Essay #2 Outline

*The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by lê thi diem thúy was a frustrating read. The writing is consistently challenging to follow and rests on an uncomfortable ledge between memoir and poem. Throughout most of the book, we follow the nameless narrator on her blurry escape from Vietnam by boat. Each chapter feels distinct and separate from other chapters, with different focuses on dreams, or choppy/smooth writing. The story primarily focuses on the narrator, Ba, and Ma. We learn of other characters, but they are rarely brought up. The Gangster We Are All Looking For falls short of what could’ve been a stronger story due to it’s overuse of imagery and detail, complex metaphors and storytelling, and underdeveloped characters.

One of the first scenes in the book describes the narrator’s encounter with Mel, a minor character only present in the first chapter of the book:

*When Mel approached us at the airport, we heard a faint rattling: a ring full of gold and silver keys hanging from his belt. With each step Mel took, the ring swung and rattled by his side. The keys were new to him. Mel was tall and thin, but the ring looked fat, important. Mel caught the ring and pushed it into his pocket. This silenced the keys for a moment. He shook everyone’s hand…* (Le 5)

As mentioned previously, this would be good poetry, but Mel’s keys are never brought up again. Without any pause for explanation or even a hint of what this is supposed to mean, we continue.

1. P3: Complex stuff
   1. Segue from the imagery into the metaphors that feel pointless using this quote:
      1. *One night, Mr. Russel fell asleep and dreamed that the boards were seabirds sitting on the waves. He saw a hand scoop the birds up from the water. It was not his hand and it was not the hand of God. The birds went flying in all direction across the blinding blue sky of Mr. Russell’s dream, but finally he saw them fly in only one direction and that was toward the point where in the dream he understood himself to be waiting, somewhere beyond the frame.* (Le 5)
      2. Sentence about how this is making the reader guess about what it means
         1. (and also how frustrating that this metaphor is never used again or explained)
   2. Other metaphors that I found problematic
      1. Butterfly incident
      2. Daydreaming thing in class
         1. *I began to play with the ceiling…I told myself that I could find the thread and focus on it hard enough with my eyes, I could tear the sky open…* (Le 21)
      3. The constant feeling of
   3. End this paragraph with the ending scene
      1. *One night, during our first spring together in California, my father woke my mother and me and told us to grab our coats and put on our shoes…* *As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights. (Le 157-158)*
      2. The sudden switch in time back to their first spring as a family coupled with the abrupt ending makes you question if you somehow missed several chapters of the book.
2. P4: Underdeveloped Characters (not sure if I have enough to substantiate this. I certainly think they’re underdeveloped but I don’t know if I can find a whole lot to convince people that they are)
   1. Main character
      1. Seems somewhat unaffected all the time
         1. The scene after Ma and Ba are fighting
            1. *I run out front and dance like a crazy lady, dance like a fish, wiggle my head and whip my body around*. (Le 93)
            2. Is she used to this or something? She doesn’t seem to mind
         2. The other scene where Ma and Ba fight
            1. *I’d lock myself in the bathroom and … pretend. I could listen to them and not listen to them. And when the awful quiet came, I’d break it by filling the tub with more water.* (Le 67)
            2. It doesn’t even say that she cried. Did this not bother her. It clearly bothered her but it seems like she doesn’t care.
         3. Hammock Scene
            1. *When I touched a finger to his spine, he curled upon himself like an anemone. It was then, as he pulled away from me, that I realized the crying came from him. The hammock tilted toward the ground, the crickets went quiet, a dark cloud crossed the face of the moon, and time stopped.* (Le 109)
            2. Why do we never get told how she feels or what she’s thinking? It’s established that we’re able to know other people’s thoughts, like Ba. Frustratingly, we can’t seem to know what our own narrator is thinking!
   2. Ba (less so than Ma)
      1. Mysterious Guy from The North
      2. Went into a re-education camp after fighting with the south
   3. Ma
      1. Never told how she ended up in California and her journey
      2. Don’t know how she really grew up
      3. She seems to be an afterthought
         1. *One of the gates hung lower than the other after my mother backed into it that summer, trying to park our family's new used Cadillac* (Le 38)
3. Closing Paragraph
   1. All of the things listed above were what made the book frustrating. (reword obviously)
   2. To top it off we never really find out if this is an autobiography?
   3. Was not a good book but perhaps good poetry.