a son. Now, though, he is fully aware of just how harrowing it is to say goodbye to a child, meaning that he's now capable of empathizing—not simply sympathizing—with the families whose sons have died fighting for him (Lincoln).

Chapter 54-55 Quotes

Upon Mr. Bevins's exit, I was immediately filled with longing for him and his associated phenomena, a longing that rivaled the longing I had felt for my parents when I first left their home for my apprenticeship in Baltimore—a considerable longing indeed.

Such had been the intensity of our co-habitation.

I would never fail to fully see him again: dear Mr. Bevins!

[...] We would be infused with some trace of one another for forevermore.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln, Roger Bevins III

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hans Vollman describes the intoxicating and renewing experience of occupying Roger Bevins III. After the two friends enter Lincoln and try to convince him to return to Willie's crypt, they find themselves also inhabiting one another. Eventually, Lincoln stands and walks away, leaving Vollman and Bevins alone together. When they exit one another to follow the president, they're surprised to see how much this experience has altered them. Indeed, Vollman "immediately" misses his friend, a testament to "the intensity of [their] co-habitation." This is significant, considering that these two men have spent night after night with one another in the Bardo with nothing to do but talk to one another—and yet, they still didn't fully *know* one another, not like they do now, after they've truly united. In this moment, then, Saunders suggests that even the closest of friends can become even closer by fully coming together, open-mindedly inhabiting (in this case literally) each other until they're each "infused with some trace of one another."

Chapter 61 Quotes

I have been here since and have, as instructed, refrained from speaking of any of this, to anyone.

What would be the point? For any of us *here*, it is too late for any alteration of course. All is done. We are shades, immaterial, and since that judgment pertains to what we did (or did not do) in that previous (material) realm, correction is now forever beyond our means. Our work there is finished; we only await payment.

Related Characters: The Reverend Everly Thomas (speaker), Roger Bevins III, Hans Vollman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

After narrating his story—in which he runs away from his final judgment only to end up in the Bardo—the Reverend explains that he hasn't told anyone about his experience in the afterlife. He was, after all, instructed to keep quiet, but he also doesn't see the "point" of telling his friends that judgment awaits them. "It is too late for any alteration of course," he says, upholding that the Bardo isn't a place where a person can right their wrongs. To make this point even clearer, he adds, "All is done." Indeed, there's no way anyone in this transitional realm can "correct" what they did in the living world. This assertion reveals the Reverend's understanding that life is a temporary, finite thing. Knowing that his existence amongst the living has ended, he comprehends that he can't do anything to change the way he spent his time before dying. The question of whether or not actions taken in the Bardo might affect one's final judgment, however, is left unresolved, despite the Reverend's pessimistic convictions here.

Chapter 66 Quotes

Of course, there was always a moment, just as an order was given, when a small, resistant voice would make itself known in the back of my mind. Then the necessary job was to *ignore* that voice. It was not a defiant or angry voice, particularly, just that little *human* voice, saying, you know: I wish to do what I wish to do, and not what you are telling me to do.

And I must say, that voice was never quite silenced.

Although it did grow rather *quiet* over the years.

Related Characters: Thomas Havens (speaker), Elson Farwell , Willie Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

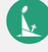
Thomas Havens says this to Willie Lincoln when the many (formerly-enslaved) black souls in the Bardo come to tell their stories. Having interrupted Elson Farwell—who wants to take revenge on his masters—Thomas explains that he never had much disdain for his master, who gave him occasional periods of free time. Nonetheless, though, he can't deny the fact that there was always "a small, resistant voice" in the back of his "mind" that would protest any order given to him by his master. And although he tried to "ignore" this voice, he was never able to completely "silence" it, since it was, after all, a "*human*" voice. The notion that this voice is inherently "human" underlines the fact that people aren't meant to be ordered around. Indeed, part of being human means possessing free will, and so Havens finds it impossible to silence the voice in his head, a voice that says: "I wish to do what I wish to do, and not what you are telling me to do." What's scary, though, is the fact that this voice "did grow rather *quiet* over the years," a fact that shows just how detrimental forced servility can be to a person's concept of free will and humanity.

Chapter 74 Quotes

I was in error when I saw him as fixed and stable and thought I would have him forever. He was never fixed, nor stable, but always just a passing temporary energy-burst. I had reason to know this. Had he not looked this way at birth, that way at four, another way at seven, been made entirely anew at nine? He had never stayed the same, even instant to instant.

He came out of nothingness, took form, was loved, was always bound to return to nothingness.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker), Hans Vollman, Willie Lincoln

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lincoln once again reflects upon Willie's death. Looking at his son's lifeless body, the president tries to come to terms with the fact that life is impermanent. "I was in error when I saw him as fixed and stable," he thinks, recognizing that it was foolish to think of anyone as lasting "forever." Lincoln chides himself for not acknowledging this earlier, when Willie was still alive and constantly changing, rapidly shifting through different stages of life, the process of growing up constantly making him "entirely anew." "He had never stayed the same, even instant to instant," the president reminds himself, ultimately urging himself to accept life's ephemeral nature. Thinking this way, he considers an even more abstract and existential concept,

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realizing that life itself emerges from "nothingness" and inevitably "return[s] to nothingness" once more. And although the president isn't yet emotionally ready to think in these terms, it's worth noting that he *does* acknowledge one positive, uplifting notion—namely that between the "nothingness" before his birth and the "nothingness" after his death, Willie experienced love. In turn, Saunders signals to readers the boy's life wasn't lived in vain even if its own brevity threatens to make it seem meaningless.

Chapter 80-81 Quotes

And though that mass co-habitation had jarred much loose from me (a nagging, hazy mental cloud of details from my life now hung about me: names, faces, mysterious foyers, the smells of long-ago meals; carpet patterns from I knew not what house, distinctive pieces of cutlery, a toy horse with one ear missing, the realization that my wife's name had been *Emily*), it had not delivered the essential truth I sought, as to why I had been damned. I halted on the trail, lagging behind, desperate to bring that cloud into focus and recall who I had been, and what evil I had done, but was not successful in this, and then had to hurry to catch my friends up.

Related Characters: The Reverend Everly Thomas (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

The Reverend thinks these words to himself after he and a large group of fellow Bardo-dwellers tumble out of Lincoln's body. This group of souls inhabited Lincoln in order to convince the man to return to Willie's crypt, and though they failed to succeed in this regard, they all come out of the experience feeling renewed, as if they now have a better understanding not only of one another, but of themselves, too. The Reverend experiences this, finding that the "mass co-habitation" has "jarred much loose" from him. Indeed, he suddenly remembers details about his time in the living world that he has long-since forgotten, like that his wife's name was Emily. The fact that he forgot this in the first place signals to readers that the Reverend has been in the Bardo for a very long time. It also suggests that even the most meaningful aspects of life eventually fade away—like life itself. In keeping with this, the Reverend is disappointed to learn that he can't "recall" whatever "evil" thing he did to deserve eternal damnation. In this moment, then, Saunders intimates that good and evil aren't simple matters. Rather, even the most glaring vice can go undetected, leaving humans to grapple with the moral and existential uncertainty that comes along with being human.

Whatever my sin, it must, I felt (I prayed), be small, compared to the sins of *these*. And yet, I was of their ilk. Was I not? When I went, it seemed, it would be to join them.

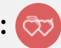
As I had many times preached, our Lord is a fearsome Lord, and mysterious, and will not be predicted, but judges as He sees fit, and we are but as lambs to Him, whom He regards with neither affection or malice; some go to the slaughter, while others are released to the meadow, by His whim, according to a standard we are too lowly to discern.

It is only for us to *accept*; accept His judgment, and our punishment.

But, as applied to me, this teaching did not satisfy.

And oh, I was sick, sick at heart.

Related Characters: The Reverend Everly Thomas (speaker), Willie Lincoln, The Vermonter , The British Voice , The Female Voice

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

As a dreadful tendril wraps around Willie's body—trying to keep him in the Bardo forever—the Reverend realizes that there are miniature people embedded in its surface. When these people speak to him, he discovers that they're in hell, and this simultaneously repulses and frightens him, since he knows that he too is supposed to be in hell. "I was of their ilk," he says, horrified by the idea. Because he finds himself so vehemently opposed to these hell-dwellers and their sinful ways that he questions why, exactly, he should have to "join them." In doing so, though, he remembers that God's decisions are not for humans to judge. Indeed, he has "preached" this message many times, upholding that the Lord "judges as He sees fit," and humans are "too lowly to discern" why He either rewards or punishes them. Despite this, though, he can't bring himself to "accept" God's judgment, unable to subscribe to his own notion that humans are simply to follow the Lord's incontrovertible will.

Instead of blindly "accept[ing]" his fate, then, the Reverend struggles to find the answer as to why he deserves damnation.

❝ We were as we were! the bass lisper barked. How could we have been otherwise? Or, being that way, have *done* otherwise? We *were* that way, *at that time*, and had been led to that place, not by any innate evil in ourselves, but by the state of our cognition and our experience up *until that moment*.

By Fate, by Destiny, said the Vermonter.

By the fact that time runs in only one direction, and we are borne along by it, influenced precisely as we are, to do just the things that we do, the bass lisper said.

And then are cruelly punished for it, said the woman.

Related Characters: The Reverend Everly Thomas (speaker), Willie Lincoln, The Vermonter , The British Voice , The Bass Voice , The Female Voice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Reverend relays what the hell-dwellers say while they wrap around Willie's body. While he interrogates himself in an effort to determine what evil thing he's done to deserve damnation, the tendril-people work to absolve themselves of any culpability regarding their wrongdoings. Although the bass voice suggests that he and his companions did not—while they were alive—possess "any innate evil," the Vermonter blames "Fate" and "Destiny" for their sins, ultimately suggesting that none of them could have done anything to alter themselves for the better. As such, the hell-dwellers frame their damnation as "cruel" and unjust even as they freely admit to having carried out the very sins that earned them their respective places in hell. This attitude stands in stark contrast to the mindset with which the Reverend approaches his own sinfulness. Whereas the hell-dwellers know they've done bad things but absolve themselves nonetheless, the Reverend actively seeks to hold himself accountable but doesn't even know what he has done to deserve damnation.

Chapter 92 Quotes

❝ Flying out window, allowed, allowed (the entire laughing party of guests happily joining behind me, urging me to please, yes, fly away) (saying oh, he feels much better now, he does not seem sick at all!)!

Whatever that former fellow (willie) had, must now be given back (is given back gladly) as it never was mine (never his) and therefore is not being taken away, not at all!

As I (who was of willie but is no longer (merely) of willie) return

To such beauty.

Related Characters: Willie Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is Willie's celebratory final monologue, which takes place directly after he has finally departed from the Bardo. As the child leaves that transitional realm, he divests himself *from* himself, letting go of his physical attachment to the living world. As this happens, Saunders provides readers with a glimpse of what one can only assume is a heaven of sorts for Willie, since he flies out a "window," chanting joyously that this is "allowed" and clearly reveling in the idea that he can now do whatever he wants. What's more, the setting of his paradise resembles the party that the Lincolns threw at the beginning of the novel—a party Willie was too sick to attend. Now, though, poor health can do nothing to stop him. Throughout this monologue, Saunders allows Willie's diction to slip away from itself, reflecting the child's newfound freedom. Indeed, the first sentence of this passage is completely unbound from itself, as it doesn't even hold together in terms of grammatical conventions, instead wheeling off into parenthetical considerations before haphazardly ending with a triumphant exclamation point—yet another manifestation of Willie's liberated exultation. In this moment, celebration takes precedent over organization and limitation, as Willie slithers out of himself and happily embraces the "beauty" of life, death, and the afterlife.

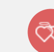
Chapter 93-94 Quotes

❝ He must (*we* must, we felt) do all *we* could, in light of the many soldiers lying dead and wounded, in open fields, all across the land, weeds violating their torsos, eyeballs pecked out or dissolving, lips hideously retracted, rain-soaked/blood-soaked/snow-crusted letters scattered about them, to ensure that we did not, as we trod that difficult path we were now well upon, blunder, blunder further (we had blundered so badly already) and, in so blundering, ruin more, more of these boys, each of whom was once dear to someone.

Ruinmore, ruinmore, we felt, *must endeavor not to ruinmore*.

Our grief must be defeated; it must not become our master, and make us ineffective, and put us even deeper into the ditch.

Related Characters: Roger Bevins III (speaker), Willie Lincoln, Hans Vollman, Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

Although Roger Bevins III narrates this passage, he is actually bringing to light President Lincoln's thoughts. In this scene, Willie has just departed, an event that suddenly releases Lincoln, allowing the man to finally leave the graveyard because he can sense that his boy is no longer there. As he turns to leave, he walks through Bevins and Vollman, and so they occupy him one last time. In doing so, they see the effect that this tumultuous, grief-ridden night has had on the president. Apparently, coming to terms with Willie's death has inspired Lincoln to do "all" he can "to ensure that" the Union wins the Civil War. If he fails to do this, the "many soldiers lying dead and wounded" all over the country will have died in vain. If the Union wins, on the other hand, at least these soldiers will have sacrificed themselves for a greater good. By spotlighting this line of thinking, Saunders illustrates that the president's loss has enabled him to finally empathize with the thousands of parents who have lost their sons in the war. In turn, this loss and "grief" turns into a heartfelt sense of compassion, one that motivates Lincoln to forge forward instead of letting his sorrow become his "master."

❝ Across the sea fat kings watched and were gleeful, that something begun so well had gone off the rails (as down South similar kings watched), and if it went off the rails, so went the whole kit, forever, and if someone ever thought to start it up again, well, it would be said (and said truly): The rabble cannot manage itself.

Well, the rabble could. The rabble would.

He would lead the rabble in managing.

The thing would be won.

Related Characters: Roger Bevins III (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

Roger Bevins III narrates this passage, but he is merely giving voice to Lincoln's thoughts as he occupies the president for the last time. As Lincoln leaves the cemetery after finally having made his peace with his son's death, he lets himself focus on the Civil War, resolving to conquer his grief so that he can move forward with his duties as the leader of the Union. This causes him to consider the fact that European "kings" are "gleeful" that the United States has plunged into chaos. After all, at this point in history, it has only been 86 years since the U.S. established itself as an independent country unaffiliated with England. Bearing this in mind, Lincoln knows that European monarchs must surely be pleased to see this new experiment in democracy fail so spectacularly. This, he realizes, is precisely why he must lead the Union to victory, thereby proving that the "rabble" (which is integral to democracy itself) can bring about unity and equality.

Chapter 95-96 Quotes

I began to feel afraid, occupying someone so accomplished. And yet, I was comfortable in there. And suddenly, wanted him to *know* me. My life. To know *us*. Our lot. I don't know why I felt that way but I did. He had no *aversion* to me, is how I might put it. Or rather, he had once had such an aversion, still bore traces of it, but, in examining that aversion, pushing it into the light, had somewhat, already, eroded it. He was an open book. An *opening* book. That had just been opened up somewhat wider. By sorrow. And—by us. By all of us, black and white, who had so recently mass-inhabited him. He had not, it seemed, gone unaffected by that event. Not at all. It had made him sad. Sadder. *We* had. All of us, white and black, had made him sadder, with our sadness. And now, though it sounds strange to say, he was making *me* sadder with *his* sadness, and I thought, Well, sir, if we are going to make a sadness party of it, I have some sadness about which I think someone as powerful as you might like to know.

Related Characters: Thomas Havens (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

As President Lincoln leaves the cemetery, Thomas Havens jumps into his body and accompanies him off the premises. Once inside, he realizes that Lincoln is president of the United States, a fact that scares him—after all, Havens has spent his entire life as a slave who feared white men in authoritative positions. Despite this impulse toward fear, though, he intuits that Lincoln is an empathetic man, someone willing to examine his own biases and interrogate his "aversions." This process of interrogation, Havens suggests, naturally "erode[s]" bigotry. Of course, Lincoln's open-mindedness also has something to do with the fact that Havens and many of his fellow Bardo-dwellers recently inhabited him all at once, thus "opening" him up to a diverse set of people. In turn, Lincoln took on the collective emotions of that group of souls, becoming "sadder" because of their various afflictions. And because empathizing with someone often means not only taking on their burdens, but also sharing one's own, Lincoln now begins to make Thomas Havens "sadder," such that the two men allow their emotions to flow into one another, ultimately uniting them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

"On our wedding day I was forty-six, she was eighteen," begins Hans Vollman, who explains that, contrary to all expectations, he did not consummate his marriage because he "refused" to "mortify" his young bride. Coming upstairs after the wedding party, he found her wearing a "thinnish thing" forced upon her by an aunt. He noticed she was trembling—an observation that stopped him from "excercis[ing] the marital prerogative." Instead, he told her she was beautiful and that he was ugly, explaining that he knew their marriage "had its roots not in love but expedience," since her family had betrothed her to him because they were poor. Vollman also told her he wouldn't ever touch her under these circumstances, suggesting instead that they become friends.

As Hans Vollman tells the story of his wedding night, Saunders quickly establishes that he is a kindhearted, empathetic man. Judging by the way he treats his young bride, it's clear he's attentive and doesn't want to force his will upon anybody. Since the novel engages so extensively with the difference between virtue and vice, it's important to keep this in mind, remembering that Hans is an overall good person, not someone who deserves to be unhappy or to suffer.

Continuing the story of his wedding night, Hans Vollman explains that he told Anna—his bride—that she should pretend to everyone that they consummated their marriage, though in truth they decided to simply be friends. In this way, he says, they grew closer and closer, eventually coming to enjoy each other's company. "*She is here*," Hans would think sometimes, "*still here*." Then, at a dinner party one night, Anna spoke kindly of him in front of their friends, and he could tell she meant the flattering things she said. The next day, she left him a note telling him that she'd like (to use her words) to "expand the frontiers of [their] happiness together in that intimate way to which [she was], as yet, a stranger." Concluding the note, she asked Hans to "guide her in this."

Once again, Saunders shows that Vollman is an empathetic person, someone willing to hold off on his own desires in order to make a loved one feel comfortable. In doing so, Vollman finds that love often develops naturally, as evidenced by the fact that Anna soon comes to feel affectionate toward him. In this way, Hans's empathy fosters an environment in which a mutual fondness can actually take root and blossom.

After Anna left her note, Vollman explains, the couple spent a joyful night kissing and cuddling in bed. The next day, they both felt "the rising tide of lust" and knew that they'd finally consummate their marriage that night. Hans, for his part, was "not an inexperienced man," since he had been married before and, in the aftermath of that marriage, had also taken to visiting prostitutes. Nonetheless, he found himself giddy at the idea of making love to Anna, and was hardly able to concentrate on his work at his printing office. "And that day—alas—was the day of the beam," he says, cursing his luck. As he sat at his desk in the printing office, a ray shot down and hit him, incapacitating him so that his plan with Anna had to "be deferred."

That Vollman gets hit by this "beam" right before finally making love to Anna is a testament to the fact that life doesn't always go according to plan. Saunders hasn't yet revealed the nature of this "beam," but it becomes clear that Vollman has to accept that he must wait to consummate his marriage. Indeed, he believes the plan must "be deferred," an approach that suggests he sees his situation—whatever it is—as impermanent, something that will eventually pass and thus enable him to proceed with his life.

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"Per the advice of my physician," Hans Vollman says, "I took to my—A sort of **sick-box** was judged—was judged to be—" He falters at here, and the voice of Roger Bevins III enters, saying: "Efficacious." Thankful for this help, Hans says, "Efficacious, yes. Thank you, friend." He then continues his story, explaining that he lay in his "sick-box" in the parlor of his home, where the physician and his assistants soon returned and carried him to a "sick-cart" to take him away. "I saw that our plan must be indefinitely delayed," Hans says. "What a frustration! When, now, would I know the full pleasures of the marriage-bed?" After waxing poetic about what it would be like to finally have sex with Anna, he says that he and his wife will have to wait until his "recovery" is "complete."

In this moment, Vollman is interrupted by Roger Bevins III, yet another disembodied voice. As such, readers realize that Lincoln in the Bardo *doesn't follow narrative conventions, but rather takes an unexpected shape, wherein multiple voices float in and out, helping one another tell their stories. In this way, Vollman's narration becomes a communal process, one aided by Roger Bevins III. On another note, it becomes rather obvious at this point that the "beam" that hit Hans has killed him. After all, there's no such thing as a "sick-box," which is clearly an alternative way of referring to a coffin. In turn, readers see that Vollman is in denial when he says that he will make a full "recovery." Rather than embracing the fact that life is impermanent, he clings to the idea that he's merely sick.*

Hans Vollman admits that, though he has somewhat come to terms with the fact that he must wait to consummate his marriage, he didn't feel that way when he first took to his "**sick-box**." In fact, when he was placed on the "sick-cart," he found that he could "briefly leave" his sick-box and create "little duststorms." He even broke a vase sitting on his porch, though Anna and the physician didn't notice, as they were too busy talking about his "injury." As such, Hans threw "a bit of a tantrum" by passing through several dogs and causing them to "yip" and dream about bears. "I could do that then!" he exclaims. "Those were the days! Now I could no more induce a dream of a bear in a dog than I could take our silent young friend here out to dinner! (He does appear young, doesn't he, Mr. Bevins?)"

