IS A MOTHER

OCEAN

ALSO BY OCEAN VUONG

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous Night Sky with Exit Wounds

TIME IS A MOTHER

Ocean Vuong

PENGUIN PRESS // NEW YORK
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THỜI GIAN LÀ MỘT NGƯỜI MẠ

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for Peter & for my mother, Lê Kim Hồng, called forward <u>OceanofPDF.com</u>

Forgive me, Lord: I've died so little!

—César Vallejo

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TOY BOAT

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THE PUNCTUM
TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD
NO ONE KNOWS THE WAY TO HEAVEN
ALMOST HUMAN
DEAR ROSE

WOODWORKING AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Notes & Acknowledgments

The Bull

He stood alone in the backyard, so dark the night purpled around him. I had no choice. I opened the door & stepped out. Wind in the branches. He watched me with kerosene -blue eyes. What do you want? I asked, forgetting I had no language. He kept breathing, to stay alive. I was a boy which meant I was a murderer of my childhood. & like all murderers, my god was stillness. My god, he was still there. Like something prayed for by a man with no mouth. The green-blue lamp swirled in its socket. I didn't want him. I didn't want him to be beautiful—but needing beauty to be more than hurt gentle enough to hold, I reached for him. I reached—not the bull but the depths. Not an answer but an entrance the shape of an animal. Like me.

Snow Theory

This is the best day ever I haven't killed a thing since 2006 The darkness out there, wet as a newborn I dog-eared the book & immediately Thought of masturbation How else do we return to ourselves but to fold The page so it points to the good part Another country burning on TV What we'll always have is something we lost In the snow, the dry outline of my mother Promise me you won't vanish again, I said She lay there awhile, thinking it over One by one the houses turned off their lights I lay down over her outline, to keep her true Together we made an angel It looked like something being destroyed in a blizzard I haven't killed a thing since

Dear Peter

they treat me well

here they don't

make me forget

the world like you

promised but oh well

I'm back inside

my head

where it's safe

cause I'm not

there the xanax

dissolves & I'm

okay this bed

no longer stranded

at sea the door

coming closer

now & I'm gonna

dock some days

I make it to

the reading room

they have one flew over

the cuckoo's nest can you

believe it but hey

I think I'm getting better

though I learned

in the courtyard yesterday

I'm still afraid

of butterflies

how they move so much

like a heart

on fire I know it doesn't

make sense this pill

a bone-shard of will

unwilling me Peter

I feel sorry

for anyone

who has to die despite

the fact I was

fifteen once but

who knows I tell lies

to keep from

falling away

from me you

wouldn't

believe it a man

in the back of

a walgreens once said

I can make you look

like something true

fuck he said

oh fuck you're so much

like my little brother

so I let him kiss me

for nothing oh well

childhood

is only a cage

that widens

like this sunlight honest

through the clinic window

where a girl

on methadone

claps alone

at a beige butterfly

knocking its head up

the beige wall Peter

I'm wearing your sea-green socks

to stay close I swear

I'll learn to swim

when I'm out once

& for all
the body floats
for a reason maybe
we can swim right up
to it grab on
kick us back
to shore Peter I think
I'm doing it right
now finally maybe
I'm winning even
if it just looks like
my fingers are shaking

Skinny Dipping

some boys have ghosted from this high

but I wanna go down on you anyway to leap

from the bridge
I've made
of my wrongs look

they lied to us no one here was ever ugly look

if you see me then I prayed

correctly I leapt from the verb taking off

my best shirt this rag & rage a tulip too late

in summer's teeth like the blade

in a guillotine I won't

pick a side my name a past tense where I left

my hands for good oh it should be

enough to live & die alone with music on

your tongue to jump from anywhere & make it

home

to be warm & full of nothing oh

I kept my hope
-blue Vans on
this whole time

to distract you from my flat ass did it work oh

my people my people
I thought
the fall would

kill me but it only made me real

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Beautiful Short Loser

Stand back, I'm a loser on a winning streak.

I got your wedding dress on backward, playing air guitar in these streets.

I taste my mouth the most & what a blessing.

The most normal things about me are my shoulders. You've been warned.

Where I'm from it's only midnight for a second & the trees look like grandfathers laughing in the rain.

For as long as I can remember I've had a preference for mediocre bodies, including this one.

How come the past tense is always longer?

Is the memory of a song the shadow of a sound or is that too much?

Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I imagine Van Gogh singing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" into his cut ear & feeling peace.

Green voices in the rain, green rain in the voices.

Oh no. The sadness is intensifying. How rude.

Hey [knocks on my skull], can we go home now?

That one time Jaxson passed out beside a triple stack of jumbo pancakes at Denny's after top surgery.

I can't believe I lost my tits, he said a minute before, smiling through tears.

The sadness in him ends in me tonight.

It ends tonight! I shouted to the cop who pulled us over for dreaming.

I'm not high, officer, I just don't believe in time.

Tomorrow, partly cloudy with a chance.

I'm done talking, sir, I'm saying what I feel.

Inside my head, the war is everywhere.

I'm on the cliff of myself & these aren't wings, they're futures.

For as long as I can remember my body was the mayor's nightmare.

Now I'm a beautiful short loser dancing in the green.

You think I'll need a gun where we're going?

Can you believe my uncle worked at the Colt factory for fifteen years only to use a belt at the end?

Talk about discipline. Talk about good lord.

Maybe he saw that a small thing moving through a large thing is more like a bird in a cage than a word in the mouth.

Nobody's free without breaking open.

I'm not sad, he told me once, laughing, *I'm just always here*.

See, officer? Magic is real—we all disappear.

Why aren't you laughing?

No, not beauty—but you & I outliving it. Which is more so.

Somehow, I got me for days. Got this late light in the yard, leaving blood on the bone

-colored fence. This thrash of spring we drown in to stay awhile & mean it. I mean it when I say I'm mostly

male. That I recall every follicle in the failure the way they'll remember god after religion: alone, impossible & good.

I know. I know the room you've been crying in is called America.

I know the door is not invented yet.

Finally, after years, I'm now a professional loser.

I'm crushing it in losses. I'm mopping the floor where Jaxson's drain bags leaked on his way to bed.

I'm done talking, officer, I'm dancing in the rain with a wedding dress & it makes sense.

Because my uncle decided to leave this world, intact.

Because taking a piece of my friend away from him made him more whole.

Because where I'm from the trees look like family laughing in my head.

Because I am the last of my kind at the beginning of hope.

Because what I did with my one short beautiful life—was lose it

on a winning streak.

