

NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS

OCEAN WUONG

*Dear god, if you are a season, let it be the one I passed through
to get here.*

Here. That's all I wanted to be.

I promise.



Ocean Vuong's first full-length collection aims straight for the perennial "big"—and very human—subjects of romance, family, memory, grief, war, and melancholia. None of these he allows to overwhelm his spirit or his poems, which demonstrate, through breath and cadence and unrepentant enthrallment, that a gentle palm on a chest can calm the fiercest hungers.

"His name is Ocean. His obsessions are love, family, violence, the sacred, the erotic, maleness and femininity. His mode is ecstatic. His voice is now a choir, and now solo. And he tries to make sense of human suffering by allowing his personal suffering to connect him to every other fallen, broken, wounded member of our world. What a treasure he is to us. What a perfume he's crushed and rendered of his heart and soul. What a gift this book is." —Li-Young Lee

**A LANNAN
LITERARY
SELECTION** *Funding the publication
and distribution of
exceptional literary works*

POETRY \$16
ISBN 978-155659-495-3

COPPER CANYON PRESS



Author photo: Peter Bienkowski
Book: Jonathan Di-Ji Evansworth, L.



NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS

OCEAN WUONG

ALSO BY OCEAN WUONG

No

Burnings

OCEAN WUONG

NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS



COPPER CANYON PRESS
PORT TOWNSEND, WASHINGTON

CONTENTS

Threshold
3

Telemachus
7

Trojan
9

Aubade with Burning City
10

A little Closer to the Edge
13

Immigrant Haibun
14

Always & Forever
17

My Father Writes from Prison
19

Headfirst
20

Copyright 2016 by Ocean Vuong

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Cover art courtesy of the author

Copper Canyon Press is in residence at Fort Worden State Park in Port Townsend, Washington, under the auspices of Centrum. Centrum is a gathering place for artists and creative thinkers from around the world, students of all ages and backgrounds, and audiences seeking extraordinary cultural enrichment.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Vuong, Ocean, 1988– author.

Title: Night sky with exit wounds / Ocean Vuong.

Description: Port Townsend, Washington : Copper Canyon Press, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015038100

Classification: LCC PS3622.U96 A6 2016 | DDC 811/.6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015038100>

ISBN13: 978-1-55659-495-3

98765

Copper Canyon Press

Post Office Box 271

Port Townsend, Washington 98368

www.coppercanyonpress.org

In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to
a Beached Dolphin's Wet Back

22

The Gift

24

Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds

26

Thanksgiving 2006

31

Homewrecker

32

Of Thee I Sing

33

Because It's Summer

35

Into the Breach

37

Anaphora as Coping Mechanism

40

Seventh Circle of Earth

41

vi

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

43

Eurydice

47

Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas:
Mark Rothko: 1952

49

Queen Under The Hill

50

Torso of Air

55

Prayer for the Newly Damned

56

To My Father / To My Future Son

57

Det(nation)

60

Ode to Masturbation

61

Notebook Fragments

68

vii

The Smallest Measure

73

Daily Bread

75

Odysseus Redux

78

Logophobia

80

Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong

82

Devotion

84

Notes

87

Acknowledgments

88

About the Author

89

lãng mẹ [và ba tôi]

for my mother [& father]

*

If you must know anything, know that you were born because no one else was coming. The ship rocked as you swelled inside me: love's echo hardening into a boy. Sometimes I feel like an amperсанд. I wake up waiting for the crush. Maybe the body is the only question an answer can't extinguish. How many kisses have we crushed to our lips in prayer—only to pick up the pieces? If you must know, the best way to understand a man is with your teeth. Once, I swallowed the rain through a whole green thunderstorm. Hours lying on my back, my girlhood open. The field everywhere beneath me. How sweet. That rain. How something that lives only to fall can be nothing but sweet. Water whittled down to intention. Intention into nourishment. Everyone can forget us—as long as you remember.

*

Summer in the mind.
God opens his other eye:
two moons in the lake.

