NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS OCEAN VUONG

Dear god, if you are a season, let it be the one I passed through



Here. That's all I wanted to be

to get here.



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

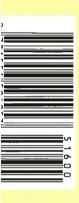
"His name is Ocean. His obsessions are love, family, violence, the sacred, the erotic, solo. And he tries to make sense of human suffering by allowing his personal his heart and soul. What a gift this book is." —Li-Young Lee world. What a treasure he is to us. What a perfume he's crushed and rendered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

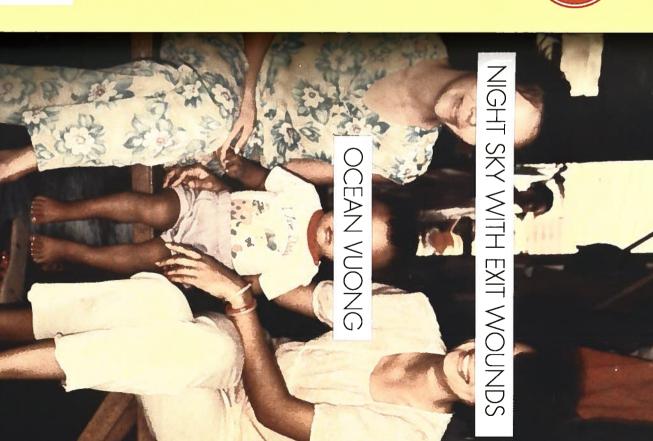
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ALSO BY OCEAN VUONG

Burnings

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OCEAN VUONG

NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS



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

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

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for my mother [& father]

tặng mẹ [và ba tôi]

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 ampersand. 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 clutch 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,

oi! Lan oi! Lan oi! / I'm so hungry / a bowl of rice / a cup of you / a single drop . rather the drops of rain / memory erases into music / hands reaching for the midflight / just to know how it felt / to have something change / in my hands lifts the hem of your purple dress / & I ignite scraping the piss-slick floor for fragments of a / phantom woman I push my face are things / I can say only where the monarchs / no longer come / with wings my clock-worn girl / my echo trapped in '88 / the cell's too cold tonight & there the lighthouse night that cracked mask / I wear after too many rifle blows / Lan / a single drop / I think my eyes are like his / watching the night bleed through matter / there's a man in the next cell who begs / nightly for his mother's breas forgetting / the body's crime of living / again dear Lan or / Lan oi what does it don't know / desire other than the need / to be shattered & rebuilt / the mind nights you are the lighthouse / some nights the sea / what this means is that I close the lilac / that opens daily from my window / there's a lighthouse / some into / their country / the ak-47 the lord whose voice will stop / the lilac / how to saw lodged in blue dark until one or three / started to run from their country screams the kapok's bark spitting / in our eyes until one or two collapsed / the / to be gone these hands / that dragged the saw through bluest 4 a.m. / cricket twitching cheek I was 22 the chamber / empty I didn't know / how easy it was / rat your voice on the verge of / my hands that pressed the 9mm to the boy's / scent of lilacs / in the moss-covered temple a shard / of dawn in the eye of a dead are things / I can say only in the dark / how one spring / I crushed a monarch Em khỏe khong? Giờ em đang ở đầu? Anh nhớ em va con qua. Hơn nữa & there / here are those hands / some nights they waken when touched / by music or against a window the size of your palm where / beyond the shore / a grey dawn

Headfirst

Không có gi bằng cơm với cá. Không có gi bằng má với con.

Vietnamese proverb

by cutting.

neglects the cries Don't you know? A mother's love of what it burns. My son, the way fire neglects pride

you will have today. Don't you know? the tops of skulls. Men There are men who touch breasts as they would even tomorrow

over mountains, the dead on their backs.

who carry dreams

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.

tell them your name When they ask you where you're from,

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

> into the hunger of dogs. My son, tell them That you were not born but crawled, headfirstthe body is a blade that sharpens

Prayer for the Newly Damned

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

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

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 into the dream & all as our heads whiplashed back

was torgiven.

a better hour onto the page Because what you heard, or will hear, is true: I wrote

& watched the fire take it back.

Something was always burning.

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.

 $\label{eq:control_form} If you are given my body, put it down.$ 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 even 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.

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About the Author

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