Although Vollman hasn't yet managed to accept the fact that he's dead, he has at least succeeded in coming to terms with his new limitations. Indeed, he knows he's no longer capable of doing certain physical things, thereby tacitly recognizing the impermanence of his own body. What's more, he can't pull off the same kind of ethereal hijinks he could perform when he first took to his "sick-box," suggesting that a person's abilities deteriorate the longer they stay in whatever place Hans exists (which readers know from the novel's title is the Bardo, a liminal space between death and the afterlife). Lastly, Vollman indicates that he and Bevins aren't alone, though he doesn't yet fully turn his attention to this third person.

Resuming his story, Hans Vollman explains that he eventually reentered his **sick-box**. "[I was] weeping in that way that we have," he says, "—have you come to know this yet, young fellow? When we are newly arrived in this hospital-yard, young sir, and feel like weeping, what happens is, we tense up ever so slightly, and there is a mildly toxic feeling in the joints, and little things inside us burst." After giving an account of what this feels like, Vollman says, "Goodness, are you a child? He is, isn't he?" Roger Bevins III agrees that the heretofore unnamed person before them does indeed seem young, and Vollman apologizes for speaking so morbidly to a child. "Good God," he says. "To be confined to a sick-box while still a child."

In keeping with the fact that Saunders has already established him as an empathetic person, Hans Vollman now takes pity on the child before him. Although he seems to have more or less made peace with his own situation, he frames the Bardo as a place unfit for children, and is unable to fathom what it would be like to be "confined to a sick-box" as a young person. In turn, Saunders suggests that it's unnatural for children to occupy this realm.

CHAPTER 2

Interspersed throughout the narrative, Saunders includes sections comprised of historical excerpts. This particular section begins with a quotation from "Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House," by a former slave who eventually became the confidante of Mary Lincoln. In this excerpt, she explains that President Lincoln is expected to "give a series of state dinners every winter"—dinners that are quite expensive. Apparently, the First Lady decided she'd rather have President Lincoln host "three large receptions" instead of these dinners. As such, the family started throwing parties, which an American historian explains (in yet another excerpt) were "criticized" by abolitionists who found "the merry-making at the White House" inappropriate, given that the country had recently embarked upon a Civil War.

By providing multiple accounts of the president and his various decisions, Saunders establishes the divisive nature of the United States during Lincoln's presidency. Indeed, while some citizens perhaps understand why the president would want to throw receptions instead of hosting state dinners, others "criticize" him for doing so. What's more, Saunders also reveals to readers in this section that Lincoln in the Bardo *takes place during the Civil War, thus underlining the circumstances driving the country apart. As the South fought to secede from the rest of the country, President Lincoln led the Union in an effort to keep the country together. Using this history as a touchstone, Saunders mixes the nation's political unrest with Lincoln's personal life, showing that the president is subject to intense scrutiny even when it comes to throwing a party.*

Another historical excerpt explains that Willie Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's son, was quite sick when the president threw one of his large receptions. "Willie was burning with fever on the night of the fifth, as his mother dressed for the party," historians write. "He drew every breath with difficulty. She could see that his lungs were congested and she was frightened."

In this moment, Saunders uses Mary Lincoln's concern to create tension, framing Willie's illness as a potentially dire situation that threatens the Lincolns with the possibility of losing their son. What's more, since Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III have already addressed a heretofore unnamed child in the Bardo, readers begin to intuit that Willie is indeed headed toward his grave.

CHAPTER 3

Using an array of historical accounts of the Lincolns' reception, Saunders describes the lavish party, which brimmed with "exotic flowers" displayed in rooms with "multitiered chandeliers" and "carpets of sea-foam green." "Every nation, race, rank, age, height, breadth, voice-pitch, hairstyle, posture, and fragrance seemed presence," writes one historian. One attendee describes in a private letter the juxtaposition between this opulence and the national situation, noting: "This, it occurred to me, this was the undisciplined human community that, fired by its dull collective wit, now drove the armed nation towards it knew-not-what sort of epic martial cataclysm: a massive flailing organism with all the rectitude and foresight of an untrained puppy." Another attendee adds, "The war was less than a year old. We did not yet know what it was."

Once again, Saunders situates the novel by bringing to light the political circumstances influencing the president and his citizens. Although people criticize Lincoln for hosting such an extravagant party in trying times—calling him and his guests an "undisciplined community"—it's worth noting that it makes perfect sense for the president to throw a soirée that would bring people together. Indeed, individuals from different "nations," "races," and "ranks" unite during this evening, a perfect representation of the kind of unity Lincoln strives to attain on a larger scale in the Civil War.

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Assembling a vivid image of the Lincolns' reception, the historical excerpts speak of a wonderfully constructed "pagoda" of sweets and an array of exquisite foods. "Yet there was no joy in the evening for the mechanically smiling hostess and her husband," reads one historical account. "They kept climbing the stairs to see how Willie was, and he was not doing well at all."

By juxtaposing the merriment of the presidential reception with Willie's death, Saunders heightens the painful fear Abraham and Mary Lincoln feel in this moment. Despite how terrified they are of losing Willie, they must smile "mechanically" for the good of the party, since it's up to them to bring these people together even in trying times. In turn, Saunders presents yet another small-scale representation of the national situation, as Lincoln must maintain the illusion of strength during the war even when things are going badly.

CHAPTER 4-6

The historians assert that Willie can hear the Marine Band piping out its songs as the reception progresses merrily below. As his face smolders with a fever, his parents fret over his wellbeing and their guests grow exceedingly drunk. "The terror and consternation of the Presidential couple may be imagined by anyone who has ever loved a child, and suffered that dread intimation common to all parents, that Fate may not hold that life in as high a regard, and may dispose of it at will," writes one woman in a letter from the time. As dawn approaches, Willie's condition takes a turn for the worse.

The idea that "Fate may not hold" a child's life in high regard and thus "dispose of it" suggests that life and corporeal existence are fleeting. No matter how much a parent loves their child, there's no denying the fact that everyone will someday die. Of course, what makes the Lincolns' situation so tragic is that Willie is seemingly destined to die before *them, thus forcing them to grapple with this impermanence on a more tangible and immediate level.*

CHAPTER 7

In a letter to her brother, Isabelle Perkins—a woman who lives across the street from the cemetery— describes seeing Willie Lincoln's funeral procession. She watches the group enter the chapel, and then later leave the graveyard. The next day, she explains, she sees President Lincoln return to accompany his son's coffin to the crypt in which he'll be temporarily interred. "They have been loaned a place in the crypt belonging to Judge Carroll," Isabelle writes. It is now nighttime, and she assures her brother that she's grown accustomed to the silence of the graveyard. "I have grown comfortable having these Dead for company," she states, "and find them agreeable companions, over there in their Soil & cold stone Houses."

Everything about Willie in Lincoln in the Bardo *is characterized by impermanence. Indeed, even his crypt—where he should presumably remain for eternity—is a temporary arrangement, since his parents plan to move him once they themselves leave Washington, D.C. (the real William Lincoln was indeed transferred to a graveyard in Illinois, where he now lies next to his father). In this way, Saunders prepares readers to see Willie as an embodiment of transience and transition, a figure who represents life's ephemerality.*

CHAPTER 8

Historians describe Willie's temporary tomb. "Nothing could have been more peaceful or more beautiful than the situation of this tomb and it was completely undiscoverable to the casual cemetery visitor," they write, "being the very last tomb on the left at the extreme far reaches of the grounds."

By detailing the aspects of Willie's interment, Saunders emphasizes the feeling of loss surrounding the child's death. Normally in the company of his parents and various White House staffers, now Willie's body lies secluded from everyone he knows and loves. In turn, Saunders invites readers to empathize with Abraham and Mary Lincoln, who are now forced to live without their son.

CHAPTER 9

Roger Bevins III now tells his own story, saying he discovered early in life that he was attracted to men. He calls this attraction a "certain predilection" and adds that, though this "predilection" has always felt "quite natural and even wonderful" to him, nobody else ever seemed capable of seeing his love of men in such a favorable light. "I wished to be happy (as I believe all wish to be happy), and so undertook an innocent—well, a *rather* innocent—friendship with a fellow in my school." This "fellow" was named Gilbert, and Bevins quickly came to love him. Unfortunately, though, Gilbert told him one afternoon that he wanted to end their secret love affair in order to "live correctly." In turn, Bevins lost all desire to live.

Bevins believes his attraction to men—his "predilection"—is "quite natural and even wonderful," but this unfortunately doesn't influence the way his surrounding society views homosexuality. Indeed, the people around Bevins frame his romantic and sexual preferences as the product of vice—an idea to which Gilbert clearly subscribes, considering that he decides to end his relationship with Bevins in order to "live correctly," a statement implying that homosexuality is shameful. Bevins, on the other hand, is unwilling to come to terms with this idea, which is why he loses his desire to live: this life, it seems, cannot accommodate him.

Bevins continues his story, explaining that losing Gilbert led him to slit his wrists with a butcher's knife, leaving behind two notes—one to his parents, which said (in so many words) "*I am sorry*," and another to Gilbert, which said (also summarily), "*I have loved, and therefore depart fulfilled*." As soon as he cut himself, though, he regretted his decision. "Feeling nauseous at the quantity of blood and its sudden percussive redness against the whiteness of the tub," he says, "I settled myself woozily down on the floor, at which time I—well, it is a little embarrassing, but let me just say it: I *changed my mind*."

Although it is a sad and ghastly act, Bevins seems to understand and accept life's fleetingness when he slits his wrists. Indeed, he comes to terms with the fact that his life will end someday, thus deciding to take matters into his own hands sooner rather than later. Despite his sadness, he believes his love for Gilbert has made the experience of being alive inherently worthwhile (though painful), an idea that perhaps helps him come to terms with ending his time among the living. He decides to end his life, but he also seems to have an appreciation for it, too—and it is exactly this appreciation that makes him suddenly "change [his] mind."

Lying on the kitchen floor next to the porcelain tub over which he slit his wrists, Roger Bevins III suddenly realized "how unspeakably *beautiful*" the world is, "How precisely engineered for our pleasure." Each small physical occurrence (a slant of sunlight, the scent of food on the wind, everything) has now become unspeakably lovely for Bevins—so lovely, in fact, that he can't stop enumerating them now as he remembers the world he's left behind. "Sir. Friend," interrupts Hans Vollman. "Am I—am I doing it again?" asks Bevins. "Take a breath. All is well. I believe you are somewhat alarming our new arrival," Vollman replies. "Many apologies, young sir. I only meant, in my way, to welcome you," says Bevins.

Loss, Saunders intimates in this moment, fuels appreciation. Just when Bevins starts bleeding out, he feels a deep sense of longing for the world—a place he wanted to leave only minutes before. This notion also applies to the idea of impermanence, as Saunders illustrates that life's ephemerality only makes people want to cling to it even tighter.

Resuming his story, Bevins explains that he now lies prostrate on the kitchen floor, waiting with his head next to an orange peel for his mother to find him so that he can "be revived, and rise, and clean up the awful mess […] and go outside, into that beautiful world, a new and more courageous man, and begin to *live*!" He resolves to follow his "predilection" with "gusto," loving whomever he pleases because he is has been "freed now of all fear, hesitation, and timidity." Listing the many things he'll fully enjoy once he recovers, he waxes poetic yet again about the many sensory delights of life on earth. "Friend. Bevins," Vollman interrupts, stopping him once more.

For clarity's sake, it's worth noting that Bevins isn't actually lying on the kitchen floor when he says this. Though he thinks his physical form is waiting to be found, he exists in the Bardo, where he tells his tale. In this way, Saunders shows that Bevins is unwilling to admit his life has ended, instead reveling in the idea that he'll be able to "go outside, into that beautiful world" and live with "gusto." Adamant that his time on earth hasn't yet come to a close, he romanticizes life itself, his appreciation for existence swelling even as he languishes in the Bardo.

At this point, Willie Lincoln finally speaks, saying, "'Bevins' had several sets of eyes All darting to and fro Several noses All sniffing His hands (he had multiple sets of hands, or else his hands were so quick they seemed to be many) struck this way and that, picking things up, bringing them to his face with a most inquisitive Little bit scary." Apparently, as Bevins tells his story, he grows so many new "eyes noses and hands" that his body disappears beneath the many added parts. "Eyes like grapes on a vine," Willie notes, "Hands feeling the eyes Noses smelling the hands Slashes on every one of the wrists."

As Willie describes Bevins's appearance, readers come to understand that souls in the Bardo manifest into physical forms that reflect their preoccupations with the world they've left behind. Indeed, Bevins's body parts multiply because he's obsessed with the many sensory pleasures of being alive. On another note, Willie's strange use of language reminds readers that he is still trying to adjust to the Bardo—his fragmentary manner of speaking suggests that he isn't yet used to this place, which seems to have a notable effect on his ability to communicate. This is worth keeping in mind, as Saunders later explores the ways in which children are negatively influenced by remaining in the Bardo.

Vollman explains that Willie Lincoln observes Bevins from the roof of his own "sick-house" (a "white stone home"). Bevins interjects that the boy also periodically glances at Vollman himself, but Vollman tries to shush his friend. Nonetheless, Bevins is correct that Willie has noticed Vollman's odd physical appearance. As the boy notes, "The other man (the one hit by a beam) Quite naked Member swollen to the size of Could not take my eyes off It bounced as he Body like a dumpling Broad flat nose like a sheep's Quite naked indeed Awful dent in the head How could he walk around and talk with such a nasty—" Interrupting the boy, Vollman announces the arrival of their friend the Reverend Everly Thomas, who sprints over looking like he always looks: "eyebrows arched high, looking behind himself anxiously, hair sticking straight up, mouth in a perfect O of terror."

In this scene, Saunders offers more descriptions of the Bardo-dwellers and their strange physical appearances. Once again, it's clear that these souls take forms that reflect their preoccupations with whatever they obsessed over in their previous lives. Vollman, for instance, sports an eternal erection that denotes the lust and excitement he felt just before dying. The fact that these people take such forms says something about just how attached they still are to the way they lived their lives—unable to accept that they're dead, they cling to the things that defined their last moments.

"A newcomer?" says the Reverend in a calm voice, despite his startled demeanor. "I believe we have the honor of addressing a Mr. Carroll," says Mr. Bevins, but the young boy only stares at him blankly. "No doubt you are feeling a certain pull?" asks Vollman. "An urge? To go? Somewhere? More comfortable?" Despite these urgings, though, Willie merely says, "I feel I am to wait." When Vollman asks what, exactly, he intends to wait for, the boy says, "My mother. My father. They will come shortly. To collect me."

When Vollman asks if Willie feels a "certain pull" to go somewhere "more comfortable," he implies that children aren't meant to occupy this liminal realm. The fact that he assumes Willie is uncomfortable here further illustrates the notion that stasis is unfit for children. After all, children constantly undergo change, growing quickly into adults. As such, it's against nature for them to remain fixed, a fact that applies to their experience in the Bardo.

Hans Vollman shakes his head somberly, telling Willie that his parents may indeed come, but they won't collect him. "In any event, they will not stay long," he says. "All the while wishing themselves elsewhere," adds Roger Bevins III. "Thinking only of lunch," says the Reverend. Despite these pieces of advice, though, Willie decides to stay, thinking about how he has barely even had the chance to play with his new Christmas toys and considering the fact that soon spring will come. "I am to wait," he says.

The fact that Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend rarely receive visitors suggests that people outside the Bardo quickly move on from their losses. Indeed, they soon find ways to continue their lives without their loved ones. This stands in stark contrast to the Bardo-dwellers' own attitude, which keeps them from accepting that they've left behind their lives for good.

CHAPTER 10

Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend explain that young people "are not meant to tarry." Indeed, they have seen many children come and go over the years. Even babies have transitioned through this space, including an infant girl who "just lay there" while "giving off a dull white light" and a "high-pitched keening" until—forty-seven minutes later—she moved on to join her mother, who had barely preceded her. Bevins asserts that most children "naturally" leave this place, and the Reverend adds: "Or else." "Imagine our surprise, then," Vollman says, "when, passing by an hour or so later, we found the lad still on the roof, looking expectantly about, as if waiting for a carriage to arrive and whisk him away." The Reverend, for his part, says, "Something needed to be done."

When Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend say that young people "are not meant to tarry," they frame Willie's resolve to stay in the Bardo as unnatural, though they are perhaps also somewhat impressed by the boy's strength. This makes sense, considering that they must know the strength it takes to occupy this realm. Still, though, they see the act of "tarry[ing]" as contrary to nature, especially when it comes to children, who are otherwise normally in a state of constant evolution and transition.

CHAPTER 11

Vollman tells Willie to follow him, Bevins, and the Reverend. "There is someone we would like you to meet," he says, and Willie joins them, discovering that he can "walk-skim" over the ground. As he follows these older souls, he finds that he's glad to distance himself from his coffin, since there's something "untoward" lying inside of it, something he thinks is a "worm the size of a boy." This worm, he notes, is wearing *his* suit.

Willie's aversion to his own body further illustrates the fact that these souls now lead entirely new existences—existences quite unlike the ones to which they've grown accustomed. Indeed, Willie has trouble recognizing the end of his corporeal presence, instead turning his physical body into an abstraction by calling it a "worm." This ultimately helps him avoid the truth, which is that he is dead. In turn, he enables himself to continue existing in the Bardo, which seems to require a person to deny that they have died.

CHAPTER 12

As Willie walk-skims with Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend, a woman joins them and lists off the names of various "wildwoods flowers." As she exhibits her vast botanical knowledge to Willie, a man follows behind her, groping her and bragging about his "subtle understanding of the significant aspects of" female clothing. Just as this woman is about to sing a song for Willie, she and the groping man halt. "Oh no," she says, "I won't go no closer. Good day to you, sirs." With this, she and her lusty companion hastily retreat.

One common characteristic among the Bardo-dwellers is that they all yearn to tell some sort of story having to do with their obsessions. As this woman talks to Willie, she reveals her preoccupation with "wildwoods flowers," talking for no apparent reason other than to make her presence known. Likewise, the man groping her won't stop boasting about his own clothing-related genius. These fixations, it seems, are part of what keep such people in the Bardo—unable to let go of their obsessions, they spend eternity rehashing their stories. Thus they remain tethered to the world, unwilling to let go of their previous lives.

"We had reached the edge of an uninhabited wilderness of some several hundred yards that ended in the dreaded **iron fence**," Hans Vollman says, and Roger Bevins III explains that this is the "noxious limit beyond which" they cannot "venture." Affixed to this fence lies the Traynor girl, who has been fastened there so long that she has ultimately become part of the boundary itself. As Willie and his guides approach, Elise Traynor "manifests" as a "horrid blackened furnace." With sorrow in his voice, the Reverend recalls when the girl first arrived, a period during which "she uninterruptedly manifested as a spinning young girl in a summer frock of continually shifting color." Now, Vollman asks her to tell Willie about "the perils of this place," but she only turns into a series of horrid objects. When the group turns to leave, though, Elise beckons Willie closer and begins her tale.

To further illustrate the fact that children aren't meant to "tarry" in the Bardo, Willie's three older guides reveal to him the terrible effect of stasis. Indeed, Elise Traynor proves that awful things happen to young people who refuse to move on from this realm, which is intended to be a chiefly transitory space. In this way, Saunders builds even more tension surrounding Willie's resolve to stay.

CHAPTER 13

Elise Traynor tells Willie that a number of young men used to "desire" her as they sat together on pleasant evenings. Before any kind of physical intimacy ever took place, though, her mother always sent somebody to fetch her. "I want ed so much to hold a dear Babe," she says. "I know very wel I do not look as prety as I onseh. And over time, I admit, I have come to know serten words I did not formerly." As if to demonstrate this fact, she interrupts herself, saying: "Fuk cok shit reem ravage assfuk." A mere fourteen-year-old girl, she asks Willie to come again soon, though tells him to leave behind his "anshient frends," who she dislikes because—in urging her to talk to Willie—they've asked her to "slander" "that which [she is] doing. Wich is no more than what they are doing."

It's worth noting that Elise Traynor has a very specific reason for staying: she wants to "hold a dear Babe" but has never gotten the chance to get pregnant. In turn, she's unwilling to let go of her previous life, for she hasn't gotten what she most wants out of her time on earth. Furthermore, when she criticizes Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend for "slander[ing]" her, she refers to the fact that they want her to tell Willie the downside of staying in the Bardo. This is a rather hypocritical request, she points out, since these older souls are waiting in the Bardo just like she is. Although this is true, it's evident that "tarrying" in this realm has a more pointedly negative effect on Elise, which is made clear by the fact that her linguistic capabilities have altered since she first arrived. The more time she spends in the Bardo, Saunders suggests, the more her language deteriorates.