Old Glory

Knock 'em dead, big guy. Go in there guns blazing, buddy. You crushed at the show. No, it was a blowout. No, a massacre. Total overkill. We tore them a new one. My son's a beast. A lady-killer. Straight shooter, he knocked her up. A bombshell blonde. You'll blow them away. Let's bag the broad. Let's spit-roast the faggot. Let's fuck his brains out. That girl's a grenade. It was like Nam down there. I'd still slam it though. I'd smash it good. I'm cracking up. It's hilarious. You truly murdered. You had me dying over here. Bro, for real though, I'm dead.

You Guys

brushing my teeth at two in the morning I say over my shoulder you guys you guys I'm serious what are we going to make of this mess my voice muffled with wintergreen foam what are we going to do now that it hurts when I look at those I love like you two you who have been through so much together the thick & skin of it I'm proud of you both I say as the foam pinkens through my lips I'm told our blood is green but touches the world with endings my name a place where I've waited for collisions you guys are you listening I'm sorry for being useful only in language are you still with me I ask as I peer into the tub where I placed them gently down the two white rabbits I'd found on Harris St the way back from Emily's where we watched *American Dad!* on her mom's birthday her mom who would've been 56 this year we ate rocky road in bowls with blue tulips

I'm too tired she said

to be this happy

& we laughed without

moving our hands perhaps

the rabbits are lovers or sisters sometimes

it's hard to tell gender

from breathing

earlier I had scooped them

from the pavement

they were crushed but only

kinda one

had a dented half-face

the other's back flattened like

a courage sock

I cradled them wetly

in my sweatshirt but now

the tub is a red world save for the silent

island of fur flickering

in my fugitive words guys I say

just wait for me alright

just wait a bit longer I swear

I'll leave this place spotless

when I'm done I say

reaching back to

my wisdom teeth forgetting

it's been four years

since they're gone

Dear Sara

What's the point of writing if you're just gonna force a bunch of ants to cross a white desert?

—cousin sara, age 7

& if you follow these ants they'll lead you back to stone tablets an older desert where black bones once buried are now words where I wave to you at 2:34 am they survived the blast by becoming shrapnel embedded in my brain which is called learning but maybe I shouldn't talk like this maybe I should start over Sara I messed up I'm trying to stay clean but my hands are monsters who believe in magic Sara the throat is also an inkwell black oil wrung through your father's fingers after a day beneath the Buick say heartbreak & nothing will shatter say Stonehenge & watch the elephants sleep

like boulders blurred in Serengeti rain it doesn't have to make sense to be real—your aunt Rose gone two years now like a trick they forgot to finish & the air holds your voice as it holds its own vanishing maybe you are the true soldier ant hoarder of what's so massive it could crush you into a twitching comma Sara your name sharpens daily against the marble of your mother's teeth there are sparks in every calling & called we press our faces to the womb till we're jokes on our way to cracking up & maybe you're right little ant queen with your shoes the shade of dirty paper white desert your pink & blue pens untouched after all who can stare at so many ruins & call it reading this family of ants fossilized on the page you slam the book shut look out

at the leafless trees doused in red April rain where none of us are children long enough to love it

American Legend

So I was driving with my old man. The day wasted save for the cobalt haze closing around us. We were on our way to kill our dog, Susan. I mean, we had to bring her to the clinic to put her down, this murder or maybe they meant put her in the ground—though I knew Susan would be ashed in the incinerator out back. Puffs of smoke, little ghost poodles. Where was I going with this? Right—the car, the rain, the legend of joy & pain. My old man & I, the Ford big enough for us to never touch. & maybe I meant to make the hairpin turn too hard. & the thing flipped like a new law, going 80. Maybe I wanted, at last, to feel him against me—& it worked. As the colors spun through the windshield, wild metal clanking our shoulders, the sudden wetness warm

everywhere, he slammed into me & we hugged for the first time in decades. It was perfect & wrong, like money on fire. The skin around his neck so soft, his aftershave somehow summer. It lasted not a second but he was smiling, his teeth already half-gone, as if someone wiped them away to make room for something truer. Put it down on the page, son, he said one night, after telling me why he did what he did with his life, shitfaced on Hennessy. We were sitting at the kitchen table before his shift at the sock factory. His eyes: raindrops in a nightmare. I touched him, then let go. The car stopped rolling, we hung upside down as things dripped. Steam or breath. I did what any boy would do after getting exactly what he wanted: I kissed my father. He grinned I think. His pupils elsewhere. I reached back, unlatched the cage. The dog stepped out, sniffed my old man, still warm, then ran

into the trees, into her second future. I walked from the wreck till the yards became years, the dirt road a city, until my face became this face & the rain washed the gasoline clean from my fingers. I found a payphone in the heart of the poem & called you collect to say all this knowing it won't make a difference, only more. So hello, hi, the blood inside my hands is now inside the world. Words, the prophets tell us, destroy nothing they can't rebuild. I did it to hold my father, to free my dog. It's an old story, Ma, anyone can tell it.

The Last Dinosaur

When they ask me what it's like, I tell them imagine being born in a hospice in flames. As my relatives melted, I stood on one leg, raised my arms, shut my eyes & thought: *tree tree as* death passed me—untouched. I didn't know god saw in us a failed attempt at heaven. Didn't know my eyes had three shades of white but only one image of my mother. She's standing under an ancient redwood, sad that her time on earth is all she owns. O human, I'm not mad at you for winning but that you never wished for more. Emperor of language, why didn't you master *No* without forgetting Yes? Sure, we can make out if you want, but I'm warning you it's a lot. Sometimes I think gravity was like: *To be brutally honest* . . . & then never stopped talking. I guess what I mean is that I ate the apple not because the man lied when he said I was born of his rib but that I wanted to fill myself with its hunger for the ground, where the bones of my people still dream of me. I bet the light on this page isn't invented yet. I bet you never guessed that my ass was once a small-town wonder. That the triceratops went nuts when I danced. How once, after weeks of drought, I walked through my brother's laughter just to feel the rain. O wind-broke wanderer, widow of hope & ha-has. O sister, dropped seed—help me— I was made to die but I'm here to stay.

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Rise & Shine

Scraped the last \$8.48 from the glass jar.
Your day's worth of tips

at the nail salon. Enough for one hit. Enough to be good

till noon but these hands already blurring. The money a weird

hummingbird caught in my fingers. I take out the carton of eggs. Crack

four yolks into a day
-white bowl, spoon
the shells. Scallions hiss

in oil. A flick of fish sauce, garlic crushed the way you

taught me. The pan bubbling into a small possible sun. I am

a decent son. Salt & pepper. A sprig

of parsley softened

in steam. Done, the plate fogs its own ghosts. I draw a smiley face

on a napkin with purple marker. I lace my boots. It doesn't

work—so I tuck them in. Close the back door. Gently the birches sway but never

touch. The crickets unhinge their jaws in first light, last

syllables crackling like a pipe steady over a blue flame

as footsteps dim down a dawn-gold road & your face

at the window a thumbprint left over from whose god?