Always & Forever

Open this when you need me most,
he said, as he slid the shoe box, wrapped
in duct tape, beneath my bed. His thumb,
still damp from the shudder between mother's
thighs, kept circling the mole above my brow.
The devil's eye blazed between his teeth
or was he lighting a joint? It doesn't matter. Tonight
I wake & mistake the bathwater wrung
from mother's hair for his voice. I open
the shoe box dusted with seven winters
& here, sunk in folds of yellowed news
-paper, lies the Colt .45—silent & heavy
as an amputated hand. I hold the gun
& wonder if an entry wound in the night
would make a hole wide as morning. That if
I looked through it, I would see the end of this
sentence. Or maybe just a man kneeling
at the boy's bed, his grey overalls reeking of gasoline
& cigarettes. Maybe the day will close without
the page turning as he wraps his arms around

the boy's milk-blue shoulders. The boy pretending
to be asleep as his father's clurch tightens.

The way the barrel, aimed at the sky, must tighten
around a bullet
to make it speak

My Father Writes from Prison

Lan oi,

Em khòe khong? Giở em đang ở đâu? Anh nhớ em va con qua. Hòn nĩa & there
are things / I can say only in the dark / how one spring / I crushed a monarch
midflight / just to know how it felt / to have something change / in my hands
/ here are those hands / some nights they waken when touched / by music or
rather the drops of rain / memory erases into music / hands reaching for the
scent of lilacs / in the moss-covered temple a shard / of dawn in the eye of a dead
/ rat your voice on the verge of / my hands that pressed the gmm to the boy's /
twitching cheek I was 22 the chamber / empty I didn't know / how easy it was
/ to be gone these hands / that dragged the saw through bluest 4 a.m. / cricket
screams the kapok's bark spitting / in our eyes until one or two collapsed / the
saw lodged in blue dark until one or three / started to run from their country
into / their country / the ak-47 the lord whose voice will stop / the lilac / how to
close the lilac / that opens daily from my window / there's a lighthouse / some
nights you are the lighthouse / some nights the sea / what this means is that I
don't know / desire other than the need / to be shattered & rebuilt / the mind
forgetting / the body's crime of living / again dear Lan or / Lan oi what does it
matter / there's a man in the next cell who begs / nightly for his mother's breast
/ a single drop / I think my eyes are like his / watching the night bleed through /
the lighthouse night that cracked mask / I wear after too many rifle blows / Lan
oi! Lan oi! I'm so hungry / a bowl of rice / a cup of you / a single drop /
my clock-worn girl / my echo trapped in '88 / the cell's too cold tonight & there
are things / I can say only where the monarchs / no longer come / with wings
scraping the piss-slick floor for fragments of a / phantom woman I push my face
/ against a window the size of your palm where / beyond the shore / a grey dawn
lifts the hem of your purple dress / & I ignite

Headfirst

*Không có gì bằng con vùi cả.
Không có gì bằng má vùi con.*

Vietnamese proverb

Don't you know? A mother's love

neglects pride

the way fire

neglects the cries

of what it burns. My son,

even tomorrow

you will have today. Don't you know?

There are men who touch breasts

as they would

the tops of skulls. Men

who carry dreams

over mountains, the dead

on their backs.

But only a mother can walk

with the weight

of a second beating heart.

Stupid boy.

You can get lost in every book

but you'll never forget yourself

the way god forgets

his hands.

When they ask you

where you're from,

tell them your name

was fleshed from the toothless mouth
of a war-woman.

That you were not born

but crawled, headfirst—

into the hunger of dogs. My son, tell them

the body is a blade that sharpens

by cutting.

Prayer for the Newly Damned

Dearest Father, forgive me for I have seen.
Behind the wooden fence, a field lit
with summer, a man pressing a shank
to another man's throat. Steel turning to light
on sweat-slick neck. Forgive me
for not twisting this tongue into the shape
of Your name. For thinking:
this must be how every prayer
begins—the word *Please* cleaving
the wind into fragments, into what
a boy hears in his need to know
how pain blesses the body back
to its sinner. The hour suddenly
stilled. The man, his lips pressed
to the black boot. Am I wrong to love
those eyes, to see something so clear
& blue—beg to remain clear
& blue? Did my cheek twitch
when the wet shadow bloomed from his crotch
& crickled into ochre dirt? How quickly
the blade becomes You. But let me begin
again: There's a boy kneeling
in a house with every door kicked open
to summer. There's a question corroding
his tongue. A knife touching
Your finger lodged inside the throat.
Dearest Father, what becomes of the boy
no longer a boy? *Please*—
what becomes of the shepherd
when the sheep are cannibals?