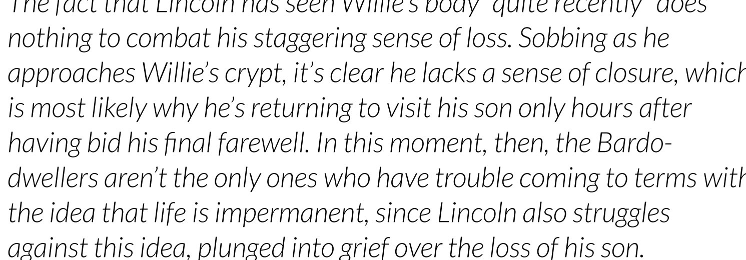
CHAPTER 14-15

Leaving Elise Traynor, Willie asks Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend if the same thing will happen to him if he stays, and they assure him it will. “It is—it is somewhat happening already,” the Reverend says. “I believe, then, that I must do as you say,” Willie admits. As the group prepares to say goodbye, though, his eyes fix on something in the distance, and his face alights with joy. “Father,” he says.

Once again, Saunders emphasizes the idea that young people aren’t meant to “tarry” in states of stasis. Just as Willie comes to terms with this notion, though, he sees his father, a fact that will no doubt upset his plans to leave. In this moment, Willie reconnects to his past life, remembering his connection to his father—a connection that makes it harder for him to leave the Bardo.

CHAPTER 16

Turning around, Vollman sees that “an exceedingly tall and unkempt fellow” is making his way toward the white stone home through the graves. “This was highly irregular,” the Reverend notes. “It was after hours; the front gate would be locked.” Indeed, Willie has only been interred that very same day, meaning that his father has no doubt seen him “quite recently.” Nonetheless, Abraham Lincoln approaches the white stone home, “sobbing” as he goes, and Willie runs toward him and jumps into his arms for an embrace. Unfortunately, though, he merely passes through Lincoln’s body, and the president keeps moving toward the white stone home.



The fact that Lincoln has seen Willie’s body “quite recently” does nothing to combat his staggering sense of loss. Sobbing as he approaches Willie’s crypt, it’s clear he lacks a sense of closure, which is most likely why he’s returning to visit his son only hours after having bid his final farewell. In this moment, then, the Bardo-dwellers aren’t the only ones who have trouble coming to terms with the idea that life is impermanent, since Lincoln also struggles against this idea, plunged into grief over the loss of his son.

When Lincoln reaches the white stone home, he keys it open and goes inside, where he slides Willie’s coffin from the wall, places it on the floor, and opens it. Looking upon his son’s face, he lets out a “gasp of recognition” and “recollection,” a gasp that signals the sudden remembrance of “what [has] been lost.” Reaching out, he touches the boy’s face and hair, a gesture Bevins assumes the man must have done “many times when the boy was—” Interrupting his friend, Vollman says, “Less sick.”

When Vollman interrupts Bevins, readers once again see his commitment to denying the fact that he has died. Indeed, every time he fears that someone might outwardly acknowledge the fact that everyone in the Bardo is dead, Vollman jumps in to make sure that person refers to their collective predicament in terms of illness, not mortality. Once more, then, it becomes clear that one must deny life’s impermanence in order to go on existing in the Bardo.

CHAPTER 17

Returning to the historical accounts of Willie’s illness, Saunders outlines the Lincolns’ sorrow after the boy’s death. One observer notes that he has never seen anybody as “bowed down with grief” as when President Lincoln saw his son’s lifeless body. “My poor boy, he was too good for this earth,” Lincoln uttered over Willie’s inert form. Regarding parenthood and loss, one historical commentator writes: “From nothingness, there arose great love; now, its source nullified, that love, searching and sick, converts to the most abysmal suffering imaginable.”

Willie’s death throws his parents into unspeakable sadness, which partly comes from having to admit the brutal reality that life is fleeting. The fact that Willie sprang “from nothingness” aligns with this notion, illustrating that each person’s existence is just a brief flash that ultimately “converts” into nothingness again, though love and various emotional attachments linger long after that person has died.

CHAPTER 18-19

Once again culling information from letters and biographies, Saunders portrays Willie Lincoln as a "lovable boy" whose charm gave him the air of a small, well-mannered adult replete with a "glow of intelligence." Indeed, the child also embodied a sense of "frankness," a quality that played itself against his otherwise boyish habits, which often made him "wild, naughty, [and] overwrought." In the aftermath of his death, Mary Lincoln lies "insensate" as the President groans in grief. The evenings, it seems, are hardest for Lincoln, since this is when Willie "would normally present himself for some talk or roughhousing." Because of this, the president especially notices the loss of his child in these moments, when the day wanes and Willie is nowhere to be found.

Yet again, Saunders depicts the harrowing effects of losing a loved one, especially a small child. In doing so, he touches upon the fact that children are especially hard to say goodbye to, since they encompass so much love, care, and hope. Indeed, where does this affection go once a beloved child passes away? This question is central to Lincoln in the Bardo, *as the president tries to find a way of managing his grief. By providing accounts of Willie's personality, Saunders endears readers to the boy, thereby enabling them to empathize more pointedly with Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln's loss.*

CHAPTER 20

Back in the white stone home, Lincoln picks up Willie's lifeless body and cradles it. At this point, the Reverend realizes a crowd has formed outside the crypt, as other souls want to watch the scene unfolding inside. Meanwhile, Willie becomes so frustrated that Lincoln won't interact with *him*—but only his corpse—that he reenters his own body, causing Lincoln to "sob anew, as if he [can] feel the altered condition of that which he [holds]." Overwhelmed and not wanting to witness something so "private," Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III leave the white stone home, though the Reverend stays, "transfixed" and "uttering many prayers."

This scene of Lincoln cradling his son's body is likely historical, and was the image that inspired Saunders to write the book in the first place. In this moment, Willie finds himself tormented by the fact that he can't interact with his father. In this state, he can't do anything but watch the real world pass him by as life unfolds without him. As such, Saunders creates a stark division between the living world and the Bardo, illustrating that the souls existing in this liminal space are utterly incapable of uniting themselves with the reality they want so badly to rejoin. Lincoln, for his part, also experiences this division. Since he doesn't know Willie is watching, however, he doesn't see himself as having been divided from his child so much as having lost *his child.*

CHAPTER 21

Inside his own physical form, Willie listens to Lincoln whisper in his ear. His father assures him that, though their "bond has been broken," it is a bond that "can never" truly break, since he'll love Willie forever. The man then breaks into tears, and Willie decides to enter him so they can interact better. Once inside, he suddenly feels extremely connected to his father. "Could feel the way his long legs lay," Willie notes fragmentarily. "How it is to have a beard Taste coffee in the mouth and, though not thinking in words exactly, knew that *the feel of him in my arms has done me good. It has. Is this wrong? Unholy? No, no, he is mine, he is ours, and therefore I must be, in that sense, a god in this; where he is concerned I may decide what is best.*"

When Willie inhabits his father, he forges a new kind of unity, one that allows him to know everything about Lincoln. However, there still exists a sense of division between them, since Lincoln himself doesn't know his son is inside of him. What's more, Saunders uses this technique as a way of divulging Lincoln's most internal thoughts, showcasing the man's fear that what he's doing—by holding his son's lifeless body—is "unholy." Indeed, the president worries that what he's doing is "wrong," but he eventually decides that—as Willie's father—he has the right to "decide what is best," thereby giving himself permission to address his sense of loss in whatever way he thinks might alleviate his grief.

Continuing to narrate his father's thoughts, Willie says: "*And I believe this has done me good. I remember him. Again. Who he was. I had forgotten somewhat already.*" Because holding Willie has helped him remember his son, Lincoln decides that he will allow himself to "return as often as" he likes. This, he resolves, will be a secret he can keep, one that will enable him to manage his grief. "Dear boy," he speaks aloud, "I will come again. That is a promise."

That Lincoln has already "forgotten" aspects of Willie is yet another indication of life's fleeting quality—no matter what, memories fade, even of loved ones. Furthermore, Lincoln frames holding Willie as something that helps him navigate his loss. Because of this, he decides he ought not be ashamed of what he's doing, even if it's unconventional. In turn, Saunders demonstrates that grief and mourning often inspire people to do strange things.

CHAPTER 22

Watching Willie's father leave, the Reverend reenters the white stone home and finds Willie sitting in the corner. "My father," says the boy. "Yes," replies the Reverend. "He said he will come again," Willie says. "He promised." This moves the Reverend so much that all he can manage to say is, "A miracle."

The Reverend finds himself profoundly touched by Lincoln's promise, because no one in the Bardo has ever experienced what Willie has just experienced. Indeed, though the Bardo-dwellers themselves remain tethered to the living world, the people in that world lead lives that have nothing to do with them. As such, Willie's interaction with his father gives people in the Bardo a sliver of hope that they too will someday be able to reconnect with a world they've left behind. Of course, it's worth noting that Willie and Lincoln haven't truly interacted—since Willie remains unable to actually communicate with his father—but nonetheless, Lincoln's promise to return suggests that people in the living world might still care about the Bardo-dwellers.

CHAPTER 23

Jack Manders writes in Oak Hill Cemetery's watchman's logbook about seeing President Lincoln arrive at the cemetery gate at one in the morning. Manders explains to Tom—an unidentified character—that he had no choice but to let Lincoln into the graveyard, though "protocol states" that nobody should be allowed in after the gate has been locked. Nonetheless, Manders was tired from a long day playing with his three children, so he wasn't in the mood to protest Lincoln's wishes. "Did not question Pres as to what he was doing here or something like that only when our eyes met he gave me such a frank friendly somewhat pained look as if to say well friend this is rather odd I know it but with eyes so needful I could not refuse him as his boy is just today interred," Manders writes.

A father himself, Manders finds himself unable to refuse Lincoln when he asks to be let into the cemetery to visit Willie. By showcasing this interaction, Saunders spotlights the strength of parental love—a love so common and yet so strong that Manders, a cemetery groundskeeper, is able to empathize with Lincoln, a man to whom he'd probably never otherwise be able to relate. In this moment, these two men unite as two fathers, their differences dropping away as Manders pities the president.

Manders remarks that Lincoln arrived at the cemetery alone on a small horse, upon which his feet dangled almost to the ground. The President, he writes, asked for the key to the Carroll crypt, which Manders gave him without question. "I handed it over and watched him wander off across grounds wishing I'd had courtesy at least to offer him loan of lamp which he did not have one but went forth into that stygian dark like pilgrim going forward into a trackless desert Tom it was awful sad," he writes. Now, hours later, the President hasn't returned. "Where is he Tom," Manders wonders. "Lost is he lost. Lost in there or fell and broke something lying there crying out. Just now stepped out listened no cries. Where is he at this time do not know Tom. Maybe out there in woods somewhere recovering from visit indulging in solitary cry?"

The empathy Manders feels for Lincoln slowly turns into a sense of foreboding worry. After all, Lincoln holds the highest office in the land, and Manders has just allowed him to venture into the night alone without a lantern. Although he begins to worry, he also seems to understand the magnitude of parental loss, guessing that Lincoln is most likely "indulging" in a "solitary cry." Manders, it seems, is cognizant of just how difficult it would be to lose a child, and though readers know Lincoln isn't "out there" crying in the "woods," Manders is correct that the president remains in the cemetery because of his overwhelming grief.

CHAPTER 24

"It would be difficult to overstate the vivifying effect this visitation had on our community," Hans Vollman says regarding Lincoln's time in the cemetery. As the man interacted with his son's body, many souls emerged from their dwelling places. "Individuals we had not seen in years walked out," the Reverend says. "Individuals we had *never* seen before, now made their anxious debuts," adds Roger Bevins III. Indeed, they explain that these people are "happy" and reinvigorated by the idea that somebody "from that other place" would "deign" to touch a body. "It was not unusual for people from that previous place to be *around*," Vollman says, but he notes that touching is an entirely separate matter, since the only time anybody has been touched is when something has gone wrong: either they've required removal from their "**sick-boxes**" for maintenance purposes, or they've been disinterred for ghastly experiments by medical students.

Once again, Saunders emphasizes the fact that the living world rarely engages with the Bardo-dwellers. Indeed, usually any interaction living people have with these souls is meaningless and even gruesome, as is the case when medical students dig up bodies for experiments. While the Bardo-dwellers cling so firmly to the living world, they're incapable of actually interacting with it. They have lost any true connection to life, though they themselves will never admit this, upholding instead that their predicament is only temporary and that they'll soon return to lead the lives they left behind. It's no wonder, then, that Lincoln's visit has a "vivifying effect" on the community, since it plays into the Bardo-dwellers' mistaken notion that they might still be able to meaningfully engage with the world.

CHAPTER 25

The Reverend takes a moment to underline the fact that the people in this place have been "loved" and have led important lives. "What I mean to say is, we had been *considerable*," he notes. "Had been *loved*. Not lonely, not lost, not freakish, but wise, each in his or her own way. Our departures caused pain. Those who had loved us sat upon their beds, heads in hand; lowered their faces to tabletops, making animal noises." Despite this love, though, nobody has ever come to hold them like Lincoln held Willie.

It is clearly important for the Reverend to believe that his existence in the Bardo doesn't reflect the life he led. This makes sense, considering that he's a Reverend and therefore someone who has most likely devoted his entire life to leading a meaningful and virtuous existence. Now, though, he finds himself in a place where none of that seems to matter, so he must remind himself that he was "considerable."

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CHAPTER 26

It isn't long before a crowd of souls surround the white stone home. Everybody, Vollman explains, wants to associate themselves with Willie, hoping to know what "this apparently charmed being" thinks of their "particular reasons for remaining." This is because, Bevins notes, there isn't a single soul here—"not even the strongest"—who doesn't "entertain some lingering doubt about the wisdom of his or her choice" to remain. Thinking this way, a mass of people lines up, each soul ready to tell Willie his or her story.

It's worth noting that Bevins speaks about staying in the Bardo in terms of strength. Indeed, he says that not even the "strongest" souls are able to avoid certain misgivings regarding their decision to stay. In turn, he frames the act of lingering in this liminal realm as a feat of endurance, and this ultimately reinforces the notion that it is unnatural to embrace stasis like these Bardo-dwellers have. Indeed, children aren't the only ones who are naturally supposed to move on—even the "strongest" adult souls in the Bardo also must fight to stay.

CHAPTER 27

Jane Ellis—a woman constantly surrounded by three "gelatinous orbs" that contain "a likeness of one of her daughters"—steps up and tells Willie her story. As a child, she explains, she once helped her father tie a deer to his carriage, and she remembers driving through the countryside feeling like "a new species of child," a girl destined for more than the narrow existence of serving tea and living in a small town. Indeed, she resolved to visit distant cities, but she eventually married a man who was neither "handsome" nor "generous," a man who never took her abroad. Though he himself was deeply incompetent and always losing his job, he wrote Jane off as "silly" whenever she spoke her mind. Before long, she was disgusted at the very sight of him, hating that he expected her to have sex with him and wait on his needs.

Jane Ellis's story includes a certain aspect that is common to many of the tales the Bardo-dwellers tell about their lives. Namely, her desire to travel and live a fulfilling life went unsatisfied in the living world, and this is why she's unwilling to accept the fact that she has died. What's keeping her in this liminal realm, then, is a yearning to return to her previous existence and live the way she always wanted to live. And although Jane's story is of course specific to her, the overall narrative (regarding a lack of fulfillment as a reason for staying in this transitional space) is quite pervasive throughout all the Bardo-dwellers' stories.

Jane Ellis continues telling Willie her story, saying that she had three children with her despicable husband. "In those girls I found my Rome, my Paris, my Constantinople," she says, explaining her ferocious love for these children. Her husband, on the other hand, cared little about the girls, though he often used them to make himself look good in public. "Is *he* to care for them?" Jane asks Willie. "In my absence?" Of course, she adds, she's only come here to rest during a minor surgery, so she will indeed return to them soon. "A rare opportunity, really," she says, "for a person to pause and take stock of her—"

When Jane Ellis mentions her children, she provides yet another reason why she's unable to let go of her existence in the living world. On another note, the intense love she feels for her daughters reminds readers of the fact that President Lincoln is still mourning Willie's death, allowing Saunders to sustain his engagement with the ideas of loss and mourning, especially regarding parents and their children.

At this point, the Reverend interrupts to describe Jane Ellis's appearance. Sometimes, he explains, the three orbs that surround her with images of her children "bear down upon her" so much that they "crush out her blood and other fluids" as she tries not to scream, for she doesn't want to scare them away. Sometimes, though, the orbs disappear completely, at which point Mrs. Ellis frantically looks for them. Worst of all, the orbs will occasionally turn into life-sized versions of her daughters and complain about things she can't possibly fix. Interrupting this description of Jane Ellis, Mrs. Abigail Blass makes her presence known, but Mrs. Ellis ignores her, asking Willie to check on her daughters if he's "allowed back to that previous place."

Once again, Saunders makes clear that the Bardo-dwellers often physically represent the various preoccupations they still have with the living world. As if to further illustrate just how tied Mrs. Ellis is to her previous life, she asks Willie to check on her daughters if he's "allowed back to that previous place," a request that shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the Bardo. Indeed, Mrs. Ellis—along with seemingly everyone else in this realm—mistakenly believes it might be possible for a person to venture back into the living world, a belief that denotes her failure to grasp that she is dead. After all, the Bardo is a place of transition, meaning that people can only move on from it, not retrace their steps.

As Mrs. Ellis's story ends, a cacophony of voices emerge, each one narrating snippets of their own stories. Nonetheless, Mrs. Blass—who is "notoriously frugal, filthy, gray-haired, and tiny (smaller than a baby)"—manages to tell her tale. Apparently, she spends her nights running around and chewing on rocks and twigs, which she hoards in her resting place, constantly counting and recounting her "possessions." "I have one thousand three hundred dollars in the First Bank," she begins, embarking upon a monologue in which she catalogues all the assets she has left behind.

Mrs. Blass is yet another example of someone who is unable to let go of their previous life. In fact, everyone in the Bardo exemplifies this attitude, which is made clear by the way large groups of them crowd around the "white stone home" and try to tell their stories. As the voices swirl around Willie, there emerges a strange sense of discordant unity. On the one hand, the Bardo-dwellers exist only as individuals who talk over each other and think only of their own stories. On the other hand, though, they might form a cohesive whole if they stopped to consider the fact that they're all in the same situation. Each of them wants more or less the same things: to tell their stories, to remain in the Bardo, and to someday return to their old lives.

Willie listens to the stories and watches the "shifting mass of gray and black" that stretches before him—a collection of souls waiting to talk to him. As he surveys the scene, Lieutenant Cecil Stone makes his way to the front and brags about his appearance, saying that he used to "cut a fine Figure" when he walked about in uniform, causing his "SHARDS" to step aside; "This is what I should like the young Swain to know," he says. "And many was the time I pounded my Lust out in the Night to good Result; pounding my good Wife or, if she was indisposed, pounding my SHARDS, whom I called SHARDS, for they were, indeed, dark as Night, like unto so many SHARDS of COAL, which did give me abundant Heat. I need only Seize a SHARD-LASS up, & Ignoring the Cries of her SHARD-MAN, would—"

When Lieutenant Cecil Stone speaks, readers remember that Lincoln in the Bardo takes place during the Civil War, a conflict that largely centered around the abolition of slavery. As Stone rants and raves in this racist manner, it becomes clear that his preoccupation with life—the reason he won't move on from the Bardo—has to do with championing the bigotry he so fully embodied while existing in the living world. Since he's a lieutenant, it's reasonable to assume that he fought for the Confederacy in an effort to save slavery from abolition. If this is the case, then his racist vitriol in the Bardo logically represents his life's project to oppress black people—and it's worth noting, of course, that this vile project has impeded his ability to successfully transition into the afterlife. Whereas other people find themselves confined to the Bardo for more wholesome and understandable reasons, Lieutenant Stone remains in this realm because he's utterly incapable of letting go of the antagonistic ideas he tried to force upon the world while he was still alive.

"Good Lord," interrupts Hans Vollman. "He is in fine form tonight," Roger Bevins III remarks. "Bear in mind, Lieutenant," says Vollman, "he is but a child." Nonetheless, Lieutenant Cecil Stone holds forth with his racist monologue, and the Reverend explains—as an aside—that the Lieutenant often grows very tall while spewing such bombastic words, reaching the heights of a pine tree and becoming as thin as a pencil. Meanwhile, Eddie and Betsy Baron approach and tell Willie in exceedingly vulgar language how they lived in extreme poverty but spent their lives partying, always upholding that their children—whom they neglected—had no right to criticize them because they hadn't walked a mile in their shoes.