The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica

It's true I'm all talk & a French tuck but so what. Like the wind, I ride my own life. Neon light electric in the wet part of roadkill on the street where I cut my teeth on the good sin. I want to take care of our planet because I need a beautiful graveyard. It's true I'm not a writer but a faucet underwater. When the flood comes I'll raise my hand so they know who to shoot. The sky flashes. The sea yearns. I myself am hell. Everyone's here. Sometimes I go to parties just to dangle my feet out of high windows, among people. This boy crying in his car after his shift at McDonald's on Easter Sunday. The way he wipes his eyes with his shirt as the big trucks blare off the interstate. My favorite kind of darkness is the one inside us, I want to tell him. &: I like the way your apron makes it look like you're ready for war. I too am ready for war. Given another chance, I'd pick the life where I play the piano in a room with no roof. Broken keys, Bach sonata like footsteps fast down the stairs as

my father chases my mother through New England's endless leaves. Maybe I saw a boy in a black apron crying in a Nissan the size of a monster's coffin & knew I could never be straight. Maybe, like you, I was one of those people who loves the world most when I'm rock-bottom in my fast car going nowhere.

Dear T

on my desk this field of snow where you're lying too still all I have to do is write the right words & I'm

> beside you (again) but all these letters &

> > nothing says your face—fashioned from nouns muscular inflection bones

hardened with the alphabet's reduction see? a flick of my wrist & a house rises from the snow

a wide porch—like you wanted—sunflowers in the front yard

late afternoon light on the latticed apple pie

a bed with cloud-white blankets & a fireplace that won't

look—a bit of ink on the pad & we're running down the street again after the thunderstorm

platelets still plenty

in veins beneath your cheek: green branches in a sunset sky which is almost

impossible—is too much so I scratch it out I make laughter instead make a song on the radio that erupts

into static the moment I enter your throat opening into *Whoa* but let me spell out

these m-a-p-l-e-s just right so we'll have a few more seconds

in the shade
look you say the trees
are falling they're being
axed down

pressed into white fields or tax forms or discharge papers or you won't stop coughing up blood maybe

we should go home now you say my father will kill me I haven't told my father

I'm on it I'm on it all

it's all over now stay

a little longer I say but your voice is already pieces

your grin peeling off
in dusted sheets & I saw
this coming: each night the pen gets so far
& runs out of

nights you write the letter dear you & it doesn't work so you write the poem but the birds are just holes in the gunshot

sky oh man the aubade left to rot into afternoon when every word

was forgotten as soon as the hand moved across the page away

from the car crash
but we deserve more than this you said this
is only the beginning each night
the same snowfields

crushed & littered across the room maybe I can build a boy

out of the silences inside maybe we can cease without dying fuck without tears falling into the truck stop urinal & we're just too tired to walk home we're just two boys lying

in the snow & you're smiling because the stars are just stars & you know

we'll only live once this time

Waterline

If I should wake & the Ark the Ark already gone

If there was one shivering thing at my side

If the snow in his hair was all that was left

of the fire

If we ran through the orchard with our mouths wide open

& still too small for amen

If I nationed myself in the shadow of a colossal wave

If only to hold on by opening by kingdom come

give me this one eighth day

let me enter this nearly-gone *yes*

the way death enters anything fully without a trace

Not Even

Hey.

I used to be a fag now I'm a checkbox.

The pen tip jabbed in my back, I feel the mark of progress.

I will not dance alone in the municipal graveyard at midnight, blasting sad songs on my phone, for nothing.

I promise you, I was here. I felt things that made death so large it was indistinguishable from air—and I went on destroying inside it like wind in a storm.

The way Lil Peep says *I'll be back in the mornin'* when you know how it ends.

The way I kept dancing when the song was over, because it freed me.

The way the streetlight blinks twice, before waking up for its night shift, like we do.

The way we look up and whisper *Sorry* to each other, the boy and I, when there's teeth.

When there's always teeth, on purpose.

When I threw myself into gravity and made it work. Ha.

I made it out by the skin of my griefs.

I used to be a fag now I'm lit. Ha.

Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brooklyn for an "artsy vibe," a young woman said, sipping her drink, *You're so lucky. You're gay plus you get to write about war and stuff. I'm just white.* [Pause] *I got nothing.* [Laughter, glasses clinking]

Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold.

Our sorrow Midas touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow.

Unlike feelings, blood gets realer when you feel it.

I'm trying to be real but it costs too much.

They say the earth spins and that's why we fall but everyone knows it's the music.

It's been proven difficult to dance to machine-gun fire.

Still, my people made a rhythm this way. A way.

My people, so still, in the photographs, as corpses.

My failure was that I got used to it. I looked at us, mangled under the *Time* photographer's shadow, and stopped thinking, *get up*, *get up*.

I saw the graveyard steam in the pinkish dawn and knew the dead were still breathing. Ha.

If they come for me, take me out.

What if it wasn't the crash that made us, but the debris?

What if it was meant this way: the mother, the lexicon, the line of cocaine on the mohawked boy's collarbone in an East Village sublet in 2007?

What's wrong with me, Doc? There must be a pill for this.

Because the fairy tales were right. You'll need sorcery to make it out of here.

Long ago, in another life, on an Amtrak through Iowa, I saw, for a few blurred seconds, a man standing in the middle of a field of winter grass, hands at his sides, back to me, all of him stopped there save for his hair scraped by low wind.

When the countryside resumed its wash of gray wheat, tractors, gutted barns, black sycamores in herdless pastures, I started to cry. I put my copy of Didion's *The White Album* down and folded a new dark around my head.

The woman beside me stroked my back, saying, in a midwestern accent that wobbled with tenderness, *Go on son. You get that out now. No shame in breakin' open. You get that out and I'll fetch us some tea.* Which made me lose it even more.

She came back with Lipton in paper cups, her eyes nowhere blue and there. She was silent all the way to Missoula, where she got off and said, patting my knee, *God is good*. *God is good*.

I can say it was gorgeous now, my harm, because it belonged to no one else.

To be a dam for damage. My shittyness will not enter the world, I thought, and quickly became my own hero.

Do you know how many hours I've wasted watching straight boys play video games?

Enough.

Time is a mother.

Lest we forget, a morgue is also a community center.

In my language, the one I recall now only by closing my eyes, the word for *love* is *Yêu*.

And the word for weakness is Yếu.

How you say what you mean changes what you say.

Some call this prayer, I call it watch your mouth.

Rose, I whispered as they zipped my mother in her body bag, *get out of there*.

Your plants are dying.

Enough is enough.

Time is a motherfucker, I said to the gravestones, alive, absurd.