56

To My Father / To My Future Son

The stars are not hereditary.
Emily Dickinson

There was a door & then a door
surrounded by a forest.
Look, my eyes are not
your eyes.
You move through me like rain
heard
from another country.
Yes, you have a country.
Someday, they will find it
while searching for lost ships...
Once, I fell in love
during a slow-motion car crash.
We looked so peaceful, the cigarette floating from his lips
as our heads whiplashed back
into the dream & all
was forgiven.
Because what you heard, or will hear, is true: I wrote
a better hour onto the page
& watched the fire take it back.
Something was always burning.

57

Do you understand? I closed my mouth
but could still taste the ash
because my eyes were open.

From men, I learned to praise the thickness of walls.

From women,
I learned to praise.

If you are given my body, put it down.

If you are given anything
be sure to leave

no tracks in the snow. Know

that I never chose

which way the seasons turned. That it was always October

in my throat

& you: every leaf

refusing to rust.

Quick. Can you see the red dark shifting?

This means I am touching you. This means

you are not alone—even

as you are not.

If you get there before me, if you think

of nothing

& my face appears rippling

like a torn flag—turn back.

Turn back & find the book I left

for us, filled

with all the colors of the sky
forgotten by gravediggers.

Use it.

Use it to prove how the stars

were always what we knew

they were: the exit wounds

of every

misfired word.

Notes

The book's epigraph is from Bei Dao's "Untitled," translated by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong.

"Threshold" borrows and alters a phrase from Carl Phillips's "Parable."

"Aubade with Burning City" borrows lyrics from "White Christmas," a song written by Irving Berlin.

The epigraph for "Immigrant Haibun" is from Edmond Jabès's *The Book of Questions*, translated by Rosemarie Waldrop.

"The Gift" is after Li-Young Lee

The title "Always & Forever" is also the name of my father's favorite song, as performed by Luther Vandross.

"Anaphora as Coping Mechanism" is for L.D.P.

The title "Queen Under The Hill" is from Robert Duncan's poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow." The poem borrows and alters language from Eduardo Corral's poem "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

"Notebook Fragments" borrows a phrase from Sandra Lim's "The Dark World"; Nguyễn Chí Thiện was a Vietnamese dissident poet who spent a total of twenty-seven years in prison for his writings. While incarcerated, with no pen and paper, he composed and committed his poems to memory.

The title "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong" is after Frank O'Hara and Roger Reeves.

"Devotion" is for Peter Bienkowski.

Acknowledgments

A pot of steaming jasmine tea for the editors of the publications in which some of these poems have appeared, sometimes in different forms:

The American Poetry Review, Assaracus, Beloit Poetry Journal, BODY Literature, Boston Review, Columbia Poetry Review, Court Green, Crab Orchard Review, Cream City Review, Dossier, Drunken Boat, Eleven Eleven, Gulf Coast, Linebreak, Narrative, The Nation, The New Yorker, The Normal School, PANK, Passages North, Pleiades, Poetry, Poetry Daily, Poetry Ireland, The Poetry Review, Quarterly West, South Dakota Review, Southern Indiana Review, TriQuarterly, and Verse Daily.

"Eurydice" was reprinted in *The Dead Animal Handbook* (2015); "Ode to Masurbation" was reprinted in *Longish Poems* (2015); "Always & Forever," "Daily Bread," "Prayer for the Newly Damned," and "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds" were reprinted in *The BreakBeat Poets* (2015); "Deto(nation)," "Eurydice," "Homewrecker," and "Telemachus" were reprinted in *Poets On Growth* (2015); "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds" was reprinted in the *Pushcart Prize* (2014); "Anaphora as Coping Mechanism" was reprinted in *Best New Poets 2014*; "Telemachus" was the winner of the 2013 Chad Walsh Prize from *Beloit Poetry Journal*; "Prayer for the Newly Damned" was a winner of the 2012 Stanley Kunitz Prize for Younger Poets from the *American Poetry Review*.

I am grateful to the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Poetry Foundation, Poets House, and the Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts, for time and support.

Thank you to Copper Canyon Press for believing.

Thanks to my dear friends, teachers, and editors for helping me.

Thank you, Peter, for Peter.

About the Author

Born in Saigon, Vietnam, Ocean Vuong lives in New York City.