In this portion of Lincoln in the Bardo, *Willie faces a number of eccentric, vulgar, and wild characters who deliver troubling stories. As such, Saunders emphasizes once more that Willie—as a child—doesn't belong in this realm, where macabre souls curse and spew racist vitriol as if they have nothing to be ashamed of. Indeed, many of Willie's fellow Bardo-dwellers are full of vice, whereas he is the sweet and well-loved child of a President fighting for equality.*

"Enough," the Reverend says to the Barons. Vollman agrees that these two souls are too vulgar to speak to Willie. "Drunk and insensate, lying in the road, run over by the same carriage, they had been left to recover from their injuries in an unmarked disreputable common sick-pit just beyond the dread **iron fence**," Vollman explains, "the only white people therein, thrown in with several members of the dark race, not one among them, pale or dark, with a **sick-box** in which to properly recover." The Reverend adds that it's not ideal to have the Barons talking to Willie. "Or be on this side of the fence," Vollman says. "It is not about wealth," says the Reverend. "It is about comportment. It is about, let us say, being 'wealthy in spirit.'" Still, though, the Barons can go wherever they like, "the fence not being an impediment to them."

Saunders delivers an important piece of logistical information in this moment: not all of the souls in the Bardo physically occupy the same space, though they do all exist in the same realm. Indeed, the Barons' actual bodies have been interred in a mass grave, where they are the only white people. This detail is worth noting because it calls attention to the ways that the outside world's prejudices—particularly surrounding race and class—threaten to make their way into the Bardo. Although all the souls in this space are forced to carry out more or less the same kind of existence, there is a delineation between the people who were disenfranchised in the real world and the people who enjoyed the fruits of equality and riches. This is an important dynamic to keep in mind as the novel progresses, since race and equality factor into the burdens Lincoln feels as the president of a country at war with itself.

CHAPTER 28

As the souls crowd around Willie, "certain familiar signs" hint at the fact that "trouble [is] brewing." First, a "hush" falls, then comes the sound of winter branches scraping against one another, followed by a "warm breeze" bearing enticing, comforting aromas. Each person smells a different array of scents, "each being differently comforted." Next, flowers emerge "fully formed from the earth" and the trees produce whatever fruit a person wants in that moment. Before long, a flood of water provides each "sick-mound" with its own "tributary," which converts into "coffee, wine, whiskey, and back into water again." "All of these things, we knew, comprised merely the advanced guard, so to speak, of what was coming," the Reverend says. Amending this statement, Vollman adds, "Of who was coming." These luxuries, they explain, are sent to have "a softening effect." "Strength now, all!" Vollman shouts as he himself hunkers down.

The pleasures that affront the Bardo-dwellers in this moment play upon each person's predilections and irresistible vices or weaknesses. When Vollman and the Reverend explain that these things—whatever they are, since Saunders has not yet revealed the nature of this attack—are supposed to have "a softening effect" on them, readers intuit that whatever is about to bombard the Bardo-dwellers has something to do with convincing these stubborn souls to finally depart. As the Bardo-dwellers prepare, readers get the sense that something is trying to convince them to leave, and this ultimately reinforces the notion that tarrying in the Bardo—that stasis—is unnatural.

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CHAPTER 29

"They entered in lengthy procession," Vollman says. "each of us apprehending them in a different guise," adds the Reverend. Vollman, for one, sees a group of attractive young brides "arrayed in thinnish things." The Reverend, on the other hand, sees angels. For Bevins, these beings manifest as "hundreds of exact copies of Gilbert." One of these Gilberts kneels beside him and whispers, "Come with us. Here it is all savagery and delusion. You are of finer stuff. Come with us, all is forgiven." Another Gilbert chimes in, saying, "We know what you did. It is all right." Bevins contests this point, saying, "I did not do it. It is not complete," but the Gilberts disagree. "I may yet reverse it," insists Bevins. "Dear boy," says a Gilbert. "Soften, soften," intones another. "You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore."

When the group of Gilberts insists that Bevins should depart from the Bardo, saying that "it is all right" that he committed suicide, he vehemently denies the notion that the act of killing himself has been completed. "I may yet reverse it," he says, once again demonstrating his unwillingness to believe that he's dead. This, of course, is a mere "delusion," and the group of Gilberts tries to get him to admit his own ephemeral nature, saying, "You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore," a line that intimates a certain kind of transience, since waves disperse upon the shore and cannot return to their previous form.

"Kindly don't bother," Bevins says to the group of Gilberts. "I have heard all of this—" Cutting him off, one of the Gilberts says in a suddenly harsh voice, "Let me tell you something. You are not lying on any floor, in any kitchen. Are you? Look around, fool. You delude yourself. It is complete. You have completed it." Adding to this, another Gilbert says, "We say these things to speed you along."

In this moment, the Gilberts drop all pretense of wooing Bevins into leaving the Bardo. Instead, they simply try to reason with him, attempting to force him into admitting that he's dead. The fact that these beings are so intent upon "speed[ing]" him along suggests again that the static life he lives in the Bardo runs contrary to the progression of a natural life cycle. These beings—who are presumably heaven-sent—don't want anyone to tarry in the Bardo, so they seek to free Bevins of his "delusions."

The beings that speak to Mrs. Abigail Blass take the form of comely country girls who remind her of herself. "Abbie, dear," one of them says, "allow me to show you something." She touches Mrs. Blass's face, and suddenly Mrs. Blass looks upon a wonderful place where she can have everything she has ever "needed." "You never in your life was given enough," says the being, and Mrs. Blass's eyes tear up. "You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore." Resolving finally to leave this place, Mrs. Blass realizes that she has been "tired" for a long time. "I believe I will come with," she says. Nearby, Hans Vollman hears a shout "of terror or victory" and then the "familiar, yet always bone-chilling, firesound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon."

Part of convincing the Bardo-dwellers to depart, it seems, is playing into the very narratives that have kept them in this liminal realm for so long. Indeed, Mrs. Blass has spent ample time talking about how many things she has earned for herself, since she believes she was never "given enough." In turn, the heaven-sent beings take a cue from this mindset, using it to their advantage by "softening" Mrs. Blass with the words, "You never in your life was given enough." In doing so, they subvert the narrative itself, now using it to help Mrs. Blass move on instead of staying in the Bardo, where nobody actually cares about hearing her story. For the first time, Mrs. Blass feels like someone is actually listening to her, and so she decides to leave.

Motivated by Mrs. Blass's departure, the beings double their efforts. Willie, for his part, sees ten versions of his mother. "Come with us," one says. "You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore," says another. Meanwhile, a bride asks Vollman when he'll "know the full pleasures of the marriage-bed." Another bride answers this question, saying, "I'll tell you when. Never. That's finished now." They then suggest he's being dishonest with himself, urging him to "admit" that he isn't "sick." Feeling himself weaken, Vollman employs a defensive tactic by asking them, "To whom do you speak? Who is hearing you? To whom do you listen?" Seeing their mounting confusion, he says, "Here I am. I am here. Am I not?" As the beings try to formulate a response, two more occurrences of the "firesound" associated with the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" bleat into the night.

One of the things that helps people remain in the Bardo is the very fact of their continued existence, even if this existence is of a limited nature. This is why Hans Vollman states, "Here I am. I am here." By saying this, he's able to convince himself that he hasn't yet died. Of course, this interpretation leaves no room for the truth, which is that Vollman is in a transitional state. While he sees life and death as binary—thinking that a person is either fully alive or fully dead—he fails to grasp that there might be a kind of existence that takes place between *these two states.*

While his friends endure their own attacks, the Reverend speaks to a beautiful angel, who asks him if he thinks God is present in this place. "I—I believe He is," the Reverend replies. "He is, of course, everywhere," says the angel. "But does not like to see you lingering here. Among such low companions." Unable to take this conversation any longer, the Reverend says, "Please go. I do not—I do not require you today," to which she responds, "But soon, I think?" In this moment, her beauty "swell[s] beyond description," and the Reverent breaks into tears. Thankfully, though, the "onslaught" comes to an end, and everything returns to the way it was. "And all was dismal again," the Reverend says.

The Reverend's heaven-sent beings appear as angels because he is a deeply religious man. Interestingly enough, he doesn't argue with these beings. Unlike his friends, he doesn't try to convince himself and his tormentors that he hasn't died. Instead, he simply tells them that he doesn't "require" them "today." In turn, readers sense that the Reverend is perhaps a bit more accepting of his situation, though he still refuses to move on from this liminal space.

CHAPTER 30

After the "onslaught," Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend try to determine which three souls departed, since they heard three instances of the "matterlightblooming phenomenon." As they search, they pass many people "weeping with the effort of resistance" and replaying the various "seductive visions and temptations to which they" were exposed. As the trio of friends makes their way across the grounds, they assume that Willie was one of the three souls to have moved on, since it is "unlikely that one so young could" survive "such a merciless assault." After all, children are *meant* to move on, since the "alternative" is "eternal enslavement."

Once again, it becomes clear that remaining in the Bardo takes a large amount of "effort"—an act of "resistance" that leaves the remaining souls utterly depleted after the heaven-sent beings try to convince them to leave. If remaining in this realm takes so much effort, it's clear that staying is unnatural, and that humans are otherwise inherently inclined to move on. In addition, Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend once more suggest that children are unfit for the Bardo, since young people who stay here are doomed to "eternal enslavement."

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CHAPTER 31

As Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend approach the white stone home, they're astounded to see Willie sitting cross-legged on its roof. Unfortunately, "the effort of resistance" has eroded his physical strength. "He was out of breath," Bevins says, "his hands were shaking; he had lost, by my estimation, approximately half his bodyweight." Apparently, it took Elise Traynor roughly a month "to descend to this level," though the Reverend says, "The fact that you are still here is impressive." "Heroic, even," adds Vollman. "But ill-advised," the Reverend says. Trying to speed the boy along, Vollman tells him, "It is all right. Really it is. We are here. Proceed in peace: you have provided us ample hope, that will last us many years, and do us much good." Willie listens to these kind words and merely replies, "Yes, only I am not going."

That the Reverend and his friends derive "ample hope" from Willie's stay in the Bardo is interesting, as it suggests that even these stubborn souls—who have been in the Bardo for quite some time—need a bit of hope to keep them going, and Willie has given them this by somehow attracting his father's attention even after his funeral—something that almost never happens. Still, the three friends urge the young boy to move along, since it's clear that the Bardo is taking a toll on Willie's strength and general well-being. Nonetheless, Willie shows his determination to remain, a decision rooted in his love for his father and his unwillingness to give that up.

Willie reminds the older souls that his father promised to return, but Vollman insists this won't actually happen. Reverend Thomas adds that they'll explain to Willie's father why the boy had to leave—if, that is, his father does indeed return. "You lie," Willie says. "You three have lied to me from the first. Said I should go. What if I had? I would have missed father entirely. And now you say you will give him a message?" When the Reverend asserts that they *will* deliver a message, Willie says, "But *How* will you? Have you a method? Of communication? I did not. When I was in there within him." "We do. We do have such a method," says Vollman, to which Bevins quickly adds, "Nebulous. Far from established."

When the Reverend and Vollman try to convince Willie that his father won't actually return, they underline the fact that people in the living world quickly move on with their lives. In this moment, they seem cognizant of the fact that the world moves on without them, though this understanding doesn't seem to influence their vehement desire to stay connected to that world. Indeed, divided from the living but still able to watch them from a remove, the Bardo-dwellers yearn for a way to interact with the world. This is why Vollman optimistically claims to have a "method" of "communication" when Willie asks if they know how to talk to people like his father. Vollman is desperate to believe that he's still somehow connected to that previous place.

Vollman suggests that there has "historically been some confusion" regarding whether or not they can communicate with people who exist in "that previous place." Before he can explain himself, though, the group's conversation is interrupted by a woman who constantly wanders the grounds searching for her husband. As this woman screams out her husband's name, Willie finds himself suddenly overtaken by the roof itself, which has "liquefied" so that he now sits in "a gray-white puddle," out of which a "vine-like tendril" creeps out, "thickening as it approache[s]" him. When the Reverend tries to swat this tendril away, he discovers that it is "more stone than snake." "The beginning of the end," Vollman says ominously.

At this point, Willie starts to experience the negative effects of staying in the Bardo. As such, Saunders increases the urgency surrounding Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend's efforts to convince the boy to leave, and readers see yet again the ways in which children are punished for remaining in the Bardo.

CHAPTER 32

Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend have seen this tendril before. Indeed, they witnessed Elise Traynor become engulfed by the very same material, so they know that the tendril will overtake Willie and fasten him to the roof of the white stone home. Once he's fixed in place, the tendril will harden into "a shell-like carapace," which will in turn "begin to transition through a series of" terrible scenes and objects, "each more detailed and hideous than the last, this process only serving to increase the speed of his downward spiral: the more perverse the carapace, the less 'light' (happiness, honesty, positive aspiration) [will] get in."

If Willie stays in the Bardo, he will lose all of the "happiness, honesty," and "positive aspiration" that might otherwise characterize his existence. Once again, then, Saunders intimates that stasis is unfit for children, who are inclined toward "aspiration," not idleness. By staying, Willie will find all of his boyish qualities choked out of himself, leaving only a "perverse carapace."

Thinking about the effect of the tendril on children depresses Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend because it reminds them that they did nothing to help Elise Traynor when she succumbed. They remember walking away with bowed heads as the tendril wrapped around her, and she was singing the whole time, though her songs gradually became "less lovely as the initial carapace formed and she took on the form of a girl-sized crow." Indeed, they feel now that they didn't do enough to save Ms. Traynor, since they were "rather newly arrived back then" and thus "much preoccupied with the challenges of staying," which, they make clear, are not "inconsiderable" and "have not lessened in the meantime." Now, they watch Willie tossing back and forth in discomfort as the chapel bell tolls three o'clock—indicating that the night is drawing to a close and that they should be on their way.

As the three friends watch Willie struggling against the tendril, Saunders infuses the story with a new kind of urgency, since he indicates that the night will soon end, at which point it will be too late to save the boy. What's more, the characters feel ashamed for having ignored Elise Traynor in her time of need, a memory that unearths the notion that each person in the Bardo exists first and foremost as an individual. Indeed, these souls focus primarily on "the challenges of staying," meaning that they often have to eschew notions of unity and empathy in order to wholeheartedly devote themselves to remaining in the Bardo.

CHAPTER 33

Drifting in and out of consciousness as the tendril wraps around him, Willie dreams of his mother and father, fantasizing about the candy served at the Lincolns' receptions not long before his death. Remembering the way he used to play with his father, he realizes he'll never be able to roughhouse with him again. Unless, that is, he remains "strong." "Must stay," he thinks. "Is not easy   But I know honor   Fix bayonets   How to be brave   Is not easy   Remember Col. Ellis   Killed by Rebs   For bravely tearing down the Reb flag from a private   I must stay   If I wish to get   Home."

When Willie says, "Remember Col. Ellis," he refers to Elmer E. Ellsworth, the first Union officer to die in the Civil War, and the conflict's first known casualty. In 1861, the president asked him to remove a Confederate flag from a hotel in view of the White House. He was killed while doing this, and his name later became a rallying cry for Union soldiers. In this moment, Willie conflates wartime bravery with the strength it takes to remain in the Bardo, a testament to just how taxing it is for him to tarry in this liminal realm as a child, and also showing his youthful investment in his father's cause.

CHAPTER 34-35

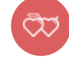
Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend start digging at the tendrils wrapping around Willie. Above, the Three Bachelors fly about while laughing and making jokes. "Having never loved or been loved in that previous place," the Reverend explains, "they were frozen here in a youthful state of perpetual emotional vacuity; interested only in freedom, […] railing against any limitation or commitment whatsoever." When they land, Willie tells them he's waiting for his father, who has promised to return. "This father of his," one of them says to the adult souls. "Long-legged fellow?" "Yes," the Reverend replies. "Just passed him," they say. Indeed, they claim that they just flew over Willie's father, who is sitting "all quiet-like" in another section of the grounds. Having divulged this information, they say "toodle-oo" and fly off into the night again.

The Three Bachelors' connection to the living world—the thing that keeps them from transitioning away from the Bardo—is that they've never "loved or been loved." As such, their reason for staying is among the most obvious in the entire Bardo, since they essentially refuse to move on because they still hope to find love. At the same time, though, they're afraid of "commitment," a fact that makes it unlikely they'll ever find love, no matter where they are. Ironically, by staying in the Bardo, they commit themselves to an eternity of sameness, though they obviously aren't cognizant of this dynamic.

CHAPTER 36

The Reverend sees that Vollman and Bevins are "intrigued" by the news that Lincoln is still on the premises. Gesturing for his friends to join him in private in the white stone home, he says, "We are here by grace. Our ability to abide far from assured. Therefore, we must conserve our strength, restricting our activities to only those which directly serve our central purpose." As he speaks, many of Bevins eyes roll in boredom and annoyance, and Vollman tries to balance a pebble on his enormous penis. "We must look out for ourselves," the Reverend continues. "And, by doing so, we protect the boy as well. He must hear nothing of this rumor, which would only serve to raise his hopes. As we know, only utter hopelessness will lead him to do what he must. Therefore, not a word. Are we in agreement?"

In this moment, the Reverend intuits that Vollman and Bevins want to somehow interfere with Willie's situation, perhaps by trying to "communicate" to Lincoln (after all, Vollman believes this is possible). Nonetheless, the Reverend frames this as ill-advised, instead counseling his friends to remain focused on their own efforts to stay. What's more, he also suggests that the only way they'll be able to convince Willie to leave the Bardo is by showing him that his father will never again come back to interact with him. Indeed, "only utter hopelessness" will encourage the boy to depart. As such, the Reverend implies that what keeps people in the Bardo more than anything is hope and the delusion that their situation will somehow improve.



Vollman and Bevins mutter their agreement, and the Reverend makes his way back to the roof. As he does so, Vollman and Bevins glance at one another. "In truth," Bevins admits, "we were bored, so very bored, so continually bored." Vollman agrees, asserting that the utter "sameness" of every single night wears on a person. "There would be no harm, we thought, in taking a quick trip," he says. "Out to where the gentleman sat," says Bevins. Deciding this, the two friends agree to not tell the Reverend where they're going. "We could just…go," says Vollman.

As previously established, existing in the Bardo requires a considerable amount of effort, as each soul must constantly dwell upon the reasons why he or she refuses to depart. Unsurprisingly, this monomaniacal fixation is not only fatiguing, but also quite boring. It makes sense, then, that Vollman and Bevins jump at the opportunity to do something out of the ordinary, since their entire existences are otherwise completely devoid of variation.

CHAPTER 37-41

Bevins and Vollman zoom out of the white stone home and make their way across the grounds, passing familiar souls who mumble their stories and enact their obsessions. For example, they go by a man who can't stop thinking about the many properties he owns—every time a "new property-worry" comes to mind, his body pitches forward onto the ground and spins to face the direction of that particular house. Bevins and Vollman also pass two men who are in "perpetual conversation," though their linguistic abilities have deteriorated into nonsense, a meaningless stream of words focused loosely on the things they were obsessed with in "that previous place." These men have been here for a long time, and Bevins and Vollman worry that they may someday be "destined for a similar fate."

It seems here that the Bardo has a negative effect not only on children who tarry, but on everyone—even adults. Indeed, Bevins and Vollman fear that they are "destined" to become like the two men they pass who are in a "perpetual" but nonsensical conversation. Once again, then, Saunders suggests that this space—which is only supposed to be transitional—isn't a place people are meant to stay for long periods of time, thereby implying that progression, succession, and change are natural parts of the life cycle and that stasis is not.

On their way to Willie's father, Bevins and Vollman come across a group of souls standing around "a freshly filled sick-hole." Approaching the crowd, they listen to the new arrival, a Civil War soldier who delivers a monologue loosely structured as a letter to his wife. He explains that he has just experienced a day of "Unholy slaughter and fear" and that, unfortunately, one of his comrades didn't make it. "I arrived here at this place by Distant journey," he says. "And confin'd all the while. It was a terrible fite as I believe I rote you." Slowly, he begins to feel a "foreboding" sense that he shouldn't "linger" in this place, though he can tell that something is keeping him here. At this point, he emerges from his "sick-hole" and starts flickering, going invisible, which Vollman says is common when somebody is about to depart.

In this scene, the Civil War brings itself to bear on the Bardo. Watching this newly arrived soldier, Bevins and Vollman listen to him detail the horrors of the war, which he characterizes as "unholy." The fact that this soldier is even in the Bardo means that something is keeping him from moving on. In other words, he must have unfinished business in the living world, though he does experience the "foreboding" sense that he isn't mean to tarry in this realm. The fact that he so quickly intuits this suggests that whatever's keeping him from departing is perhaps not quite as strong as the things preventing people like Vollman or Bevins from leaving. Nonetheless, it's clear he must confront something in order to leave, even if he's on the verge of moving on.