Body, doorway that you are, be more than what I'll pass through.

Stillness. That's what it was.

The man in the field in the red sweater, he was so still he became, somehow, more true, like a knife wound in a landscape painting.

Like him, I caved.

I caved and decided it will be joy from now on. Then everything opened. The lights blazed around me into a white weather

and I was lifted, wet and bloody, out of my mother, into the world, screaming

and enough.

Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker

Mar.

Advil (ibuprofen), 4 pack Sally Hansen Pink Nail Polish, 6 pack Clorox Bleach, industrial size Diane hair pins, 4 pack Seafoam handheld mirror "I Love New York" T-shirt, white, small

Apr.

Nongshim Ramen Noodle Bowl, 24 pack Cotton Balls, 100 count "Thank You For Your Loyalty" cards, 30 count Toluene POR-15 40404 Solvent, 1 quart UV LED Nail Lamp Cuticle Oil, value pack Clear Acrylic Nail Tips, 500 count

May

Advil (ibuprofen), 4 pack Vicks VapoRub, twin pack Portable Electric Nail Drill Salonpas Heat-Activated muscle patch, 40 count Lipstick, "Night Out Red" Little Debbie Chocolate Zebra Cakes, 4 boxes

Jun.

Large faux-clay planter pots, value set Carnation Condensed Milk, 6 pack Clear Nail Art Acrylic Liquid Powder Dish Bowl, 2 pcs Birthday Card—Son—Pop-up Mother and Son effect Nike Elite Basketball Shorts, men's small

Jul.

Saviland Holographic Gold Nail Powder, 6 colors Nescafé Taster's Choice Instant Coffee Advil (ibuprofen), 4 pack PIXNOR Pedicure Double-Sided Callus Remover Bengay Medicated Cream, 3 pack

Aug.

Newchic Ochre Summer Dress Floral Print, sz 6 Wrigley's Doublemint Gum, 8 pack Plastic Adirondack Lawn Chair, colonial blue

Sep.

Nail buffers and files, 10 pcs Coppertone Sunblock, 6 oz

Oct.

CozyNites Fleece Blanket, pink Sleep-Ease Melatonin caps, 90 count Icy Hot Maximum Strength pain relief pads

Nov.

Tampax, 24 count Faux-Resin Hair clips, 3 pack

Dec.

Advil (ibuprofen) Maximum Strength, 4 pack True-Gro Tulip Bulbs, 24 pcs

Jan.

Feb.

Healthline Compact Trigger Release Folding Walker Yankee Candle, Midsummer's Night, large jar

Mar.

Chemo-Glam cotton head scarf, sunrise pink White Socks, women's small, 12 pack

Apr.

Chemo-Glam cotton scarf, flower garden print "Warrior Mom" Breast Cancer awareness T-shirt, pink and white

May

Mueller 255 Lumbar Support Back Brace

Jun.

Birthday Card—"Son, We Will Always Be Together," Snoopy design

Jul.

Eternity Aluminum Urn, Dove and Rose engraved, small Perfect Memories picture frame, 8 x 11 in, black Burt's Bees lip balm, Honey, 1 pc

Aug.

Sep.

Easy-Grow Windowsill herb garden

Oct.

YourStory Customized Memorial Plaque, $10 \times 8 \times 4$ in Winter coat, navy blue, x-small

Nov.

Wool socks, grey, 1 pair

Nothing

We are shoveling snow, this man and I, our backs coming closer along the drive. It's so quiet every flake on my coat has a life. I used to cry in a genre no one read. What a joke, they said, on fire. There's no money in it, son, they shouted, smoke from their mouths. But ghosts say funny things when they're family. This man and I, we take what will vanish anyway and move it aside, making space. There is so much room in a person there should be more of us in here. Traveler who is inches away but never here, are you warm where you are? Are you you where you are? Something must come of this. In one of the rooms in the house the man and I share, a loaf of rye is rising out of itself, growing lighter as it takes up more of the world. In humans, we call this *Aging*. In bread, we call it *Proof*. We're in our thirties now and I rolled the dough just an hour ago, pushing my glasses up my nose with a flour-dusted palm as I read, reread, the hand-scrawled recipe given me by the man's grandmother, the one who, fleeing Stalin, bought a ticket from Vilnius to Dresden without thinking it would stop, it so happened, in Auschwitz (it was a town after all), where she and her brother were asked to get off by soldiers who whispered, keep moving, keep *moving*, like boys leading horses through wheat fields in the night. How she passed the huddled coats, how some were herded down barbed-wire lanes. The smoke from our mouths rising as the man and I bend and lift, in silence, the morning clear as one inside a snow globe. How can we know, with a house full of bread, that it's hunger, not people, that survives? He pours a bag of salt over the pavement. From where I'm standing it looks like light is spilling out of him, like the dusty sunray that found his grandmother's hands as she got back on the train, her brother at her side, smoke from the engine blown across the faces outside, which soon fall back to pine forests, washed pastures, empty houses with full rooms. The man clutches his stomach as if shot, the light floods out of him—I mean you. Because something must come of this. When the guard asked your grandmother if she was Jewish, she shook her head, half-lying, then took from her bag a roll, baked the night before, tucked it in the guard's chest pocket. She didn't look back as the train carried her, newly twenty, toward where I now stand, on a Sunday in Florence, Massachusetts, squinting at her faded scrawl: *sift flour, then beat eggs until happy-yellow.* The train will reach Dresden days before the sky is filled with firebombers. More smoke. A bullet or shrapnel, failing to find her. The brother under rubble, his name everywhere around her like the snow falling on your face forty years later, on December 2, 1984, while your mother carries you, alive only three hours, the few steps to the minivan where your grandmother, sixty now, crowns your head with her brother's name. Peter, she says, Peter, as if the dead could be called back into new, stunned bones. The snow has started up again, whitening the path as though nothing happened. But to live like a bullet, to touch people with such intention. To be born going one way, toward everything alive. To walk into the world you never asked for and choose a place where your wanting ends—which part of war do we owe this knowledge? It's warm in this house where we will die, you and I. Let the stanza be one room, then. Let it be big enough for everyone, even the ghosts rising now from this bread we tear open to see what we've made of each other. I know, we've been growing further apart, unhappy but half full. That clearing snow and baking bread will not fix this. I know, too, as I reach across the table to brush the leftover ice from your beard, that it's already water. It's nothing, you say, laughing for the first time in weeks. It's really nothing. And I believe you. I shouldn't, but I do.

Scavengers

Your body wakes

into its quiet rattle

Ropes & ropes

How quickly the animal

empties

We're alone again

with spent mouths

Two trout gasping

on a June shore

Side by side, I see

what I came for, behind

your iris: a tiny mirror

I stare

into its silver syllable

where a fish with my face

twitches once

then gones

The fisherman suddenly a boy

with too much to carry

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Künstlerroman

After walking forever through it all, I make it to the end.

