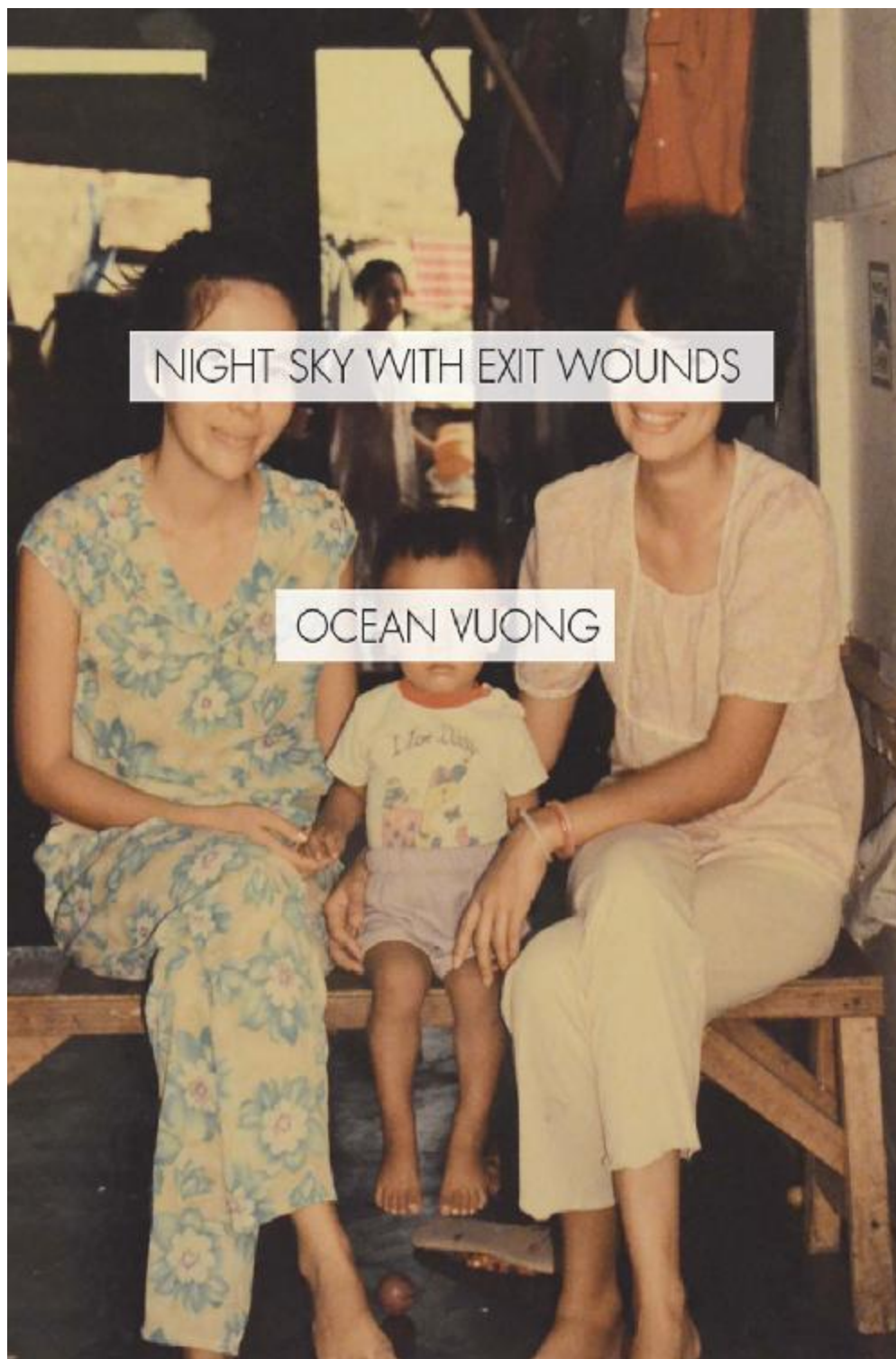




NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS

OCEAN VUONG



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# Night Sky With Exit Wounds

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Pellentesque euismod.

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Thank you. We hope you enjoy these poems.

*This e-book edition was created through a special grant provided by the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation. Copper Canyon Press would like to thank Constellation Digital Services for their partnership in making this e-book possible.*

*tặng mẹ [và ba tôi]*

*for my mother [& father]*

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*The landscape crossed out with a pen  
reappears here*

Bei Dao

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## Threshold

In the body, where everything has a price,  
I was a beggar. On my knees,

I watched, through the keyhole, not  
the man showering, but the rain

falling through him: guitar strings snapping  
over his globed shoulders.

He was singing, which is why  
I remember it. His voice—

it filled me to the core  
like a skeleton. Even my name

knelt down inside me, asking  
to be spared.

He was singing. It is all I remember.  
For in the body, where everything has a price,

I was alive. I didn't know  
there was a better reason.

That one morning, my father would stop  
—a dark colt paused in downpour—

& listen for my clutched breath  
    behind the door. I didn't know the cost  
of entering a song—was to lose  
    your way back.  
So I entered. So I lost.  
    I lost it all with my eyes  
wide open.