"I am here, am trapped here and I see of this instant what I must do to get free," the soldier declares, still addressing his wife. "Which is tell the TRUTH." Moving on, he confesses to having slept with another woman. Feeling wretched for having done this, he finally clears his conscious, and then "a blinding flash of light" appears, taking the soldier away with the "firesound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon." Feeling as though the soldier didn't even "give this place a proper chance," Bevins and Vollman move on from the crowd, resuming their quest to find Willie's father.

The soldier enables himself to depart the Bardo by telling the truth, which is that he had an affair while he was still alive. In doing this, he serves as a perfect example of someone who embraces his transition from death to the afterlife. Instead of fighting the notion that he has died, he responds accordingly by unburdening himself of his vices and thus freeing himself of any ties to his previous life. It's no surprise, of course, that Bevins and Vollman find this incomprehensible, as they've grown so accustomed to the Bardo that they can't fathom how anyone could possibly decide to leave it so quickly.

CHAPTER 42-44

Vollman and Bevins walk-skim across the grounds, taking note of the many "home-places" of souls who have long since moved on. Finally, they find Willie's father sitting with his legs crossed in the grass, looking like "a sculpture on the theme of Loss." Pausing and briefly considering that the Reverend would disapprove, they enter the man's body. First, Vollman goes in, sitting in the same position as Willie's father. "Bevins, come in! This is not to be missed," he yells. Listening to his friend, Bevins follows Vollman. "And the three of us were one," he says.

In this moment, Bevins and Vollman unite with President Lincoln, literally becoming "one" person. This is arguably the only tangible connection they can possibly have with the living world, since by inhabiting Lincoln they ultimately get to experience what it's like to still be alive, even if only in a secondary way.

CHAPTER 45-46

When Bevins (who is younger than both Vollman and Lincoln) enters the president, the man experiences a rush of youth, suddenly remembering his own escapades as a young man, letting his mind drift to the memory of a woman leading him seductively down a muddy path. Not wanting to dwell upon this illicit flashback during such a somber time, Willie's father redirects his attention, trying to recapture his son's face in his mind's eye. To do this, he has to think of a specific time, reminiscing about when he took Willie to have his suit fitted. "*Little jacket little jacket little jacket*," he thinks. "*Same one he is wearing back in there, now. Huh. Same little jacket. But he who is wearing it is—(I so want it not to be true.) Broken. Pale Broken thing.*"

Luckily for Vollman and Bevins, Lincoln doesn't use the word "dead" when he says, "But he who is wearing it is—." Instead, he opts for the word "broken," revealing that, much like Bevins and Vollman, he hasn't yet wrapped his mind around the concept of death's finality. Rather, he thinks of his son as merely a "pale broken thing." Of course, this line of thinking is flawed, since calling something "broken" underhandedly implies that that "thing" is potentially fixable. As such, Lincoln deludes himself in the same way that the Bardo-dwellers trick themselves into denying the irreversibility of their deaths.

Lincoln continues to think about Willie, wondering what has happened to his boy. "*Why will it not work*," he muses. "*What magic word made it work. Who is the keeper of that word. What did it profit Him to switch this one off. What a contraption it is. How did it ever run. What spark ran it. Grand little machine. Set up just so Receiving the spark, it jumped to life. What put out that spark? What a sin it would be. Who would dare. Ruin such a marvel. Hence is murder anathema. God forbid I should ever commit such a grievous—*" Without warning, Vollman and Bevins sense something troubling, feeling something distressing lurking in Willie's father. As the man—and, thus, Vollman and Bevins, too—runs his hand over his face, he tries to "suppress a notion just arising," but he finds himself unable to do so.

The troubling sensation Vollman and Bevins feel arising in this moment has to do with the fact that Lincoln is responsible for many deaths, since, as the leader of the Union, he has sent countless young men into battle. As such, he feels deeply guilty, since he has just now stated that "murder is anathema," but then suddenly remembers that his own orders have caused thousands of deaths. Because of this, he feels like a hypocrite—a flawed leader and even an immoral man who can't even adhere to his own belief that only a monster would "ruin such a marvel" as life itself.

CHAPTER 47

Using historical excerpts, Saunders provides an account of the nation's response to the Civil War. "Young Willie Lincoln was laid to rest on the day that the casualty lists from the Union victory at Fort Donelson were publicly posted, an event that caused a great shock among the public at that time, the cost in life being unprecedented thus far in the war," writes one historian. Lincoln, another writer explains, learns of this body count as Willie's body lies "under embalmment," and other historians and diarists describe the harrowing battle at Fort Donelson, which has claimed the lives of people of all ages—sons, brothers, and fathers. In one letter to the president, an aggrieved father writes, "How miny more ded do you attend to make sir afore you is done? One minit there was our litle Nate on that bridge with a fishpole and ware is that boy now?"

With these historical excerpts, Saunders gives readers a snapshot of the unrest the nation underwent during the Civil War. He also shows the strain placed on Lincoln, as the man not only loses his son but also has to keep the country on track during the bloodiest conflict in American history. As he contends with the harrowing loss of his son, he also has to come to terms with the fact that many of his own countrymen hate him for what he's doing. When people ask in their letters "how miny more ded" Lincoln intends to "make afore [he] is done," they remind him that his decisions produce very tangible results: massive quantities of dead human beings. This is why he's unable to think about Willie's death without considering the morality of his own choices.

CHAPTER 48

Back in the cemetery, Lincoln continues thinking about Willie. "*He is just one*," he considers. "*And the weight of it about to kill me. Have exported this grief. Some three thousand times. So far. To date. A mountain. Of boys. Someone's boys. Must keep on with it. May not have the heart for it. One thing to pull the lever when blind to the result. But here lies one dear example of what I accomplish by the orders I—may not have the heart for it*." Going on in this manner, he wonders what he should do about the Civil War, asking himself if he should call the whole thing off. "*What am I doing. What am I doing here. Everything nonsense now*," he thinks, feeling that he has forever lost his sense of happiness.

When Lincoln thinks about how he has "exported" the grief of death "some three thousand times," readers see how the Civil War has affected his conception of loss and mourning. Because he has ordered troops to fight the Confederacy, he feels morally responsible for the many casualties that have already taken place in the war. What's more, it's worth noting that the grief he feels over his son's death throws him into a sense of meaninglessness. "Everything nonsense now," he thinks, demonstrating that the loss of a loved one can severely disorient and disenchant even the most powerful (and articulate) people.

"*Trap. Horrible trap*," Lincoln thinks. "*At one's birth it is sprung. Some last day must arrive. When you will need to get out of this body*." Thinking this way, the president finds himself incapable of finding happiness in everyday life, ultimately determining that he'll "be happy no more."

Lincoln is still unable to come to terms with Willie's death, and allows this to inform the way he views the world. Instead of accepting the fact that life ends, he sees this as a terrible, almost sadistic state of affairs (as evidenced by the fact that he refers to life's impermanence as a "trap"). Because of this outlook, he can't imagine himself ever being "happy" again.

CHAPTER 49

Bevins and Vollman continue observing Lincoln's thoughts, seeing that he feels "distraught" as he prods the far reaches of his brain for any kind of "consolation." In order to soothe himself, he tries to think of Willie as existing in a place void of suffering. "*All over now*," he thinks. "*He is either in joy or nothingness*." In keeping with this, Lincoln asks himself why it's worth grieving, but he answers himself by pointing out that he is in "the habit of loving" Willie—a habit he can't easily give up. "*Only there is nothing left to do*," he thinks. "*Free myself of this darkness as I can, remain useful, not go mad. Think of him, when I do, as being in some bright place, free of suffering, resplendent in a new mode of being*."

In this moment, Lincoln's thoughts become slightly more optimistic. Although he has already determined that he'll "be happy no more," this bleak outlook enables him to accept the fact that there's nothing to do but move on with his life in spite of this tragic loss. "Free myself of this darkness as I can, remain useful, not go mad," he thinks, understanding that he can't shirk his responsibilities as president of the United States during the Civil War.

CHAPTER 50-52

Knowing Willie isn't "in some bright place, free of suffering" or "resplendent in a new mode of being," Vollman and Bevins find themselves saddened by Lincoln's hopes for his son. As such, they try to convince the man to return to Willie. After all, they want Willie to move on from this place, and so does his father. Vollman, for his part, believes it's possible to affect people by entering them and concentrating on a certain idea, but Bevins isn't so sure. "There has historically been some confusion around this issue," Vollman admits once again, telling a story in which he, Bevins, the Reverend, and several other souls inspired a young bickering couple to retreat behind a stone home and make love while they watched. Later, the couple married. Still, Bevins is hesitant to influence Lincoln, but Vollman urges him along by pointing out that it won't hurt to try.

Lincoln's newfound acceptance of life's impermanence encourages Vollman and Bevins, who think this mindset would help Willie understand that he must leave this transitional realm. However, in order to make this happen, they'll need to somehow influence Lincoln, thereby finding a way to actually interact with the living world.

CHAPTER 53

Inside Willie's father, Bevins and Vollman try to "persuade the gentleman." Thinking about the white stone home and about Willie, they intone, "*Stand up, go back. Your boy requires your counsel. He is in grave danger. It is anathema for children to tarry here. His headstrong nature, a virtue in that previous place, imperils him here, where the natural law, harsh and arbitrary, brooks no rebellion, and must be scrupulously obeyed*." Unfortunately, this approach fails. Just as they're about to lose heart, though, they realize the lock to the stone home is in Lincoln's pocket. Indeed, he has forgotten to lock the crypt, so Bevins and Vollman think about the dangers of leaving a "sick-home" open. Putting his hand in his pocket, Lincoln realizes his mistake, stands up, and sets off toward his son once more.

It's worth examining what Bevins and Vollman say in their effort to persuade Lincoln to return to the white stone home. First of all, they use the word "anathema," which Lincoln uses in chapter XLVI when he says, "Hence murder is anathema." In this way, they try to become one with the president, merging their vocabulary with his so that they might more effectively influence him. Second of all, when they say that Willie's "headstrong nature" ("a virtue in that previous place") goes against the "natural law," they confirm the notion that people are meant to move through the Bardo on their way to a new existence. Indeed, tarrying is "unnatural," a fact they try to make clear to Lincoln by uniting with him, assuming his voice, and telling him what he needs to know about his son.

CHAPTER 54-55

Bevins and Vollman are astonished at their success. When Lincoln stands, he leaves them sitting inside one another, a "configuration" that allows them to fully understand one another for the first time. Having never entered Bevins before, Vollman feels the "great beauty of all the things of this world" and desires "the man-smell and the strong hold of a man," while Bevins sees "Anna's face" and comprehends his friend's "reluctance to leave her behind." Greatly renewed by this experience, the two friends wonder why they've never done this before. When they get up to follow Lincoln, they suddenly miss each other and feel that they will "be infused with some trace of one another forevermore."

Even though Vollman and Bevins have known each other for a very long time, they've always been too focused on their own experiences—their own reasons for staying in the Bardo—to fully inhabit one another. When they do so for the first time, then, they're shocked by the revitalizing and rewarding experience. In turn, Saunders shows that coming together gives people an opportunity to truly understand and empathize with one another, as Vollman now comprehends Bevins's various predilections, and vice versa—a mingling of experiences that leaves them both feeling "infused" with one another in a positive way.

Not only do Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III now know seemingly everything about one another, but they also know many things about Lincoln, too. "Removed from both Vollman and the gentleman," Bevins remarks, "I felt arising within me a body of startling new knowledge. The gentleman? Was *Mr. Lincoln*. Mr. Lincoln was *President*. How could it be? How could it not be? And yet I knew with all my heart that Mr. Taylor was president." Vollman, on the other hand, knows that Mr. Polk occupies that "esteemed office." Nonetheless, they can't deny that they now know Lincoln is president, along with a number of other new facts, like that trains now run beyond Buffalo, that there's a machine called the *telegraph*, that theaters are now lit by gaslight. Giddy and baffled, the two friends quickly follow Lincoln.

The fact that Vollman believes James Polk is president means that he died between 1845 and 1849. Bevins, on the other hand, thinks Zachary Taylor is president, meaning that he must have died between 1849 and 1850. In this way, Saunders manages to inform readers how long these two souls have been in the Bardo; since Lincoln in the Bardo *takes place in 1862, it has been somewhere between twelve and seventeen years since Vollman and Bevins died. That they're surprised to discover time has passed indicates once again the extent to which they believe they can simply exist in stasis—they refuse to move on from the Bardo, and so they assume the living world has stood still, waiting for them to join it once more.*

CHAPTER 56-58

Saunders quotes an account written by a White House guard. This guard notes that Lincoln has still not returned to the White House at two in the morning. The guard considers waking Mary Lincoln, but can't bring himself to trouble her, since she's in such an intense state of mourning. Plus, she's under heavy sedation. Other accounts of Mary confirm this, saying that she collapsed into bed and accepted drugs to subdue her "cries of agony."

Once again, Saunders provides brief representations of what's happening in the world outside the Bardo. In doing so, he shows the bottomless depths of parental grief, as Mary Lincoln proves unable to even leave her bed.

CHAPTER 59

Still writing to her brother, Isabelle Perkins notes that she must have fallen asleep. Waking up and resuming her letter, she guesses it's nearly four in the morning. Noticing a small horse tied to the cemetery fence, she wonders who has come to the graveyard at this time of night. She writes that she can see Manders's light on in his house across the way (at the edge of the cemetery), where she watches him pace back and forth before finally venturing into the darkness and disappearing with a lantern, most likely seeking the mysterious "midnight visitor." Overcome by curiosity, Isabelle decides to stay awake to "glimpse the face of [the] visitor once Manders retrieves the fellow."

By showcasing Isabelle's interest in seeing who has come to the graveyard so late at night, Saunders spotlights the extent to which people are fascinated by each other's hardships. In the same way that the nation at large can't help but talk constantly about the president and his sorrowful loss, Isabelle finds herself naturally drawn to the "midnight visitor" and the sadness that must have led him through the cemetery gates at this time of night.

CHAPTER 60

Meanwhile, the Reverend toils in solitude, working to free Willie from the tendrils. As he does so, an orgiastic group approaches to watch, finding the scene "stimulating" and falling to the ground in "rhythmic gasping" as they paw at one another. "What do you think?" the Reverend says to Willie. "Is this a good place? A healthy place? Do these people seem sane to you, and worthy of emulation?" In response, Willie points out that the Reverend himself is here. "I am different," the Reverend asserts. "From me?" asks Willie. "From everyone," he replies, and when Willie asks how, exactly, he's different, the Reverend almost tells him.

Readers are perhaps unsurprised by the fact that the Reverend is different from the rest of the Bardo-dwellers. After all, he confronted the heaven-sent beings (when they came) in a completely different manner than his friends, simply telling them that he didn't "require" their assistance (Bevins and Vollman, on the other hand, vehemently denied the beings' assertions that they were dead). As such, it seems clear that the Reverend is in fact different, and that this difference stems from his acceptance of his situation. Unlike his friends, he seems to have somewhat come to terms with the reality of his death.

CHAPTER 61

"For I *am* different, yes," the Reverend admits, though he doesn't say this to Willie. Unlike Bevins, Vollman, and everybody else in this place, he knows "very well" what he is. "Am not 'sick,'" he says, "not 'lying on a kitchen floor,' not 'being healed via **sick-box**,' not 'waiting to be revived.' No." He then describes his own "end," which took place in the guest room of his house after a long life in the ministry. As he stared out the window, he felt content, experiencing a "stable and grateful state of mind," something he "had tried to cultivate" all his life. He was, in short, in a "state of acceptance and obedience" as he died. "I was dead," he says. "I felt the urge to go. I went. Yes: simultaneously becoming cause and (awed) observer (from within) of the bone-chilling firesound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon […], I went."

That the Reverend was in a "state of acceptance and obedience" illustrates that, in order to successfully pass from life into the afterlife, a person must embrace or at least acknowledge their own death. When the Reverend uses the word "obedience," he intimates that letting go of life is in line with the natural law of existence, something that must be obeyed. The fact that the Reverend is still in the Bardo, though, means that something must have gone wrong in his transition from the last moments of his life into his death.

Telling the story of his journey into death, the Reverend describes walking "along a high-mountain trail" behind two men he somehow knows have died mere seconds before him. The man at the front is wearing a yellow bathing suit, having died while swimming in Maine. The man directly in front of the Reverend, on the other hand, is wearing a cheap funeral suit and is humming as if he is in a state of happy and "willful ignorance." As the Reverend walks along this path, he sporadically finds himself back at his grave, hovering above it and watching his wife and a congregation bid their farewells to him at his funeral. Every time this happens, he longs to be back on the trail with his two new friends, where a valley stretches out below them—a valley he knows, somehow, is their final destination.

It's worth noting that the Reverend's story differs greatly from the accounts given by Vollman and Bevins regarding the last moments of their existences in the living world. Indeed, while the Reverend dies and then walks along a path—a clear manifestation of the kind of progression and transition inherent to the life cycle—his friends' stories end with both of them lying inert, waiting to be healed. Once again, then, it's clear that Vollman and Bevins won't let themselves accept the natural progression of life, which inevitably leads to death. Instead, they cling to their lives, unwilling to submit themselves to the transition they must eventually make. The Reverend, on the other hand, happily walks into the unknown.

The Reverend and his companions come upon a set of stone steps that lead into the valley. Since he was buried in his religious garb, the two men look at him, as if to ask whether or not they should proceed, and he nods that they should indeed. Walking along, they hear a "chanting of some sort, excited voices, the clanging of a bell," sounds that make the Reverend happy. He and his friends step off the stairs into "a sun-drenched meadow," where they find a "large structure" made of "interlocking planks and wedges of purest diamond, giving off an array of colors." When they approach, a crowd forms around them and urges them forward until they reach a door attended by an "honor guard" smiling at their arrival.

These descriptions of the Reverend's experience are chiefly expository, providing readers with a vivid image of the true afterlife in the novel's world. In turn, there emerges a stark contrast between the Bardo (a bleak, dismal graveyard) and this wonderful valley. As such, Saunders suggests that many wonders await the Bardo-dwellers, if only they'll allow themselves to move on.

The honor guard opens the door, and the Reverend and his fellow travelers walk across a diamond floor "to a single diamond table." At this table sits a man the Reverend understands is a "prince; not Christ, but Christ's direct emissary." As for the room itself, it resembles a warehouse with which the Reverend was familiar as a child. Somehow knowing they're expected to proceed for judgment in the order in which they arrived, the man in the yellow bathing suit steps forward and presents himself to the Christ-emissary.

Interestingly enough, this afterlife seems to present itself to the Reverend according to his personal memories and feelings. Not only does he feel like the room he's in resembles a familiar warehouse from his childhood, but the valley itself seems a reflection of the kind of picture-perfect heaven he has no doubt invested himself in for his entire life. One wonders, then, what someone like Vollman or Bevins might see if they were to finally move on from the Bardo.

From each side, two beautiful "beings" with feet of "sun-yellow light" appear. "How did you live," asks one, and both them place their heads to the man in the bathing suit's temples, "beam[ing] with pleasure at what they [find] within." "May we confirm?" they ask, and he assures them they can. The one on his right then sings a "single joyful note" as "several smaller versions of himself" dance out holding a large mirror framed by "precious gems." "Quick check," says the Christ-emissary, as one of the yellow-footed beings holds the mirror to the bathing-suited man's face while the other puts his hand in the man's chest, removes his heart, and places it on a scale. The other yellow-footed being looks in the mirror, and the Christ-emissary says, "Very good" as a "sound of rejoicing" comes across a "vast kingdom extending in all directions around the palace."

In this moment, the bathing-suited man is deemed virtuous by the Christ-emissary. The fact that the Reverend and his travel companions are judged in the first place suggests that moving on from the Bardo means not only accepting death, but also submitting oneself to intense scrutiny when it comes to virtue and vice (at least in the Reverend's version of the afterlife). However, Saunders doesn't reveal what, exactly, has deemed the bathing-suited man worthy of this "rejoicing" sound. Rather than pinpointing the precise traits that make this man virtuous, Saunders suggests that goodness is an abstract concept, something that can be weighed and totaled in a way that doesn't necessarily make sense to mere humans. It is, in other words, an overarching quality.

As the large doors of diamond open to admit the bathing-suited man, the Reverend glimpses "a tent of purest white silk" and a "great feast about to unfold." Looking closer, he sees a "magnificent king" sitting on a "raised dais" next to an empty chair intended for the bathing-suited man. This king, the Reverend somehow knows, is Christ Himself. As he watches this unfold, he feels a happiness he's never before experienced—a feeling that sharply diminishes as the diamond doors slam shut and he finds himself plunged into a destitute sadness that causes him to suddenly weep as the man in the funeral suit—also weeping—steps forward for judgment.

Once again, Saunders juxtaposes the utterly sublime with the otherwise mundane in order to illustrate just how enticing the afterlife can seem. Indeed, the Reverend gets a glimpse of heaven and now can't imagine existing elsewhere even momentarily. A mere slice of heaven leaves him feeling the utter loss of such unadulterated goodness. If this is how he feels in this moment, one can only imagine the kind of wretched discontent he must feel on a daily basis, since readers know he currently resides in the Bardo, a place that is much, much worse than heaven's diamond-enchanted antechamber.