The REWIND button flashes red __ red __ red.

I sit down and push the button. The screen flicks on, revealing a man in a pressed black suit sitting at the edge of a dirt road, staring into a Panasonic TV set from the '80s.

I watch him rise and walk backward, down the unmarked road, past the gutted mobile homes, empty concrete slabs crisscrossed with weeds, then through a pine grove littered with dead needles, which soon opens to a field of poppies, past a ravine choked with cars rusting from another century.

He walks backward through the night-green hills, hands in his pockets as the crescent moon, an empty boat, skims the sky.

He walks backward into town, up the steps of the grand hotel, into a hall crowded with crystal chandeliers, waiters with plates of caviar spoons, flutes of champagne. The room a kingdom of light.

The man is surrounded by merry people in fine dress. They whirl backward around him, faces flushed with opulence. The tie he wears (too big) is the one his cousin, Victor, gave him outside of Drew's package store, saying "You're a writer now, you should look like one" three weeks before Victor checked himself into the psych ward at Silver Hill.

One by one the people hand the man a book, the artifact of his thinking. He opens each one and, pen in hand, traces a deliberately affected, illegible signature, until the name, in red ink, evaporates. Everyone raises their

glasses, satisfied, mouths open as crickets start up around me, the screen flickering as the tape whirs.

I watch him walk backward through the crowd, alcohol flowing through their lips into glasses as he leaves the hall toward the empty streets, alone.

He walks as the sun rises, then falls, through days, weeks, then months.

He walks backward through airports, convention centers, dips into taxis, even a limousine, then a governor's mansion, through immaculate foyers of leather-embroidered divans and marble mantels, Tiffany lamps, polished granite counters, rooms just for "sitting" where no one ever sat. Fresh fruit piled in teak bowls set to rot.

The tape skips and I see, on the screen, a sheet of dust shoot up from the surface of a river, then gather into a cloud under a bridge, before funneling into the copper urn cradled in the man's arms.

His face looks unfinished. The man's little brother rests his head on the man's shoulder. In their oversize rented suits, they look like ambassadors from a country that no longer exists.

It is the country of sons.

//

I watch him leave another mansion in reverse, down a long driveway flanked with phlox and geraniums, down a mountain road at night, through towns whose names you hear only when a hurricane passes through, gas stations overgrown with ragweed and asters, past an alley wide as a gravestone, over gravel medians where somebody's sister was last captured on CCTV. I see him walk backward into a row house with eight satellite dishes jammed on the garage roof. The dark of a basement. The sound of

needle wrappers torn open, the occasional face from high school, thirty-twoed and sucked out under a two-second match.

A voice bashed against a wall turns to dust in his cochlea as the warmth of junk passes through him like a new spine. He can feel their laughter in his hands.

Cigarettes spark in the dark: fireflies in a bomb shelter.

He walks backward past the cornfield (where, at seven, he lost his dog, Cheetah, and sat for two hours in the corn crying) and picks up his suit jacket hung on a broken hydrant. He puts it on and continues backward toward his mother's house, where he kisses her on the cheek in a grimy kitchen, the \$50 bill going from his hand to hers, then back into her bra. He heads up the stairs, into the bathroom, and lets the vomit in the sink rise to his mouth. Snot back up his nose. Hands shaking.

//

The tape skips—I see him lying on the floor in a dimly lit room, eyes shut, the dark wetness at his starched collar drying back to tears, the tears crawling up his cheeks.

He blows his nose, rises to his knees, hands over his face. A framed medal, an ornate award, slides into his arms. He kisses it, searches the glass for his face, then gets up, flicks on the lights.

He's in a dressing room, surrounded by mirrors. His red, wet eyes on every wall.

He walks backward through double doors, shafts of light, the award tucked under his arm. Through a foyer, down a wide linoleum hall, reporters flanking him, cameras, forced grins, stiff handshakes, half hugs, then he backs onto the wing of a stage in the baroque opera house. The crowd roars mutely, the award raised with both arms, its gold edges glimmering under clinical houselights. His heart a fish tossed into the wooden boat inside him.

The tape skips and I see him go backward out of the Stop & Shop in Hartford, the one that starts to crumble, brick by brick, as he gets further away. Bulldozers, men in hard hats—until it's razed to the ground, then replaced by larger, irregular stones, until it becomes the walls of a century-old church, the steeple rising under the wrecking ball's touch. Pieces of stained glass gather into Saint Francis's haloed face.

He walks backward into the church, where Kelvin's casket glows in the dusky light. Mothers and grandmas with heads bowed. But what he wants, or rather, what I want for him, doesn't happen: underneath Kelvin's button-up, the stitched pink eye in his chest, just above his right lung, doesn't open, the .45-caliber shell doesn't come out, won't suspend itself in Sunday's air, won't make an obedient return to the barrel, splinter into lead, polymer, iron, elements, the ash of a star ejected from a cosmos into this one.

Kelvin doesn't sit up in his casket to kiss his father, Mr. Rios, on the forehead when the man hobbles back to take the Tonka truck from his nineteen-year-old boy's hands.

//

The dictator on TV, the noose removed from his neck as the world watches. The dictator crawling backward into the hole in the ground, his face a crumpled law.

I keep my finger on REWIND, like a good citizen, and the man in the suit keeps running backward through the narrative—that is, the knowledge—I've forced on him.

Summer approaches spring as he walks backward, freshly eighteen, into a motel room off Route 4, where his clothes come off like bandages. Where he lies very still on the lumpy bed beside a soldier, just back from the desert, where he left his right ear. The light from the street falls into the hollow where the ear once was, making a medallion of gold on the side of the man's head. The boy runs his tongue across it and waits to be forgiven.

On the wall, the shadows of their erections fall, then rise. We are rare in goodness, and rarer still in joy. Their clothes return to them, like crumpled laws.

He walks backward as the soldier walks backward. They smile at each other until both are out of sight. The night returns to itself, less whole. The Maybelle Auto marquee a beacon in the fog.

//

And the tanks roll out of Iraq, the women backing away from their dead, rags over their mouths.

Books disintegrate to trees as the tape roll thins. The trees rise to their feet. The drugs leave the veins of four friends in the Mazda, the car flipping nine times on I-84 and landing on its wheels, their necks re-boned to their lives as they sing Ja Rule and Ashanti's "Mesmerize," eyes shut in a freshman high.