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I

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Telemachus

Like any good son, I pull my father out  
of the water, drag him by his hair

through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail  
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer  
where we left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral  
of trees. I kneel beside him to see how far

I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*  
*Ba?* But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming  
with seawater. He is so still I think

he could be anyone's father, found  
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year  
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. I turn him  
over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face  
not mine—but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers good-night:  
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin  
the faithful work of drowning.

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Trojan

A finger's worth of dark from daybreak, he steps  
into a red dress. A flame caught  
in a mirror the width of a coffin.  
Steel glinting  
in the back of his throat. A flash, a white  
asterisk. Look  
how he dances. The bruise-blue wallpaper  
peeling  
into hooks as he twirls, his horse  
-head shadow thrown on the family  
portraits, glass cracking  
beneath  
its stain. He moves like any  
other fracture, revealing the briefest doors.  
The dress  
petaling off him like the skin  
of an apple. As if their swords  
aren't sharpening  
inside him. This horse with its human  
face. This belly full of blades  
& brutes. As if dancing could stop  
the heart  
of his murderer from beating  
between his ribs. How easily a boy in a dress



the red of shut eyes  
vanishes  
beneath the sound of his own  
galloping. How a horse will run until it breaks  
into weather—into wind. How like  
the wind, they will see him. They will see him  
clearest  
when the city burns.

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## Aubade with Burning City

*South Vietnam, April 29, 1975: Armed Forces Radio played Irving  
Berlin's "White Christmas" as a code to begin Operation Frequent  
Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese  
refugees by helicopter during the fall of Saigon.*

Milkflower petals in the street  
like pieces of a girl's dress.

*May your days be merry and bright ...*

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.

*Open, he says.*

She opens.

Outside, a soldier spits out  
his cigarette as footsteps fill the square like stones  
fallen from the sky.

*May*

*all your Christmases be white*

as the traffic guard unstraps his holster.

His fingers running the hem  
of her white dress. A single candle.

Their shadows: two wicks.

A military truck speeds through the intersection, children

shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled  
through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog  
lies panting in the road. Its hind legs  
crushed into the shine  
*of a white Christmas.*

On the bed stand, a sprig of magnolia expands like a secret heard  
for the first time.

*The treetops glisten and children listen,* the chief of police  
facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.  
A palm-sized photo of his father soaking  
beside his left ear.

The song moving through the city like a widow.  
*A white ... A white ... I'm dreaming of* a curtain of snow  
falling from her shoulders.

Snow scraping against the window. Snow shredded  
with gunfire. Red sky.  
Snow on the tanks rolling over the city walls.  
A helicopter lifting the living just  
out of reach.

The city so white it is ready for ink.

The radio saying run run run.  
Milkflower petals on a black dog  
like pieces of a girl's dress.

*May your days be merry and bright.* She is saying  
something neither of them can hear. The hotel rocks  
beneath them. The bed a field of ice.

*Don't worry,* he says, as the first shell flashes  
their faces, *my brothers have won the war*  
*and tomorrow ...*  
The lights go out.

*I'm dreaming. I'm dreaming ...*  
*to hear sleigh bells in the snow ...*

In the square below: a nun, on fire,  
runs silently toward her god—

*Open,* he says.

She opens.

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## A Little Closer to the Edge

Young enough to believe nothing  
will change them, they step, hand in hand,

into the bomb crater. The night full  
of black teeth. His faux Rolex, weeks

from shattering against her cheek, now dims  
like a miniature moon behind her hair.

In this version, the snake is headless—stilled  
like a cord unraveled from the lovers' ankles.

He lifts her white cotton skirt, revealing  
another hour. His hand. His hands. The syllables

inside them. O father, O foreshadow, press  
into her—as the field shreds itself

with cricket cries. Show me how ruin makes a home  
out of hip bones. O mother,

O minute hand, teach me  
how to hold a man the way thirst

holds water. Let every river envy  
our mouths. Let every kiss hit the body

like a season. Where apples thunder  
the earth with red hooves. & I am your son.

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## Immigrant Haibun

*The road which leads me to you is safe  
even when it runs into oceans.*

Edmond Jabès

\*

Then, as if breathing, the sea swelled beneath us. If you must know anything, know that the hardest task is to live only once. That a woman on a sinking ship becomes a life raft—no matter how soft her skin. While I slept, he burned his last violin to keep my feet warm. He lay beside me and placed a word on the nape of my neck, where it melted into a bead of whiskey. Gold rust down my back. We had been sailing for months. Salt in our sentences. We had been sailing—but the edge of the world was nowhere in sight.