The man in the funeral suit undergoes the same process as the first man, but this time the yellow-footed beings withdraw in disgust when they put their heads to his temples, retreating to two stone pots in order to vomit "twin streams of brightly colored fluid." As the miniature versions of themselves scurry forth to mop their mouths, they ask, "May we confirm?" Aghast, the man in the suit says, "Wait, what did you see. Is there some—" Despite his protests, the yellow-footed beings continue, singing two jagged and terrible notes as the smaller versions of themselves tumble out with a "feces-encrusted mirror" and a scale. "Quick check," says the Christ-emissary. "I'm not sure I completely understood the instructions," the funeral-suited man says. "If I might be allowed to—" Before he can finish his sentence, the beings rip out his heart and shove the mirror in his face.

Having seen the joyful acceptance of the bathing-suited man, the Reverend must certainly feel an ominous sense of foreboding when the funeral-suited man elicits a much harsher reaction from the Christ-emissary and his helpers. Further, the fact that the yellow-footed beings don't listen to the funeral-suited man's protests indicates that there is no arguing against their determinations—vice, it seems, is just as pervasive and overarching as virtue, and once a person has lived out their life, there's no changing how they will be judged. (But again, this scenario might be unique to the Reverend himself, and in keeping with his preconceived notions of judgment and the afterlife.)

"Oh dear," says the Christ-emissary, and "a sound of horrific opprobrium and mourning echoe[s] all across that kingdom." When the diamond doors open, the Reverend can't believe the change that has taken place within. The tent, which had been made of silk, is now fashioned from stretched and blood-speckled flesh, and the banquet is no longer a feast but a collection of long tables bearing "numerous human forms" in "various stages of flaying." As the funeral-suited man is forced to advance, he pleads with the Christ-emissary, saying there must have been some kind of mistake, listing off a number of "charitable things he [has] done back in Pennsylvania, and the numerous good people who [will] vouch for him." In spite of this, the diamond doors slam behind him, and the Reverend realizes it's his turn to step forth.

Making it clear that the funeral-suited man protests in vain, Saunders once more suggests that people can't do anything to change the virtuousness or sinfulness of their lives once they've already died. Indeed, the funeral-suited man must venture into Hell regardless of what he says regarding his own positive traits. Once again, then, Saunders emphasizes that life is a temporary thing and that, once it ends, there's no reversing death's finality.

"How did you live?" ask the yellow-footed beings, and they put their heads to the Reverend's temples. Up close, the beings look like familiar authority figures from the Reverend's childhood. As they examine his life, he tries to "let them fully in," wanting "to provide as true an accounting of [his] life" as possible. In turn, the beings withdraw "even more fiercely than before" and rush to the stone pots, where they violently vomit. Looking at the Christ-emissary, the Reverend sees that His eyes are downcast. "May we confirm?" says one of the yellow-footed beings as the mirror and scale emerge from either side. "Quick check," says the Christ-emissary, and the Reverend turns and runs.

Even though the Reverend thinks he has lived virtuously (he is, after all, a deeply religious man), he discovers that he is not worthy of heaven. In this way, Saunders implies that living life according to various religious rules is not a surefire way of attaining heaven. Discipline isn't necessarily an inherent virtue, he suggests, and living a pious life doesn't automatically qualify a person for salvation. In turn, Saunders frames virtue and vice as complicated notions, allowing readers to step away from reductive, clear-cut ways of looking at goodness.

Although the yellow-footed beings don't follow him, "whips of fire" fly by the Reverend's ears, whispering, "*Tell no one about this. Or it will be worse upon your return.*" They then withdraw, and the Reverend runs in terror for "days, weeks, months," forging on until, exhausted, he collapses and falls asleep. Upon waking up, he finds himself here, in the cemetery once again, "grateful" that he has avoided his fate. "I have been here since and have, as instructed, refrained from speaking of any of this, to anyone," he says. And in any case, he recognizes the futility of telling anybody about what he's seen, since it's already too late for the souls here to change the way they've lived. "All is done," he says. "We are shades, immaterial."

When the Reverend says, "All is done," he acknowledges that there's nothing he can do in this realm to change the way he lived his life. "We are shades, immaterial," he adds, emphasizing the fact that existing in the Bardo means living in a transitional limbo, one in which nothing can be influenced. Unlike his friends, he accepts the reality of his existence, but this doesn't help him come to terms with his destiny. Rather than resolving to go forth and accept his punishment, he decides to wallow in the Bardo, where he can at least prolong his final judgment.

Ever since he learned of his impending damnation, the Reverend has racked his brain for reasons why he might deserve such harsh punishment. "I did not kill, steal, abuse, deceive," he notes, "was not an adulterer, always tried to be charitable and just; believed in God and endeavored, at all times, to the best of my ability, to live according to His will. And yet was damned." He wonders if he deserves this punishment because of his "occasional" moments of "doubt," or perhaps because he sometimes "lusted," or maybe because he has committed some glaring sin that "even now [he remains] unaware of it, ready to commit it again."

In the aftermath of his flight from judgment, the Reverend finds himself flummoxed by the concept of vice and sin. What, he wonders, makes a person worthy of heaven? That the answer to this question isn't as straightforward as the Reverend previously thought suggests that Saunders wants to portray goodness as complex, not cut and dry. Indeed, people often encompass both vice and virtue at once. The fact that the Reverend questions himself so adamantly—trying desperately to pinpoint his moral failures and shortcomings—ultimately redeems him, at least in the readers' eyes, since self-examination and unbiased reflection is an undoubtedly brave and commendable act.

As the Reverend concludes his tale, he sees that Willie's situation has worsened, the tendrils having engulfed the boy. As he notices this, Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III come sweeping up to the white stone home, declaring triumphantly that they've succeeded in persuading Willie's father to return. Indeed, Lincoln follows not far behind, making his way toward them as the moon shines on his distinctive face.

Having invited readers to consider the nature of vice and virtue, Saunders now turns the attention back onto Willie, thereby emphasizing once more how unfit this child is for the Bardo. Indeed, his fellow spirits either harbor delusions about their own existences (as is the case for Vollman and Bevins) or have been denied access to heaven because of some moral shortcoming (as is the case for the Reverend). Willie, on the other hand, is a mere boy, and yet he faces a worse fate than anyone else in this realm: forced eternal internment. Once more, then, Saunders implies that children are simply not meant to remain in the Bardo.

CHAPTER 62

A number of excerpts describe President Lincoln's physical appearance, contradicting one another regarding the color of his eyes and whether or not he's ugly. Some find him extraordinarily homely with a disconcertingly arrayed face, whereas others see his features as captivating and full of "good humor." One writer states: "Oh, the pathos of it!—haggard, drawn into fixed lines of unutterable sadness, with a look of loneliness, as of a soul whose depth of sorrow and bitterness no human sympathy could ever reach. The impression I carried away was that I had seen, not so much the President of the United States, as the saddest man in the world ."

Saunders highlights the divisive spirit ravaging the country by showing that people can't even agree about whether or not Lincoln is ugly. In doing so, Saunders suggests that opinion and subjectivity are unstable things upon which to build an argument—one person thinks Lincoln is ugly, another does not; this, it seems, is hardly worth fighting over, and yet the nation finds itself incapable of letting its various differences alone. In turn, Saunders provides readers with yet another analog to the divisive mentalities fueling the Civil War. After all, if Americans are wont to fight over something as inconsequential as the president's physical appearance, it's unlikely they'll behave peacefully when it comes to issues of secession and slavery.

CHAPTER 63

Lincoln approaches the white stone home, goes inside, takes Willie's coffin from the wall, puts it on the ground, kneels, and opens it. Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend watch this until they hear Willie cry out from the roof, where the tendrils have now fixed him in place so strongly that none of them can pull him up. However, Vollman realizes there are no tendrils beneath Willie, so the group pushes the boy through the roof until he lands inside the white stone home next to his father. "Go in, listen well. You may learn something useful," Vollman urges him. "We have recently heard your father express a certain wish," Bevins adds. They then tell him that Lincoln wants his son to be in "some bright place," "free of suffering," "resplendent in a new mode of being." As such, Willie approaches his father but hesitates to enter.

Yet again, Willie's fellow Bardo-dwellers want to show him that he's unfit for the Bardo. Since Lincoln wants his son to exist in a "new mode of being," they urge him to enter his father, hoping that doing so will help the boy see that he shouldn't cling to his past life. After all, living in a "new mode of being" would mean freeing himself from any ties he has to his previous existence, thereby embracing change and transition.

CHAPTER 64-65

Once again, a crowd forms around the white stone home, since news of Lincoln's return spreads quickly. "All craved the slightest participation in the transformative moment that must be imminent," says Vollman, and Bevins notes that the souls have "abandoned any pretext of speaking one at a time," such that there swells a great "cacophony" of voices as people launch into their stories. Before long, though, the crowd begins shouting, saying, "No, no, it [is] not appropriate," as a number of black souls approach the group and talk to Willie. "Let them have their chance," somebody calls out. "In this place, we are all the same." And though this remark is met with scorn, Bevins notes that "several men and women of the sable hue" are determined to "have their say."

In this moment, readers see that the Bardo is not a unified place. Rather, the divisions and racist narratives at play in the living world have made their way into this realm, despite the fact that all the souls are more or less in the same spiritual or existential situation. Though some recognize this fact—saying, "In this place, we are all the same"—others are unwilling to give up the bigoted notions they've carried into the Bardo.

CHAPTER 66

The first black soul to speak is Elson Farwell, who begins by saying, "I did always try, in all my aspects, to hew to elevation; to dispense therewith, into myself, those higher virtues of which, rendered without, one verily may sag, and, dwelling there in one's misfortune, what avails." As he speaks, the Barons—whose bodies lie next to Elson's in the mass grave—urge him to "say it more simple." Nonetheless, he continues using elevated language to tell his story, explaining that he educated himself whenever he could during his enslavement, always hoping that improving his intellect would "assuage" his unhappiness, though this was never the case. Then, while traveling to the countryside with his master's family, he fell and couldn't get up. Eventually, one of the master's children passed him and promised to send help, but he clearly forgot, leaving Elson languishing on the trail.

Elson Farwell sees intelligence as an inherent virtue, something that can help a person combat his or her own "unhappiness." Indeed, he hoped while he was alive to improve his life as a slave by "hew[ing] to elevation," increasing his intelligence in order to attain "higher virtues." Unfortunately, though, this pursuit did little to help him overcome the harsh reality of his own enslavement, and when his master's son forgot to send help for him, he was forced to fully recognize that the "higher virtues" he attained by educating himself ultimately meant nothing to his oppressors.

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As Elson lay on the trail, he realized that had been "sorely tricked," and that his master's family had no respect for him, regardless of his intelligence or impressive vocabulary. As such, he has resolved to take his revenge on them whenever he has fully recovered from his fall. When Elson finishes his tale, Thomas Havens—another former slave—explains that he never felt such anger toward his masters, for he led a rather pleasant life and was even allowed to enjoy moments of free time once or twice a week, assuming his master didn't need him for something. "I had my moments," he says. "My free, uninterrupted, discretionary moments. Strange, though: it is the memory of *those* moments that bothers me most. The thought, specifically, that other men enjoyed whole lifetimes comprised of such moments."

When Thomas Havens admits that his "moments" of "free" time only made his existence as a slave even more unbearable, he shows that people often don't realize their own unhappiness until they've had an opportunity to reflect upon the ways their lives haven't amounted to what they might have otherwise hoped. In turn, Saunders suggests that many of these former slaves exist in the Bardo because they've been denied the lives they deserved as humans. Indeed, they recognize that they never got to live unencumbered by racism and bigotry, and they now want to correct that, unwilling to die before they've experienced freedom.

Next, Litzie Wright steps forward with Mrs. Francis Hodge, who tells Litzie's story, since Litzie can't speak. Mrs. Francis Hodge explains that Litzie endured a lifetime of rape at the hands of her masters, forced to submit to horrific acts. As she describes these tragedies, Lieutenant Cecil Stone pushes his way through yelling, "Back, SHARDS, get ye back!" With the help of several "burly white men," he clears "the black supplicants away from the white stone home." In response, Thomas Havens says, "Ah. Here, as there?" Ignoring this, Lieutenant Stone and his cronies push the crowd of black souls against the "dreaded **iron fence**," but the black souls are uninfluenced by the fence's "noxious effect." Unable to push them further, Stone and his group plant themselves in a standoff with the black souls.

Thomas Havens' statement, "Here, as there?" emphasizes the extent to which many of the Bardo-dwellers have taken racist narratives into this transitional realm. As previously mentioned, all of the souls in the Bardo are in the same existential circumstances, but this doesn't stop people like Lieutenant Stone from propagating narratives of division and superiority. In this way, the Bardo reflects the United States during the Civil War, as the black souls push back against Stone's racist henchmen, standing their ground and fighting for equality in the same way that many black soldiers fought for the Union.

CHAPTER 67-68

As commotion ensues outside the white stone home, Lincoln hears nothing. Just as Willie is about to step into his father, though, a lantern light wobbles in the distance. Searching for the president, Manders approaches the crypt, calling out, "Mr. President" as he goes. "He calls for my father," Willie says. "Your father is President?" the Reverend asks. "He is," replies Willie. "Of?" asks the Reverend. "The United States," Willie answers, and Bevins explains that this is true, saying that a significant amount of time has passed since they've departed from "that previous place." "There is a state called *Minnesota*," he informs the Reverend. "We are at war," says Vollman. "At war with ourselves. The cannons are greatly improved."

The passage of time underscores the strength of the Bardo-dwellers' determination to remain in this realm. Indeed, though many years have gone by in the living world, people like Vollman and Bevins have remained here, convincing themselves that they're merely waiting to rejoin the lives they left behind—lives that have stood relatively still (in their minds) in their absence. This, of course, is untrue, and so the Bardo-dwellers are shocked to discover that things in the outside world have changed. In this way, Saunders once more shows how hesitant these souls are to recognize the fleeting nature of life.

Manders enters the crypt and says, "Ah. Here you are. Sir." Getting to his feet, Lincoln shakes Manders's hand, and Manders offers him a lantern. Because Lincoln doesn't want to deprive him of his only light, though, he suggests they return together. Manders agrees and steps outside to wait. This entire ordeal strikes Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend as a "catastrophe" because Willie hasn't gone into his father yet. In fact, the boy hasn't even advanced from the wall, where he now stands in fear, though Bevins realizes upon closer inspection that fear isn't what's keeping the boy there, but rather the wall itself, which has "liquefied" and morphed into more tendrils, which are now wrapping around Willie's waist. "We needed time, to get him free," Vollman says, and so he enters Lincoln once more, leaving Bevins to dig at the tendrils with his many hands.

Saunders uses seemingly every opportunity available to have someone from the Bardo enter President Lincoln. In doing so, he enables himself to not only divulge Lincoln's thoughts, but also to unite the living world with the Bardo, such that the souls in this liminal realm come into contact—of a kind—with the place they've left behind. What's more, it has already been established that the Bardo-dwellers can influence Lincoln, at least in certain circumstances. As such, readers naturally wonder what effect these souls have on Lincoln, a man people are always trying to influence, since he is—after all—an official elected to represent the wishes of his citizens.

CHAPTER 69

When Vollman steps into Lincoln once again, he discovers that the man is trying "to formulate a goodbye, in some sort of positive spirit, not wishing to enact that final departure in gloom, in case it might be felt, somehow, by the lad (even as he told himself that the lad was now past all feeling)." Feeling this way, Lincoln remains in the white stone home, waiting for "some comforting notion to arise," but no such idea emerges. In an effort to spark some thought that might help improve his mood, he projects his thoughts to the external world, thinking about "his life *out there*, and the encouragement of his future prospects, and the high regard in which he [is] held," but he finds that "no comfort [is] forthcoming, but on the contrary: he [is] not, it seem[s] well thought of, or succeeding in much of anything at all."

Once again, Lincoln's misgivings regarding his leadership during the Civil War bring themselves to bear on his mourning process. As he tries to say goodbye to Willie, he can't help but avoid thinking about the political unrest ravaging the country he's supposed to lead. In this manner, Saunders once again introduces the real world's many problems to the Bardo, as Vollman sits inside Lincoln and witnesses the man's insecurity about his responsibility to keep the country on track.

CHAPTER 70

Saunders gives another overview of the Civil War and the nation's reaction to it by quoting historical texts and correspondences. "The Presdt is an idiot," writes one commentator. "Vain, weak, puerile, hypocritical, without manners, without social grace, and as he talks to you, punches his fists under your ribs," notes another. Others suggest that Lincoln will go down in history as "the man who could not read the signs of the times." "If my wife wishes to leave me," says still another frustrated citizen, "may I compel her at arms to stay in our 'union'? Especially when she is a fiercer fighter than I, better organized, quite determined to be free of me?" Continuing this line of thought, one writer asserts that he and his fellow Americans "did not & will not Agree to fite for the Neygar."

Using Lincoln's introspection and personal misgivings as a jumping off point, Saunders illustrates the extent to which Americans criticize the president and his involvement in the Civil War. These critics, it seems, are people who want first and foremost to look after themselves. Indeed, they have little to no empathy when it comes to fighting on behalf of either the country or the millions of slaves denied their fundamental rights as humans. Instead, they only want to verbally abuse the president for striving for equality—a concept they don't value in the least.

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CHAPTER 71

Inside Lincoln, Hans Vollman bears witness to the man's thoughts, as the president says to himself, "*Well, what of it. No one who has ever done anything worth doing has gone uncriticized. As regards the matter at hand (as regards* him*), I am, at least, above any—*" Stopping here, Lincoln closes his eyes.

When Lincoln says, "as regards him*," he refers to Willie, to whom he's trying to formulate a farewell. The fact that he stops and closes his eyes upon thinking that he can't be criticized for his son's death suggests that he feels somewhat responsible for Willie's illness, as if he's somehow failed in his duties as a responsible parent.*

CHAPTER 72-73

Excerpts from historical texts and letters indicate the nation's response to Willie's death, showing that many believe the boy's illness could have been avoided if his parents had taken proper care of him. "Why, some asked, was a child riding a pony about in the pouring rain, without a coat?" writes one observer, commenting on the fact that Willie was allowed to do whatever he wanted, especially in the weeks leading up to his sickness. Another (more sympathetic) commentator notes, "When a child is lost there is no end to the self-torment a parent may inflict. When we love, and the object of our love is small, weak, and vulnerable, and has looked to us and us alone for protection; and when such protection, for whatever reason, has failed, what consolation (what justification, what defense) may there possibly be? None. Doubt will fester as long as we live."

The idea that "doubt will fester as long" as Lincoln lives recalls the ways that the Bardo-dwellers latch onto certain strong emotions—emotions that ultimately keep them in this transitional realm. Indeed, regret is a potent feeling, one that isn't easy to let go of, especially if someone feels guilty for not having properly cared for a loved one. In the same way that Roger Bevins regrets having taken his life and thus cannot move on, Lincoln doubts the "protection" he provided Willie, ultimately letting this regret "fester" in him and impede upon his ability to grieve and then push forward in life.

CHAPTER 74

Inside the white stone home, Lincoln looks one last time at Willie's body and, in a moment of strange hope, tries to get him to rise like Lazarus, though this only makes him feel foolish. He then tries to talk himself into a more rational state of mind, upholding that he was "in error" when he saw Willie as a "fixed and stable" being who would be in his life forever. "*He was never fixed, nor stable, but always just a passing, temporary energy-burst,*" he thinks, realizing that he always knew this but never truly admitted it to himself. "*He came out of nothingness, took form, was loved, was always bound to return to nothingness,*" he says to himself. Thinking this, he tells himself once and for all that it is time to go.

As Lincoln tries to collect himself, he thinks about the inherent ephemerality of life, acknowledging that Willie was never a "fixed" being. Rather, the boy was in a constant state of change—always growing, never staying the same. Nonetheless, humans let their affections for one another overshadow the fact that life (and even the concept of self) is temporary, and so Lincoln convinced himself that he'd always have Willie as he was in the present. By admitting that Willie "came out of nothingness" and that now he has "return[ed] to nothingness," Lincoln is the first person in the novel—other than the Reverend—to fully acknowledge life's impermanence.