The boy sitting at a desktop computer as, one by one, the words, often accompanied by unsolicited dick pics, vanish from AOL Chat screens.

asl? stats?
are you a virgin?
can you meet now?
are you down?
are you Asian or are you normal?
can I be your dad for an hour?

do you know how 2 love yet?
i can get a room
u can do ur homework while i work on that ass
are you there?
hey i won't hurt you
call me
faggot
I need you
fuck you

All of it draining back into binary code.

Then the gypsum, calcite, plaster, and lead particles rise from the pavement in massive billowing clouds, and the North Tower reconstructs itself and September's clear and blue again, and the people float up, arms open, to stand looking out of windows in good suits, in good bones.

And the tulips raise their heads, their chins high along the courthouse lawn.

//

The tape scrambles and I see the boy dancing with his mother in the front yard in the '97 nor'easter, snow floating back up the sky as he twirls under her shadow—cast larger than life by sodium lights. The flakes going up to thicken god's pillow for his never-ending sleep.

The ice retreats, the ground beneath him red and ochre as if an enormous mammal had been opened at his feet. And the leaves rush in the gusts, attach themselves, by thousands, to oak branches across the yard. His mother, at the window, lifts her head from her hands, eyes drying.

I see the boy walk backward into his house, ease his mother down on the kitchen tiles. His father's fist retracts from her nose, whose shape realigns like a fixed glitch. If I slowed it down here, I might mistake the man's knuckles for a caress, as if soothing something with the back of his hand so it won't fall apart.

The cake on the table, air returning to the boy's pursed lips as the seven candles, one by one, begin to light, and the wish returns to his head where it's truer for never being touched by language.

I am starting to root for him, on his way to dust.

//

The tape skips to the family howling, ecstatic on the front lawn, their arms waving in a summer night. The son, clutching his stuffed Elmo, runs in circles as they all head inside, where the mother picks up the phone: she's gotten a job at the clock factory in Meriden.

The Hubble telescope swoops the other way. Halley's Comet shoots back behind the trees as the Humvees roll, again, into Iraq.

He walks backward past an empty carnival where a tobacco field had greened a few months back. It's the day after the Tri-County Fair, I can tell, where all that remains of October are sunken pumpkins along the road to the city jail, and the clowns sweating on stools behind their trailers wiping away makeup in pie-tin mirrors.

The cornfield husked and rattling in the breeze, the highway beyond the pines with its air of gasoline and burned rubber. He walks backward—though there's so little time left to destroy. Backward until he bowls over, on his hands and knees. Until he's crawling on his belly almost like a soldier with a missing ear, his grey Champion hoodie browning in blotches, until soot appears on his cheeks and neck. His jeans fall away in crisp pieces as he drags himself down the road where he made his name. A thin line of blood lights along his jaw.

I press PAUSE here but nothing stops because my hands are his hands.

And all that's left are his tattered boxers as he crawls backward, half-naked, arms covered in cuts, toward the smoke rising from the ditch by Risley Road.

When he gets there, he slips his feet through the Mazda's mangled rear window, fastens the seat belt, turns his head toward the shattered window and waits for the glass to reassemble, for the friends in the front seat to sing again, here at the end.

Reasons for Staying

October leaves coming down, as if called.

Morning fog through the wildrye beyond the train tracks.

A cigarette. A good sweater. On the sagging porch. While the family sleeps.

That I woke at all & the hawk up there thought nothing of its wings.

That I snuck onto the page while the guards were shitfaced on codeine.

That I read my books by the light of riotfire.

That my best words came farthest from myself & it's awesome.

That you can blow a man & your voice speaks through his voice.

Like Jonah through the whale.

Because a blade of brown rye, multiplied by thousands, makes a purple field.

Because this mess I made I made with love.

Because they came into my life, these ghosts, like something poured.

Because crying, believe it or not, did wonders.

Because my uncle never killed himself—but simply died, on purpose.

Because I made a promise.

That the McDonald's arch, glimpsed from the 2 am rehab window off Chestnut, was enough.

That mercy is small but the earth is smaller.

Summer rain hitting Peter's bare shoulders.

The *ptptptptptptpt* of it.

Because I stopped apologizing into visibility.

Because this body is my last address.

Because right now, just before morning, when it's blood-blue & the terror incumbent.

Because the sound of bike spokes heading home at dawn was unbearable.

Because the hills keep burning in California.

Through red smoke, singing. Through the singing, a way out.

Because only music rhymes with music.

The words I've yet to use: timothy grass, jeffrey pine, celloing, cocksure, light-lusty, midnight-green, gentled, water-thin, lord (as verb), russet, pewter, lobotomy.

The night's worth of dust on his upper lip.

Barnjoy on the cusp of winter.

The broken piano under a bridge in Windsor that sounds like footsteps when you play it.

The Sharpied sign outside the foreclosed house: SEEKING CAT FRIEND, PLEASE KNOCK FOR KAYLA.

The train whistle heard through an opened window after a nightmare.

My mother, standing at the mirror, putting on blush before heading to chemo.

Sleeping in the back seat, leaving the town that broke me, whole.

Early snow falling from a clear, blushed sky.

As if called.

$|\vee|$

Ars Poetica as the Maker

And God saw the light and it was good.

—GENESIS 1:4

Because the butterfly's yellow wing flickering in black mud

was a word

stranded by its language.

Because no one else

was coming—& I ran

out of reasons.

So I gathered fistfuls

of ash, dark as ink,

hammered them

into marrow, into

a skull thick

enough to keep

the gentle curse

of dreams. Yes, I aimed

for mercy—

but came only close

as building a cage

around the heart. Shutters

over the eyes. Yes,

I gave it hands

despite knowing

that to stretch that clay slab into five blades of light,

I would go

too far. Because I, too,

needed a place

to hold me. So I dipped

my fingers back

into the fire, pried open

the lower face

until the wound widened

into a throat,

until every leaf shook silver with that god

-awful scream

& I was done.

& it was human.

Toy Boat

for Tamir Rice

yellow plastic black sea

eye-shaped shard on a darkened map

no shores now to arrive—or depart no wind but this waiting which moves you

as if the seconds could be entered & never left

toy boat—oarless each wave a green lamp outlasted

toy boat toy leaf dropped from a toy tree waiting

waiting

as if the sparrows thinning above you are not already pierced by their names

The Punctum

According to the Smithsonian, from 1830 to 1935, there were over 350 poorly documented lynchings in California, the victims being mostly of Mexican, Chinese, and Native American descent.