Immersed in Lincoln's thoughts, Vollman realizes he's neglected to convince the man to stay. "Stay," he thinks. "It is imperative that you stay." Despite his efforts, Lincoln straightens up in preparation to leave. Readying himself for departure, Lincoln seeks closure, saying to himself, "*Look down. At him. At it. What is it? Frankly investigate that question. Is it him?*" He then admits to himself that he's not looking at Willie, but "that which used to bear him around." Indeed, Willie's body now lacks the "spark" that made him alive. "*Absent that spark, this, this lying here is merely—*" Lincoln muses, urging himself: "*(Think it. Go ahead. Allow yourself to think that word.) I would rather not. (It is true. It will help). I need not say it, to feel it, and act upon it.*"

Although Lincoln has acknowledged that Willie came from "nothingness" and now has returned to that "nothingness," he still can't seem to fully face the fact that his boy is dead. When he says, "Think it," he urges himself to come to terms with the blunt truth, which is that Willie has died. By refusing to do so, though, he resembles Vollman and the other Bardo-dwellers who adamantly avoid admitting the truth. In turn, Saunders shows just how much humans struggle with the idea that life is temporary.

While Lincoln grapples with his grief, Vollman listens and tries to tell the man that Willie can still benefit from his help. However, he's unsuccessful, and Lincoln decides to leave, thinking that from now on he won't think about Willie as occupying the crypt, but instead "look upon" him in his "heart." He thinks: "*I will do it now. Though it is hard. All gifts are temporary. I unwillingly surrender this one. And thank you for it. God. Or World. Whoever it was gave it to me, I humbly thank you, and pray that I did right by him, and may, as I go ahead, continue to do right by him.*"

In order to summon the courage to leave his son in the crypt, Lincoln tries to reconcile himself to the fact that Willie's existence on earth was temporary. He does this by trying to reframe the boy's death, altering his mindset so that he doesn't see his son's life as a tragedy, but rather as a brief but wonderful "gift." As a result, Saunders accentuates the mental gymnastics people put themselves through so that they can come to terms with loss and impermanence.

CHAPTER 75-76

Meanwhile, the Reverend and Bevins tear their way through the tendril around Willie's waste. As they do so, though, Lincoln closes Willie's "**sick-box**," puts it back, and walks outside into the "now-hushed crowd." The effect of his departure throws Willie into desperation, and he launches forth to follow his father. Unfortunately, after only a few steps he weakly sits on the floor, where more tendrils wind around him. At this point, Vollman convinces Bevins and the Reverend to follow Lincoln, saying that he was unable to convince the man by himself, but perhaps they all will be able to influence him if they work together.

Vollman's suggestion that he, Bevins, and the Reverend might be able to influence Lincoln if they work together represents one of the few times in the Bardo that these souls decide to unite for a greater cause. Rather than focusing on themselves and the effort required for each of them to remain in this realm, they decide to band together for Willie, who has unwittingly fostered a sense of unity in this otherwise divided and individualistic community.

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CHAPTER 77

The Reverend hesitates to enter Lincoln. The last time he went into a human, it was when he and his friends influenced the young arguing couple to make love. Although this couple later married because of this experience, the husband returned a year later to reminisce about that fateful day, and the Reverend and the others reentered him to see the effect of their influence. In doing so, they learned that the marriage was never meant to be, ultimately resulting in great unhappiness and leading the woman to poison herself. Horrified by the effect of his actions, the Reverend promised himself that he'd never occupy a person again. However, because he feels such "affection" for Willie, and also harbors a sense of guilt for having failed to free the boy from the tendrils, he "renounce[s]" his oath and joins Bevins and Vollman inside the president.

That the Reverend has misgivings about entering humans shows just how hard he tries to behave morally, even in the Bardo. This desire to be completely virtuous partly has to do with his experience with the Christ-emissary, but his moral integrity also seems a natural part of his personality. In this moment, though, acting morally means bending his own rules, since entering Lincoln is the only possible way he might be able to save Willie from an undeserved eternity of internment.

Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend swoop through the crowd and jump into Lincoln. Intrigued, several other souls follow them. Soon a large mass of individuals leap inside, entering both Lincoln and one another, "becoming multiply conjoined." Having eluded Lieutenant Stone, the black "contingent" rushes inside, along with "too many" souls to "enumerate." "So many wills, memories, complaints, desires, so much raw life-force," Bevins says. As Lincoln walks behind Manders, Vollman asks the large group inside to focus its collective attention on telling the president "*to stop*."

For the first time ever, it seems, the Bardo-dwellers unite without paying any attention to the various things that normally divide them from one another. For instance, nobody protests the comingling of white and black souls, and this kind of unadulterated unity results in a "raw life-force" the souls have never before beheld in their time in an otherwise divided climate like the Bardo.

"*Stop*," Bevins thinks, and everybody else expresses the sentiment in their own way, chanting: "*Pause, cease, self-interrupt, desist, halt, discontinue all forward motion*." This experience, Bevins finds, is unprecedentedly wonderful. "What a pleasure," he says. "What a pleasure it was, being in there. Together. United in common purpose. In there together, yet also within one another, thereby receiving glimpses of one another's minds, and glimpses, also, of Mr. Lincoln's mind. How good it felt, doing this together!"

As the many Bardo-dwellers occupy the president, Lincoln becomes a true representation of democracy and unity. In the same way that he is politically in the midst of bringing the country together across political and racial divisions, he now literally embodies a diversity of spirit that speaks to the kind of equality for which America has always claimed to strive. What's more, the souls inside him suddenly feel enriched by the experience of having come together, suggesting that the mere act of congress is something that enhances peoples' lives.

The Reverend notes that he and the other souls haven't always "been so solitary." In fact, in "that previous place," they often engaged in group activities, interacting with other people in many different circumstances. "My God, what a thing!" says Vollman. "To find oneself thus expanded!" The Reverend, for his part, wonders how he could have possibly forgotten the joys of coming together with others, a question Bevins answers by pointing out: "To stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one's primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else." Now, though, the souls find themselves "restored somewhat to [their] natural fullness."

Staying in the Bardo requires telling one's story over and over again, dwelling on why one wants to remain. This inevitably leads to an individualistic way of thinking, a mindset that doesn't take other people into consideration. By inhabiting Lincoln and each other, then, these souls suddenly remember what it's like to empathize with other people. In turn, they find themselves "expanded" by the experience, a fact that frames the act of coming together as fundamentally enriching.

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The many souls inside Lincoln look at one another and are astonished to discover that their physical appearances have changed. Vollman, for instance, is no longer naked, but clothed, and his member is a normal size. Similarly, Bevins has the correct number of body parts, and the Reverend no longer looks eternally shocked or scared. "Poor multiply raped Litzie became capable of speech, her first utterance consisting of words of thanks to Mrs. Hodge for speaking for her, during all those mute and lonely years," Elson Farwell notes. Despite these wonderful transformations, though, Lincoln keeps walking—in fact, he even speeds up, eager to leave.

Uniting inside Lincoln has overwhelmingly positive effects for the Bardo-dwellers, but it does nothing to persuade Lincoln to stay in the cemetery. By juxtaposing these two occurrences so drastically, Saunders intimates that the act of congress—and the empathy it engenders—is inherently worthwhile, even when it fails to bring about the intended effects. In turn, this idea sheds light on the novel's consideration of the Civil War, ultimately suggesting that Lincoln's uphill battle to defeat the Confederacy is intrinsically worthwhile by mere virtue of the fact that it embodies an attempt to unite the nation and achieve a sense of equality.

CHAPTER 78-79

Bevins calls out to the Bachelors and asks them—when they land—to fly ahead and collect any additional souls who might be able to help convince Lincoln to stay. Because the Bachelors dislike commitment, though, they refuse to do this. Losing hope, the many souls exit Lincoln and, upon doing so, Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend remember they've left Willie at the white stone home.

It's worth keeping in mind that the Bachelors aren't among the souls who enter Lincoln. As such, they haven't experienced the rewarding effect of having come together with their fellow Bardo-dwellers in an act of collective empathy. This is perhaps why they remain unable to think of anyone but themselves—they are still operating as individuals, so they refuse to help Willie.

CHAPTER 80-81

When Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend reach the white stone home, they find Willie on the floor, "cocooned to the neck" in the tendrils, which have fully hardened into an unbreakable carapace. "It was over," the Reverend remarks. As the three friends huddle around the boy to say goodbye, though, a voice sounds from the carapace itself and tells them in a woman's voice that "HE" would have "no objection" if they wanted to "transport the boy back up to the roof, so that he might serve out his (infinite) interment there." As this female voice finishes speaking, a bass voice with a "slight lisp" sounds out, saying, "Mind you, none of this is by our choice. We are compelled." Looking closely at the vine, the Reverend sees that it is comprised of people, tiny seed-sized beings with "writhing" bodies and "twisting" faces.

Although Saunders hasn't yet revealed who, exactly, these speakers are, it's worth noting that they are quick to absolve themselves of any responsibility. Indeed, they say, "Mind you, none of this is by our choice," as a way of distancing themselves from Willie's situation. "We are compelled," they add, perhaps because they understand that what they're doing to this poor and helpless boy is cruel. As such, they refuse to accept any sort of culpability in Willie's "interment," despite the fact that they are the ones wrapping around the boy.

Bevins asks the tendril-people who they are and why they're "compelled," but the female voice declares that she and the others will not discuss those matters. "Mistakes were made," adds the bass voice. "My advice?" says a British voice. "Do not massacre an entire regiment of your enemy." Offering his own advice, the bass lisper says, "Never conspire with your lover to dispose of a living baby." And though she said she wouldn't discuss such things, the woman's voice proffers, "Rather than murdering your loved one with poison, resolve to endure him." A final voice—this one with a Vermont accent—adds, "Sexual congress with children is not permitted."

It becomes quite obvious that these people have sinned in their lives and, because of those sins, have been placed in the tendril. It's also rather evident that these people aren't in the Bardo, as they talk about their past lives as exactly that: past *lives. Indeed, they seem to accept that they've died and that the vices they exhibited while still alive earned them their place in the tendril. Unlike the Bardo-dwellers, then, they recognize life's impermanence.*

The Reverend asks these strange voices if they're in Hell. "Not the worst one," says the British voice. "Are not compelled to bash our skulls against a series of clustered screw-drivers at least," chimes the female voice. "Are not being sodomized by a flaming bull," adds the bass. Suddenly, the Reverend is overcome by disgust, unable to believe he could ever be associated with people who have committed such egregious sins. "What will it be then?" the British voice asks, interrupting the Reverend's thoughts. "In here? Or on the roof?" Inserting himself in the conversation, Bevins asks if these hell-dwellers can make an exception—a suggestion that invites nothing but laughter from the carapace. Vollman insists that Willie is a "fine child," but the hell-beings say, "We have done this to many, many fine children before," adding that "rules are rules."

It makes sense that the Reverend is shocked in this moment, since he believes that he, too, is supposed to be in Hell. Although he can't pinpoint precisely why he deserves eternal damnation, he's certain he never did anything as despicable as these hell-dwellers, who have killed and raped people. After all, he was a priest who lived his life in accordance to religious dictates, which forbade him from even thinking lustily. That these people have done such awful things only further confuses the Reverend, suggesting once more that vice is perhaps more complicated than humans understand.

Bevins asks the hell carapace why children are subject to different rules than adults, suggesting that this is unfair. "Please do not speak to us of fairness," the female voice says. "Did I murder Elmer?" she asks, and when the Vermonter says, "You did," she asserts, "I did. Was I born with just those predispositions and desires that would lead me, after my whole preceding life (during which I had killed exactly no one), to do *just that thing*? I was. Was that *my* doing? Was that *fair*? Did I *ask* to be born licentious, greedy, slightly misanthropic, and to find Elmer so irritating? I did not. But there I was." In a similar fashion, the pedophilic Vermonter blames his "predisposition" for his perversity, just as the bass voice claims that killing his newborn baby was the mere result of his flawed sense of goodness.

In this moment, the hell-dwellers deny their own agency in order to absolve themselves of all responsibility for their sins. This is yet another difference between the Reverend and these beings, since the Reverend—who doesn't seem to have sinned very severely in the first place—tries desperately to think of what he must have done to have deserved damnation. These people, on the other hand, simply blame their vices on "predispositions" they claim were out of their control.

As the hell-beings drone on about their "predispositions," Vollman looks at the Reverend and detects a "flicker of resolve" or "defiance" in his face. Indeed, the Reverend is repulsed by these beings, thinking, "To be grouped with *these*, accepting one's sins so passively, even proudly, with no trace of repentance? I could not bear it; must I, even now, be beyond all hope?" Thinking this way, he wonders if true faith is believing that God is "ever receptive to our smallest good intention."

Listening to the hell-dwellers, the Reverend finds himself more confused than ever regarding why he deserves damnation. It's worth noting, though, that this experience seems to give him a small amount of hope. Whereas before he believed that nothing he could do in the Bardo would ever reverse the nature of his judgment, now he considers the limits of faith, positing that perhaps God recognizes even the "smallest good intention." This idea, it seems, might extend beyond life itself, suggesting that perhaps the Reverend can do something in the Bardo to change his fate.

The hell-dwellers repeat their question about whether Willie should be affixed inside the white stone home or on its roof. When Willie doesn't respond, the Reverend tells the carapace that it would be best to put the boy on the roof. "Very well," the tendril says, releasing Willie. "If I might request the honor of carrying him up there?" asks the Reverend, and when the tendril assents to this, he stoops, picks Willie up, and dashes out of the crypt into the night.

There's little doubt that the Reverend's brave act is doomed to fail, since he obviously can't escape the Bardo itself. At the same time, though, he has run away from fate before (when he evaded the yellow-footed beings), and this time he actually has a noble cause: to save Willie. This, it seems, is the Reverend's plea for God to recognize even the "smallest good intention."

CHAPTER 82

The hell tendrils chase the Reverend, ripping through the ground like a strange earthen wave. These hellish vines split into two and crisscross in front of his feet, tripping him and swarming around his body such that, in an attempt to secure Willie, they capture him, too. "And they had him," says Vollman, who—along with Bevins—follows behind. Too late to do anything, they hear the Reverend shouting out from beneath the hardening carapace. "They have me!" he screams. "They have even me! I must—I must go! Good God! Mustn't I? Or be trapped like this forever—" His friends agree, urging him to save himself. "But I don't want to!" he replies. "I am afraid!" As the tendril garbles his words, he screams: "That palace, that dreadful diamond palace!" Vollman and Bevins then hear the sound of the "matterlightblooming phenomenon," and the Reverend is gone.

Despite the fact that the Reverend has sacrificed himself for Willie—a noble act—he's still hesitant to depart. This just illustrates how tenaciously people hold onto their existences in the Bardo. Indeed, the Reverend has seemingly accepted that he should help Willie and face his judgment, and yet he remains terrified to leave this liminal realm. "I don't want to!" he screams, a sentiment that is in keeping with the fact that he has now spent many years clinging to his existence in the Bardo—an existence that isn't easy to give up, even if the Reverend has made a moral decision to sacrifice himself for Willie.

The beam of light from the Reverend's departure temporarily damages the tendrils. Kicking the now-viscous vines, Vollman and Bevins extract Willie. While digging, they find an imprint of the Reverend's face and see that his "countenance" hadn't reverted to his normal startled state, but instead "conveyed a sense of tentative hopefulness." Grabbing Willie, Vollman sets off toward the chapel, which he now understands is where the Reverend was headed. Before he can get there, though, the tendril catches up to him and wraps around his ankles, but he hands Willie to Bevins, and the hell-beings release him in order to continue pursuing the boy. In this manner, the two friends pass Willie back and forth until finally reaching the chapel.

What the Reverend screams just before departing does not match the sentiment conveyed by his look of "tentative hopefulness." As such, readers are left to assume that he regained his composure just as the matterlightblooming phenomenon took him away, a moment during which his fear of departure transmuted into a more positive outlook. Indeed, the Reverend clearly hopes that his daring act of bravery and self-sacrifice will influence his judgment, implying that he now believes a person's actions in the Bardo might actually impact what happens to them in the true afterlife.

"I know this place," says Willie inside the chapel. Vollman isn't surprised to hear this, since everybody has passed through the chapel, the final place they were ever "taken seriously" by the previous world. Outside, the ground shakes, causing the entire building to shudder. The hell-beings call out, saying that they're simply gathering their strength but that they'll soon enter the chapel, so Vollman and Bevins might as well send Willie out. Just then, though, the two friends jump at the sound of a somebody clearing his throat. Turning around, they see Lincoln sitting pensively at the front of the chapel, "where he must have sat during the previous day's service."

The Bardo itself is a point of transition, a portal through which dead people pass into the afterlife. The chapel, then, is a more tangible representation of this portal, since everyone in the graveyard goes through this building before getting buried. As such, it's fitting that what are likely to be Willie's final moments in the Bardo should take place with his father in the chapel, a reflection of the fact that his time in this place has been—and always will be—merely transitory.

CHAPTER 83

Writing again in the watchman's logbook, Manders recounts escorting Lincoln away from Willie's crypt. As they approached the front gate, he explains, Lincoln saw the chapel and decided to sit inside it, admitting that he "felt his boy was still here with him." As Manders writes these words, he notes that the president is still in the chapel.

The fact that Lincoln feels as if his "boy is still here with him" suggests that the Bardo-dwellers actually do have some sort of connection to the living world. Although they're largely unable to act on this connection, there's no denying the fact that Lincoln, in his utter bereavement, correctly senses his son's presence, intuiting that Willie has not yet passed on.

CHAPTER 84-85

In the chapel, Willie once again has the chance to become one with his father. As he sits inside Lincoln, he tries to communicate that he'll leave this place if that's what his father tells him to do. As he does this, though, he bears witness to his father's thoughts, as Lincoln ponders Willie's final days.

Once again, Saunders seizes the opportunity to showcase Lincoln's thoughts, this time using Willie's occupation of his father as a way of showing the boy the truth, which is that he is dead.

CHAPTER 86

Once more, historical writings describe Willie's descent, explaining how his fever eventually developed into typhoid, which "works slowly and cruelly over a period of weeks, depriving the victim of digestive function, perforating the bowels, causing hemorrhaging and peritonitis." As Willie lay in pain, he was unable to "recognize the distracted loving face of the tall man who bent over him." Before long, his "eyes went dim," and a "death-dew gathered on his brow."

This section is chiefly expository, providing readers with a glimpse of Willie's death and the days leading up to it. Like many of the other portions of historical excerpts, this chapter relates to what's happening in the plot, since Willie is currently in the midst of listening in on his father's thoughts as Lincoln considers the boy's last moments among the living.

CHAPTER 87

"Wait," Willie says inside his father, confused by the man's thoughts. Watching this scene play out, Vollman sees the child grow "more upset than comforted" by what he's hearing. "Come out," Vollman shouts to Willie, but the boy ignores him, merely saying that he doesn't understand. "Come out at once," he repeats.

When Vollman sees Willie growing upset, it seems as if he's able to intuit that the boy is about to learn that he's dead. Vollman is the most adamant of the Bardo-dwellers when it comes to denying that he's dead—but the fact that he senses what Willie is about to learn implies that he understands on some unarticulated level that he himself is dead, too.

CHAPTER 88-90

As Willie sits "stock-still, eyes very wide" inside his father, Saunders describes (once again using historical excerpts) the boy's burial, giving a brief overview of the funeral. One attendee remembers approaching the president after the service and offering his condolences. "[Lincoln] did not seem to be listening," this attendee writes. "His face lit up with dark wonder. Willie is dead, he said, as if it had only just then occurred to him."

For clarity's sake, it's worth remembering that the historical excerpts Saunders employs usually follow the same contours as the plot itself. As such, when Lincoln thinks about his son's death and funeral, the excerpts run parallel to his reflections. This is significant because Willie bears witness to his father's thoughts in this moment, so if Saunders includes an excerpt in which Lincoln says, "Willie is dead," that means the president most likely is thinking about something along these lines, thereby finally revealing to Willie that he is no longer alive.

CHAPTER 91

Willie stands and exits his father. Looking at Bevins and Vollman as a crowd of souls gathers around the chapel—many of them even squeezing inside—his face goes pale. "May I tell you something?" he says to Vollman. "You are not sick." At this, the surrounding souls start fidgeting in "nervousness and agitation," but Willie presses on, saying, "That thing in my box? Has nothing to do with me." Backing away from the boy, the crowd starts trying to leave the chapel. "Stop talking," Vollman orders. "You will kindly stop talking at once." As everybody tries to run away, chaos takes hold. "There is a name for what ails us," Willie says. "Do you not know it? Do you really not know it? It is quite amazing." And just as Vollman pleads with him to be quiet, he says: "Dead. Everyone, we are dead!"

Having witnessed his father thinking about his funeral, Willie finally understands that he is dead. In turn, he spreads this knowledge throughout the community of Bardo-dwellers, much to their extreme dismay. What's perhaps most interesting about this moment is that, though the Bardo-dwellers have so much conviction when it comes to remaining in this realm, their resilience is easily undone by a child's simple sentence: "Everyone, we are dead!" In this way, Saunders shows just how powerful language can be in undoing delusional thinking. Indeed, people like Vollman have built their entire existences in the Bardo around avoiding saying words like "dead" or "death" (or even "life," instead referring to the "previous place"). Now, though, Willie forces them to admit the truth, and they find themselves defenseless against such blunt veracity.

When Willie reveals that everybody is dead, three people immediately succumb to the "matterlightblooming phenomenon." "Dead!" the boy shouts. "Dead, dead, dead!" As the crowd of souls scrambles to leave the chapel—some of them visibly on the verge of departing for good—Vollman reasons with Willie, saying he must be wrong. After all, who is the boy talking to, if everybody's dead? But this tactic doesn't work, and Willie destroys "years of work and toil with each thoughtless phrase" (according to Bevins). Indeed, Willie assures his friends that his father said he is dead, and this leaves Bevins and Vollman speechless, since they don't believe Lincoln would lie about something so serious. "I have to say, it gave me pause," Bevins says. "In my early days here, I only now recalled, I had, yes, for a brief period, understood myself to be—"

Vollman and Bevins find it difficult to argue against the notion that they are dead because they trust Lincoln, having inhabited him and thus discovered that he is an honest man (and in this moment, readers might recall the president's real-life nickname, Honest Abe). Still, Willie's exclamations negate "years of work and toil," a notion that proves just how much effort these souls have put into deluding themselves by insisting that their lives have not yet ended. When Willie yells, "Dead!", Bevins suddenly remembers that he used to "underst[and]" the true nature of his situation, though that understanding has clearly been erased by the "years of work and toil" he put into convincing himself that he's not dead but merely waiting for his mother to find him on the kitchen floor.

Willie tells his friends he wants to "do good" by going where he "should have gone in the first place." He now understands that nobody here will be able to return to "that previous place." He entreats everybody to join him, since there's nothing left for them here. "We're done," he says. With these words, three more souls disappear with a loud crack, and Willie's skin flickers "between the various selves he had been in that previous place: purple newborn, squalling naked infant, jelly-faced toddler, feverish boy on sick-bed." Wheeling through these forms, he then manifests into all the things he *would* have been: "Nervous young man in wedding-coat; Naked husband, wet-groined with recent pleasure; Young father leaping out of bed to light a candle at a children's cry; Grieving widower, hair gone white; Bent ancient fellow with an ear trumpet."

In keeping with the idea that Willie was in a constant state of change as a child, he now whirls through his past and future forms, proving that all humans—regardless of age—are always changing. Of course, children grow at a faster rate than adults, but even the oldest human beings still undergo subtle transformations as they make their way toward death. As Willie flickers, then, Saunders reminds readers once again that embracing life's impermanence is simply part of being alive and human. The fact that Willie says he should *have moved on from the Bardo "in the first place" further suggests that change and transition aren't things that are worth fighting, for they are simply part of existence.*

Looking at Vollman and Bevins, Willie says, "Oh, it was nice. So nice there. But we can't go back. To how we were. All we can do is what we *should*." With this, he closes his eyes and departs, the strength of the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" knocking Vollman and Bevins off their feet.

Again, Willie uses the word "should" when referring to the act of departing the Bardo, ultimately suggesting that embracing transition and impermanence is what humans are meant to do, for it is truly the only sensible option in the face of the realities of life and death.

CHAPTER 92

In his final monologue, Willie asserts that he is simultaneously himself and *not* himself. Now "allowed" to do whatever he wants, he delights in "swinging from the chandelier" and floating around, flying wherever he pleases. "Whatever that former fellow (willie) had," he says, "must now be given back (is given back gladly) as it never was mine (never his) and therefore is not being taken away, not at all! As I (who was of willie but is no longer (merely) of willie) return to such beauty."

Willie's final words appear after he has already departed the Bardo, giving readers a look into the mentality he carries into the afterlife. In turn, his assertion that he must "give back" everything—including himself—is in line with Lincoln's earlier idea that humans come from "nothingness" and then return once more to that nothingness. As Willie retreats from the Bardo—and, thus, farther away from life itself—he revels in the "beauty" of relinquishing his ties to the world, ultimately framing the transition between life and death as a wonderful, natural occurrence.

CHAPTER 93-94

As soon as Willie departs, Lincoln jolts, looks around, stands up, and leaves, "the lad's departure having set him free." On his way out the door, he passes through Bevins and Vollman once more, and they sense that he has made a somber kind of peace with the loss of his son. "His mind was freshly inclined toward *sorrow*," Vollman states, "toward the fact that the world was full of sorrow; that everyone labored under some burden of sorrow; that all were suffering; that whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering." This, Lincoln feels, means that the best thing a person a can do—especially someone of his stature and in his position—is work to somehow alleviate this inevitable suffering.

Since Lincoln was able to sense Willie's presence, it's unsurprising that he suddenly feels "free" once his son has left the Bardo. Of course, this doesn't mean that he isn't still sad, but only that he has found a way to live with that sadness. In keeping with this idea, he turns his mind to his duty as the president of a country at war with itself, realizing that many others are suffering in the same way that he is, since there are thousands of parents currently mourning the loss of sons who have died in battle. Carrying this new understanding of "sorrow" with him, he determines to use his position for good, "freshly inclined" toward carrying out the Civil War so that he can end the suffering of slavery and also make sure that the people who have perished for the Union haven't died in vain.

Making his way out of the chapel, Lincoln feels ready to "believe anything of this world," since his grief and loss have made him "less rigidly himself." Feeling a new capacity for mercy, he also recognizes that he's in the middle of a war—a war he must continue fighting, even if that means killing many, many people. He recognizes that "the swiftest halt to the thing" will quite possibly be the "bloodiest," but he knows that freedom is worth fighting for. Since childhood, he has intuited that America is "*for everyone*." He knows that some people think America can't manage itself and that the Civil War will derail the entire country, but he disagrees with this notion. Instead, he believes "the rabble" *can* manage itself; "The rabble could. The rabble would. He would lead the rabble in managing. The thing would be won."

The idea that Lincoln has been made "less rigidly himself" by his experience in the cemetery suggests that embracing grief and the impermanence of life ultimately strengthens a person and makes them more empathetic. It also suggests that Lincoln has perhaps been changed by the mass-inhabitation that took place when the many Bardo-dwellers jumped into his body. As such, he leaves the cemetery feeling not only stronger because of his loss, but more confident in his resolve to fight for unity in America. Thinking this way, he determines to help the "rabble"—a disorderly crowd—find its way forward as a united country.

CHAPTER 95-96

Mrs. Francis Hodge explains that she and a number of other black souls refrained from entering the chapel, since in life they were generally forbidden to do so. When Lincoln emerges, though, he walks right through her, and she briefly glimpses his internal world, which is saddled with the responsibility of the nation. Moving on, he approaches Thomas Havens, who surprises himself by jumping into the president and matching his stride. Walking along, he discovers that he enjoys occupying Lincoln. He even wants the president to know him and his people. "I don't know why I felt that way but I did," he says. "He had no *aversion* to me, is how I might put it. Or rather, he had once had such an aversion, still bore traces of it, but, in examining that aversion, pushing it into the light, had somewhat, already eroded it."

Once again, Saunders shows that various forms of bigotry have made their way into the Bardo, as people like Mrs. Hodge don't feel comfortable entering chapels even in a spiritual, non-corporeal realm. Interestingly enough, though, while the mores of racism have largely followed black souls into the Bardo, Thomas Havens is surprised to find a hopeful sense of equality when he enters the president. Indeed, Lincoln's "aversion" to black people—though still extant in the president—has been diminished by his own introspection. In this way, Saunders suggests that if a person examines their own biases with an open mind inclined toward empathy, their bigotry is likely to erode.

Havens notices that Lincoln has been changed by the souls who recently inhabited him, an experience that has opened him up. "He had not, it seemed, gone unaffected by that event," he remarks. "Not at all. It had made him sad. Sadder. *We* had. All of us, white and black, had made him sadder, with our sadness. And now, though it sounds strange to say, he was making *me* sadder with *his* sadness." Because of this, Havens decides to present Lincoln with all the sorrows related to his existence as a black man in America, holding nothing back as he directs his mind to the hardships of people like Litzie Wright and Mrs. Hodge. "We are ready, sir," he says, "are angry, are capable, our hopes are coiled up so tight as to be deadly, or holy: turn us loose, sir, let us at it, let us show what we can do."

In this moment, Havens confirms that Lincoln has been profoundly altered by the mass-inhabitation. This is perhaps why he feels "freshly inclined toward sorrow" as he walks out of the cemetery—as Havens points out, the Bardo-dwellers have made him "sadder," and he has made them sadder, too. This exchange of emotions indicates just how fully the souls and Lincoln united, as they shared one another's deepest feelings. In turn, Havens harnesses the connection he now has with the president to inspire Lincoln to do everything he can to act on behalf of the millions of black Americans who have been heartlessly disenfranchised by the country's pervasive racism.

CHAPTER 97

Litzie and Mrs. Hodge discuss the shocking news that they're dead, and both of them resolve to depart. When Mrs. Hodge asks Elson Farwell if he'll come with them, he says he intends to stay, for "if such things as *goodness* and *brotherhood* and *redemption* exist, and may be attained, these must sometimes require blood, vengeance." As such, he decides to stay until he has had his revenge "upon someone." Accepting this, the two women leave their friend, respecting his wish to stay as they embrace and succumb to the matterlightblooming phenomenon."

The fact that Elson Farwell doesn't join his friends in departing this realm simply goes to show that not all the Bardo-dwellers are ready to leave. Although many strong-willed souls have decided to move on after Willie's revelation, many others are still too preoccupied with whatever it is that's keeping them in this liminal space. For Farwell, that preoccupation is the idea that someone should pay for the dismal way he was treated while still alive. Seeking "vengeance," then, he refuses to leave.

CHAPTER 98

Isabelle Perkins includes a post-script in her letter to her brother, saying that she saw President Lincoln exit the cemetery, mount his horse, and ride away. Looking across the road, she opened her window and shouted to ask Manders if it was truly the president who just departed the cemetery. When he confirms that Lincoln did indeed just proceed into the night, Isabelle wonders about "the extent" of the president's "heartache." She then admits that she should have her caretaker her help her to bed, since it's late and she is unwell. Ending her letter, she implores her brother to come home, telling him that she loves and misses him and admitting that she has "no real friend here in this place."

By portraying Isabelle as lonely, Saunders shows that the Bardo-dwellers aren't necessarily the only ones who are estranged from their loved ones. Indeed, Isabelle is still alive, and yet she finds herself in a similar state as people like Hans Vollman, who still waits to rejoin Anna. Although the majority of the novel frames the act of waiting as something that ought to be avoided, in this moment Saunders backhandedly intimates that waiting is also a deeply human endeavor, regardless of the realm in which a person exists.

CHAPTER 99

In the logbook, Manders confirms that Lincoln has finally left the cemetery. He notes that he saw Isabelle Perkins in her house as he locked the gate, saying that she called out to ask if it was the president who'd just rode away. He admits that talking to Isabelle is sad, since he has known her since she was a child and now she's an adult but hobbled by illness, hardly able to walk. Calling across the street in the darkness, he advised her to shut the window because it was cold, and she thanked him for his concern "and said it was a sad thing wasn't it about Pres's son." Manders agreed, and Isabelle said the child is probably in a better place. Saying that he "hoped and prayed so," Manders's words "hung" in the air, as if his and Isabelle's voices were the last ones on earth.

This is an incredibly human moment, as Manders and Isabelle briefly bond over the tragedy of Willie's death. In turn, Saunders shows that unity often arises in periods of sadness and melancholy. Since both Manders and Isabelle stop to empathize with the president, they find themselves suddenly connected to one another.

CHAPTER 100-101

Meanwhile, back in the cemetery, souls start disappearing at an alarming rate. Amidst the chaos, Vollman and Bevins rush out of the chapel, passing Lieutenant Stone and Elson Farwell, who are in the midst of a seemingly never-ending fight, one that threatens to continue into eternity. Moving on, Bevins and Vollman can't help but feel "shaken" by Willie's words. Skimming across the grounds, they watch as Betsy Baron flickers and manifests as all her past and would-be future forms before departing, her husband begrudgingly following her closely behind.

Lieutenant Cecil Stone and Elson Farwell's battle serves as yet another representation of the conflict between abolitionists and slaveholders in the real world. That their combat seems fit to go on into eternity says something about just how steadfast they are in their beliefs, a reflection of the ideological impasse at which America finds itself during the Civil War. On another note, it's worth recognizing that Bevins and Vollman are faltering in their efforts to remain in the Bardo. Although Willie has merely articulated what they surely already knew (that they're dead), they now find the prospect of staying in the Bardo noticeably more difficult.

CHAPTER 102

"Suddenly Mr. Bevins did not look well," Vollman says, looking at his friend and noticing that the man's flesh has thinned. Bevins remembers his final day in that previous place, when he saw Gilbert in a bakery with another man and felt "crestfallen." Distraught, he went home and "proceeded." Thinking this, he now falls to his knees and flickers through his past selves, moving from "an effeminate but affectionate young boy" to a "red-faced distraught disaster" clutching a "butcher knife." Turning to Vollman, he asks if his friend remembers when he—Bevins—first came to this place. "You were so kind to me," he says. "I just remembered something else," he adds. "Your wife once came to visit." Startled by this turn in the conversation, Vollman denies this memory, but Bevins says, "Friend. Enough. Let us speak honestly. I am remembering many things. And I suspect that you are, too."

When Bevins first begins to flicker (indicating that he's on the verge of leaving), he still avoids articulating that he is dead. Indeed, he says that he went home after seeing Gilbert with another man, at which point he "proceeded." Note that he doesn't say what, exactly, he "proceeded" in doing—he stops short of saying that he "proceeded" to kill himself. What's interesting, though, is that the language he uses implies life's natural course of progression, a sentiment that frames stasis—or "tarrying" in the Bardo—as antithetical to existence. After all, the word "proceed" denotes a sense of movement and succession. In this way, Bevins slowly comes to terms with the fact that he has left behind his previous life, even if he hasn't quite reached the point where he can fully articulate that he has died. In this state of mind, he turns to Vollman and tries to get him to see that they're both finished with life—"that previous place."

Vollman denies Bevins's words, but his friend pushes on, recounting Anna's visit to the cemetery. She came, Bevins says, and thanked Vollman for putting her "on the path to love," explaining that she met the love of her life after his death. She then told him that she wouldn't join him when she herself died, because she belongs with her husband. "You," Vollman interrupts, "you cut your wrists and bled to death on your kitchen floor." "Yes," says Bevins. "Yes I did."

Finally, Vollman and Bevins both face the truth: they are dead. In order to exist in the Bardo, they—along with everyone else—have focused monomaniacally on their own situations, adopting an individualistic mindset in order to remain in this liminal realm. Now, though, they work together to help one another come to terms with the truth, again suggesting that unity and empathy ultimately incite progress.

"Ah, God," Vollman says as he too begins to flicker, moving from a "fresh-faced apprentice in an ink-stained smock" to a "heavy-set, limping, wooden-toothed forty-six-year-old printer." Observing this, Bevins says, "Shall we? Shall we go together?" As he says this, he circles through the forms he never had the chance to become: "The contented lover, for many years now, of a gentle, bearded pharmacist"; "A prosperous, chubby, middle-aged fellow"; "An old geezer of nearly a hundred, blessedly free of all desire […] being driven to church in some sort of miracle vehicle." Vollman agrees that they should depart, but there's one last thing the two friends know they must do, and so they swoop toward the "dreaded **iron fence**."

By revealing all the forms Bevins never had the chance to attain, Saunders emphasizes once again the fact that being alive means existing in a constant state of change. In turn, this accentuates life's fleeting, ephemeral nature. Nothing, it seems, can ever be "fixed" in place, a sentiment first expressed by Lincoln in chapter LXXIV, when the president acknowledges that he was "wrong" to think of Willie as a "stable" and permanent being in his life. Now, Bevins literally embodies this spirit of transition, demonstrating that even if he hadn't died many years ago, he wouldn't now be the same person he once was.

CHAPTER 103

When Vollman and Bevins reach Elise Traynor, she is in the form of a "smoking wreck of a rail car, several dozen charred and expiring individuals trapped within her." "We are sorry," the friends shout. "Sorry that we did not do more to convince you to go, back when you still had the chance." One of the perishing individuals inside the wreck points out that they did "slink away" as the girl succumbed, and this comment shames Vollman so much that he draws himself up and approaches the car, all the while manifesting as his future forms: "A beaming fellow in a disordered bed, the morning after he and Anna would have consummated their marriage"; "A father of twin girls"; "A retired printer with bad knees, helped along a boardwalk by that same Anna." Taking a deep breath, he steps inside the rail car and departs.

Vollman has spent many years focusing on himself. This, readers now know, is what a person must do in order to have the strength to stay in the Bardo. Now, though, Vollman has finally accepted that he has died, and this acceptance enables him to compensate for the kind of individualistic thinking that kept him from helping Elise Traynor in her time of need. Coming to terms with the fact that he must now move on, he uses his last moments in the Bardo to act empathetically in an attempt to free the Traynor girl from her terrible internment.

The train explodes with Vollman's departure, throwing Bevins to the ground. When he stands, he sees that **the iron fence** is the only thing left standing. Advancing toward it, he thinks one last time of the world's myriad sensory pleasures—"None of it was real; nothing was real," he tells himself. "Everything was real; inconceivably real, infinitely dear. These and all things started as nothing, latent within a vast energy-broth, but then we named them, and loved them, and, in this way, brought them forth. And now must lose them." Bidding his final farewell, he says: "I send this out to you, dear friends, before I go, in this instantaneous thought-burst, from a place where time slows and then stops and we may live forever in a single instant."

Bevins asserts that everything starts as "nothing," but then humans "name" and "love" these things and, as such, bring them forth until, eventually, they return to nothing. This line of thinking recalls Lincoln's idea that Willie emerged from "nothingness" and has now gone back to that nothingness. As Bevins prepares to depart, he suggests that life isn't futile simply because it ends—rather, he upholds that love makes life worthwhile, even if existence is fleeting. The brief "burst" of life that takes place between birth and death is a beautiful thing, he suggests, and though it is ephemeral, humans may still cherish the time they spend in that very transience.

CHAPTER 104-106

Feeling the blast of Bevins's departure (which takes place right by the fence), a number of remaining souls make haste to their graves because the sun is about to rise. As they rush through the cemetery, they feel a deep fatigue in their bodies, which only makes them hurry along. Among these souls are the Bachelors, who fly over head and lament the fact that they have to return to their bodies, though they admit this is the price they must pay in order to enjoy the freedom of this place, where each night there springs the possibility that they might yet find what they never were able to secure in "that previous place": love.

What keeps the Bachelors from leaving the Bardo is the hope that they might still one day find love. This is an interesting reason for staying, considering that Bevins asserts in his final moments that love is perhaps the only thing that makes the ephemeral trappings of life tangible and worthwhile. Under this interpretation, then, it makes sense that the Bachelors refuse to depart, for they have not yet attained the one thing that might give meaning to an otherwise fleeting and inscrutable life.

CHAPTER 107

Manders makes a final entry in the cemetery logbook, explaining that he has just returned from visiting the Carroll crypt to make sure everything is all right. Inside, he saw Willie Lincoln's coffin poking out from the wall, so he pushed it back in and thought morosely about the boy's first night in the cemetery—the first of a "long sad eternity of such nights." This idea makes him think about his own children, and he finds himself unable to imagine the pain of losing a little one. Trying to distract himself, he hopes that "these sad & morbid thoughts will soon fade away […] with the happy sight of our dear friend rising the Sun."

As Manders concludes his entry, he dwells upon Lincoln's harrowing loss while also looking forward to a new day. In this manner, he illustrates that life goes on despite its many tragedies. Feeling sad for the president, he recognizes that death and grief are part of life, which means they will inevitably "fade away"—just like everything else.

CHAPTER 108

Thomas Havens remains inside President Lincoln as the man mounts his horse and rides out of the cemetery. Together, they pass through the soft streets of a tranquil morning not yet fluttering with noise and life. Thomas feels that Lincoln is unhappy and guilty for having neglected his family. As he rides along, Lincoln thinks about how hard life has become, and though these thoughts strain Thomas, he determines to remain within this man. "Normally, during the day, we took our rest," he explains. "Were drawn back to our shells and must rest in there. Tonight I did not feel that draw." After falling asleep for a brief moment, Thomas sits upright and fully inhabits the president, saying, "And we rode forward into the night, past the sleeping houses of our countrymen."

The image of a former slave's spirit entering President Lincoln's soul and riding with him toward the White House is highly symbolic, since—according to history—Lincoln will sign the Emancipation Proclamation within the year, thereby declaring all slaves free. In light of this, Saunders presents Lincoln as a man who is intimately in touch with the very people he wants to liberate. Occupying the highest position in the United States, he represents not only the white citizenry, but the country's many black people, too. In this moment, then, he literally embodies diversity, as Saunders unites a former slave with an empathetic white man, fusing them together so that they ride past the houses of their shared countrymen as a single person.

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