There is sunlight here, golden enough to take to the bank. There are daffodils and sweetgrass. We have made this for you with our hands. Look at our hands, they say. There is nothing to hide. But you look closer and see, in the photo, a shadow staining the ground, over the sepia flowers, attached to no one. A hole in the dirt. And you wonder if it's an entrance or maybe the mark of something higher, something already leaving, on wings. Yes, it's just a bird, they say. A smudge of flight, defects in the camera. A product of its time. This is all a product of the times. Look at the sunlight, they say. How it falls right through. Some things are hidden in plain sight. Look, there was so much space back then. And you do look. You look and you look and it's true. There is so much air to be answered for. But your eyes return to the one black moon fallen on the ground. Life-size period unspoken for. How faithful the memory of a shadow, you think. How you can almost see the author of its curve. Now, if you could please look directly above you, they say. There is still the sky. Blue as the single eye pressed down on us. There is nothing to hide under all this sun. And your hand moves to your throat, to make sure you are still the speaker, that English is still your reckoned wreck. That it hasn't pooled into an ink-dark puddle at your feet. You feel for your throat because history has proven the skull lodged in the gravedigger's hands is often the one behind your face. But these are marigolds, they say. And these the horses. We have retouched them for your viewing pleasure. We have touched and retouched. Now, if you would come this way, they say, there is so much more to see.

Tell Me Something Good

You are standing in the minefield again. Someone who is dead now

told you it is where you will learn to dance. Snow on your lips like a salted

cut, you leap between your deaths, black as god's periods. Your arms cleaving

the wind. You are something made, then made to survive—which means you are somebody's son.

Which means if you open your eyes, you'll be back in that house, under a blanket printed with yellow sailboats.

Your mother's boyfriend, bald head ringed with red hair, a planet on fire, kneeling

by your bed again. Air of whiskey & crushed Oreos. Snow falling through the window: ash returned

from a failed fable. His spilled-ink hand on your chest. & you keep dancing inside the minefield—

motionless. The curtains fluttering. Honeyed light beneath the door. His breath. His wet blue face: earth

spinning in no one's orbit. & you want someone to say *Hey* . . . *Hey, I think your dancing is gorgeous*. *A two-step to die for,*

darling. You want someone to say all this is long ago. That one night, very soon, you'll pack a bag

with your favorite paperback & your mother's .45, that the surest shelter was always the thoughts

above your head. That it's fair—it has to be—how our hands hurt us, then give us

the world. How you can love the world until there's nothing left to love

but yourself. Then you can stop.
Then you can walk away—back into the fog

-walled minefield, where the vein in your neck adores you to zero. You can walk away. You can be nothing

& still breathing. Believe me.

No One Knows the Way to Heaven

but we keep walking anyway.

When you get here it will be different

but we'll use the same words.

You will look & look—& see only

the world. Well, here's

the world, small

& large as a father.

I am not

yet your father. I tried

to speak this morning

but the voice only went far

as my fingers. Can you see it

now?

For the first time in weeks

I saw my reflection in the

cup of coffee

& kept drinking anyway.

Strange, what a face can do

to a face. Like once,

I let a man spit in my mouth

because my eyes wouldn't water

after Evan shot himself

in his sister's chicken coop.

The chickens long

gone. I had been

looking for a sound to change

the light in the room.

But all I could find

was a man. His bright spit. I

lifted

my tongue as he stood

above me.

My jaw a ransacked

drawer.

I said Please,

'cause I'm a cold man

who believes every bit

of warmth should be saved

& savored. It's alright—

no one can punish us

now. Not even

the speaker.

I am wrong often—but not enough to forget you. You

who are not yet born. Who will

always be what remains after I build my Ark

out of everything

I lost.

Because when a man & a man

walk hand in hand into a bar

the joke's on us.

Because when a man & a man make

love, they make

only love. There's enough

for you, but not enough

for you. You indistinguishable

from rain. Rain: to give

something a name

just to watch it fall. What

will I name you?

Are you a boy or a girl

or a translation of crushed water? It doesn't matter. Maybe extinction

is temporary. Rain as it

touches ground.

Hey, maybe I'm right here.

Your dad

is right here. I'll leave the rest
of this blank
& when you get here, I'll tell you
everything. When
you get here, I'll show you
this incredible thing
we can do to mirrors
just by standing still.

Almost Human

It's been a long time since my body. Unbearable, I put it down on the earth the way my old man rolled dice. It's been a long time since time. But I had weight back there. Had substance & sinew, damage you could see by looking between your hands & hearing blood. It was called reading, they told me, too late. But too late. I red. I made a killing in language & was surrounded by ghosts. I used my arsenal of defunct verbs & broke into a library of second chances, the ER. Where they bandaged my head, even as the black letters kept seeping through, like this. Back there. I couldn't get the boys to look at me even in my best jean jacket. It was 2006 or 1865 or .327. What a time to be alive! they said, this time louder, more assault rifles. Did I tell you? I come from a people of sculptors whose masterpiece was rubble. We tried. Indecent, tongue-tied, bowl-cut & diabetic, I had a feeling. The floorboards creaked as I wept motionless by the rehab window. If words, as they claimed, had no weight in our world, why did we keep sinking, Doctor—I mean Lord—why did the water swallow our almost human hands

as we sang? Like this.

Dear Rose

I have known the body of my mother, sick and then dying.—ROLAND BARTHES

Let me begin again now that you're gone Ma if you're reading this then you survived your life into this one if you're reading this then the bullet doesn't know us yet but I know Ma you can't read napalm fallen on your

schoolhouse at six & that was it they say a word is only what it signifies that's how I know the arrowhead in my back means I'm finally pretty a word like bullet hovers in an amber

afternoon on its way to
meaning the book opens like
a door but the only one you
ever read was a coffin its
hinges swung shut on lush descriptions
of a brother I point to
you to me today a Thursday I
took a long walk alone it

didn't work kept stopping

to touch my shadow just in case feeling is the only truth & there down there between thumb & forefinger an ant racing in circles then zigzags I wanted significance but think it was just the load he was bearing

that unhinged him: another ant curled & cold lifted on his shoulders they looked like a set of quotations missing speech it's said they can carry over 5,000 times their mass but it's often bread crumbs not brothers that get carried home but going too far

is to admit the day ends anywhere but here no no Mom this is your name I say pointing to Hồng on the birth certificate thin as dust Hồng I say which means rose I place your finger on a flower so familiar it feels synthetic red plastic petals dewed with glue I leave

it out of my poems I turn from its face—clichéd oversize head frayed at the edges like something ruptured by a bullet I was born because you were starving but how can anything be found with only two hands

with only two hands you dumped a garbage bag of anchovies into the glass jar the day was harmless a breeze hovering in amber light above us gray New England branches swayed without touching to make fish sauce you said you must bear the scent of corpses salted & crushed a year in a jar tall

as a boy they dropped with slick thumps like bullets each word must stop somewhere—why not a yellow poet I put in the fish sauce I take out the fish sauce I dance on the line until I am the line they cross or cross out they nearly killed me

you said for being white with a toilet plunger you pushed the fish down sound of bones like gravel the violet vein on your wrist glistened your father was a white soldier I had amber hair you said they called me traitor called me ghost girl they smeared my face with cow shit

at the market to make me brown like you & your father the eyes glared from inside the jar they shot my brother you said looking down but away from the dead eyes my little brother if reading is to live in two worlds at once why

is he not here Ben said you can do anything in a poem so I stepped right out of it into this one to be entered is to be redefined the bullet achieves its name by pushing flesh into flesh I was struck by these words we say I was caught by this passage it moved right through opened

me up these eyes reading not yet healed shut but full of lead -en meaning which parts a red sea inside me sinew dusted to soft tissue my blood a borderless translation of errors in the reader's hands a gaping rose Hồng I say which also means

pink the shade every bullet meets before finding its truest self Calvino said human instinct is to laugh when someone falls the soldiers were cracking up as they fired your brother running his sky -blue shirt pink on the ground our evolution as hunters Calvino went on

the collapsed body a signal of meat thus hunger leads to lethal joy it's almost perfect you smiled your nose deep in the jar because the bullet makes you real by making you less which is perfect in poems the text amplified by murder

-ous deletions leads to inevitable art the pristine prisoner in his marble coffin the length of a fish a timeline across the page to document days the dead a measurement of living distance the corpse blooming

as it decays Pink Rose Hồng Mom are you reading this dear reader are you my mom yet I cannot find her without you this place I've made you can't enter within months their meat will melt into brown mucus rot almost -sauce the linear fish-spine dissolved

by time at last pungent scent of ghosts you said you named me after a body of water 'cause it's the largest thing you knew after god I stare at the silvered layers the shadowed line between two pressed fish is a finger in the dark gently remembered in the dark his finger

on my lips Ma his shhh
your friend the man watching me
while you worked the late
shift in the Timex clock factory why
am I thinking this now the gasped throats
mottled pocked fins gently the door its blade
of amber light widening as it opened
shhh it sounds like an animal

being drowned as you churned the jar your yellow-white arms pink fish guts foaming up gently you must remember gently the man he's in the '90s still his face a black rose closing do you know what it's like my boy my boy you said sweating above the jar

to be the only one hated the only one the white enemy of your own country your own face the trees they were roaring above us red leaves leaving little cuts in the sky gently I touched your elbow the fish swirling in their gone merry-go-round

sightless eyes no no Ma I said
holding my breath I don't know
what it's like & turned
my head up toward the sun
which brightly cancels
if you're reading this then
I survived my life into yours
you who told your brother you were hungry

so he stole a roasted chicken so he tucked it under his sky -blue shirt & it's not your fault reader you had to work you had to get up in the blood-blue dawn to warm up your car you who held instant coffee with both hands ate your lunch of Wonder Bread dipped in condensed milk in the parking lot alone you bought me pencils reader I could not speak so I wrote myself into silence where I stood waiting for you Ma to read me do you read me now do you copy mayday mayday you who dreamed of dipping shreds of chicken

into fish sauce as you hid in the caves above your village you white devil girl starving ghost but I shouldn't have been so hungry you said looking up at the leaves vermilion through the brother -blue sky I hated my hunger the veins on your fists the jar all amber crush

empty as a word
-less mind stop writing
about your mother they said
but I can never take out
the rose it blooms back as my own
pink mouth how
can I tell you this when you're always
to the right of meaning

as it pushes you further into white space how can I say the hole in your brother's back is not a part of your brother but your brother aparted who is still somewhere running because I wrote it in the present tense the bullet held just behind his death an insect trapped in amber the charred chicken clutched to his chest dust rising from sandals as he sprints toward the future where you're waiting by the rain -warped window wet footsteps on Risley Rd but dear reader it's only your son coming home

again after school after
the bullies put his face in brown
dirt what if I said the fastest
finger pointing to you Ma
is me would you look away
I point to you no no I went right
through you left a pink rose blazing
in the middle of the hospital

in Sài Gòn reader who cannot read or write you wrote a son into the world with no words but a syllable so much like a bullet its heat fills you today a Thursday (ours not Vallejo's) partly

cloudy a little wind I
kneel to write
our names on the sidewalk
& wait for the letters to
signal a future an
arrow pointing to a way
out I stare & stare
until it grows too dark to

read the ant & his brother long home by now night flooding the concrete black my arms dim as incomplete sentences reader I've plagiarized my life to give you the best of me & these words these

insects anchovies bullets salvaged & exiled by art Ma my art these corpses I lay side by side on the page to tell you our present tense was not too late

Woodworking at the End of the World

In a field, after everything, a streetlamp shining on a patch of grass.

Having just come back to life, I lay down under its warmth & waited for a way.

That's when the boy appeared, lying next to me.

He was wearing a Ninja Turtles t-shirt from another era, the colors faraway.

I recognized his eyes: black buttons salvaged from the coat I used to cover my mother's face, at the end.

Why do you exist? I wanted to know.

I felt the crickets around us but couldn't hear them.

A chapel on the last day of war.

That's how quiet he was.

The town I had walked from was small & American.

If I stayed on my knees, it would keep all my secrets.

When we heard the woodcutters coming closer, destroying the past to build the future, the boy started to cry. But the voice, the voice that came out was an old man's.

I reached into my pocket but the gun was gone.

I must've dropped it while burying my language farther up the road.

It's okay, the boy said at last. *I forgive you*.

Then he kissed me as if returning a porcelain shard to my cheek.

Shaking, I turned to him. I turned & found, crumpled on the grass, the faded red shirt.

I put it over my face & stayed very still—like my mother at the end.

Then it came to me, my life. I remembered my life the way an ax handle, mid-swing, remembers the tree.

& I was free.

Notes & Acknowledgments

The epigraph on page ix is from César Vallejo's "Agape." *The Black Heralds*, Lima Penitentiary printing press, 1919. Translated by Rebecca Seiferle, Copper Canyon Press, 2003.

In "The Last Dinosaur" the configuration "How once, after weeks of drought" is borrowed from Eduardo C. Corral's poem, "*Our Completion*: Oil on Wood: Tino Rodríguez: 1999."

"The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica": The lines "The sky flashes. The sea / yearns" and "I myself / am hell. Everyone's here" are lifted and altered from John Berryman and Robert Lowell, respectively.

"Not Even" refers to a line from Lil Peep's "Star Shopping."

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About the Author

Ocean Vuong is the author of the critically acclaimed poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and the *New York Times* bestselling novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. A recipient of the 2019 MacArthur "Genius Grant," he is also the winner of the Whiting Award and the T. S. Eliot Prize. His writings have been featured in *The Atlantic, Harper's Magazine, The Nation, The New Republic, The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. Born in Saigon, Vietnam, he currently lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.



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