\*

When we left it, the city was still smoldering. Otherwise it was a perfect spring morning. White hyacinths gasped in the embassy lawn. The sky was September-blue and the pigeons went on pecking at bits of bread scattered from the bombed bakery. Broken baguettes. Crushed croissants. Gutted cars. A carousel spinning its blackened horses. He said the shadow of missiles growing larger on the sidewalk looked like god playing an air piano above us. He said *There is so much I need to tell you.*

\*

Stars. Or rather, the drains of heaven—waiting. Little holes. Little centuries opening just long enough for us to slip through. A machete on the deck left out to dry. My back turned to him. My feet in the eddies. He crouches beside me, his breath a misplaced weather. I let him cup a handful of the sea into my hair and wring it out. *The smallest pearls—and all for you.* I open my eyes. His face between my hands, wet as a cut. *If we make it to shore, he says, I will name our son after this water. I will learn to love a monster.* He smiles. A white hyphen where his lips should be. There are seagulls above us. There are hands fluttering between the constellations, trying to hold on.

\*

The fog lifts. And we see it. The horizon—suddenly gone. An aqua sheen leading to the hard drop. Clean and merciful—just like he wanted. Just like the fairy tales. The one where the book closes and turns to laughter in our laps. I pull the mast to full sail. He throws my name into the air. I watch the syllables crumble into pebbles across the deck.

\*

Furious roar. The sea splitting at the bow. He watches it open like a thief staring into his own heart: all bones and splintered wood. Waves rising on both sides. The ship encased in liquid walls. *Look!* he says, *I see it now!* He's jumping up and down. He's kissing the back of my wrist as he clutches the wheel. He laughs but his eyes



betray him. He laughs despite knowing he has ruined every beautiful thing just to prove beauty cannot change him. And here's the kicker: there's a cork where the sunset should be. It was always there. There's a ship made from toothpicks and superglue. There's a ship in a wine bottle on the mantel in the middle of a Christmas party—eggnog spilling from red Solo cups. But we keep sailing anyway. We keep standing at the bow. A wedding-cake couple encased in glass. The water so still now. The water like air, like hours. Everyone's shouting or singing and he can't tell whether the song is for him—or the burning rooms he mistook for childhood. Everyone's dancing while a tiny man and woman are stuck inside a green bottle thinking someone is waiting at the end of their lives to say *Hey! You didn't have to go this far. Why did you go so far?* Just as a baseball bat crashes through the world.

\*

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.

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## 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

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## My Father Writes from Prison

Lan oi,

Em khỏe không? Giờ em đang ở đâu? Anh nhờ em va con qua. Hơn  
nửa & 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 9mm 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! 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

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## Headfirst

*Không có gì bằng c ôm với cá.*

*Không có gì bằng má với 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.

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

& close his eyes. His hair the shade  
of its cracked flesh.  
His right arm, inked with three falling  
phoenixes—torches  
marking the lives he had  
or had not taken—cradles  
the pinkish snout. Its teeth  
gleaming like bullets.  
Huey. Tomahawk. Semi  
-automatic. I was static  
as we sat in the Nissan, watching waves  
brush over our breaths  
when he broke for shore, hobbled  
on his gimp leg. Mustard  
-yellow North Face jacket  
diminishing toward the grey life  
smeared into ours. Shrapnel  
-strapped. Bushwhacker. The last time  
I saw him run like that, he had  
a hammer in his fist, mother  
a nail-length out of reach.  
America. America a row of streetlights  
flickering on his whiskey

-lips as we ran. A family  
screaming down Franklin Ave.  
ADD. PTSD. POW. Pow. Pow. Pow  
says the sniper. Fuck you  
says the father, tracers splashing  
through palm leaves. Confetti  
green, how I want you green.  
Green despite the red despite  
the rest. His knees sunk  
in ink-black mud, he guides  
a ribbon of water to the pulsing  
blowhole. Ok. Okay. AK  
-47. I am eleven only once  
as he kneels to gather the wet refugee  
into his arms. Waves  
swallowing  
his legs. The dolphin's eye  
gasping like a newborn's  
mouth. & once more  
I am swinging open  
the passenger door. I am running  
toward a rusted horizon, running  
out of a country  
to run out of. I am chasing my father  
the way the dead chase after  
days—& although I am still  
too far to hear it, I can tell,  
by the way his neck tilts

that he is singing  
to his empty hands.

to one side, as if broken,  
my favorite song

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## The Gift

*a b c      a b c      a b c*

She doesn't know what comes after.  
So we begin again:

*a b c      a b c      a b c*

But I can see the fourth letter:  
a strand of black hair—unraveled  
from the alphabet  
& written  
on her cheek.

Even now the nail salon  
will not leave her: isopropyl acetate,  
ethyl acetate, chloride, sodium lauryl  
sulfate & sweat fuming  
through her pink  
I ♥ NY t-shirt.

*a b c      a b c      a* —the pencil snaps.

The *b* bursting its belly  
as dark dust blows  
through a blue-lined sky.

*Don't move*, she says, as she picks  
a wing bone of graphite  
from the yellow carcass, slides it back  
between my fingers.  
*Again.* & again

I see it: the strand of hair lifting  
from her face... how it fell  
onto the page—and lived  
with no sound. Like a word.  
I still hear it.

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## Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds

Instead, let it be the echo to every footstep  
drowned out by rain, cripple the air like a name

flung onto a sinking boat, splash the kapok's bark  
through rot & iron of a city trying to forget

the bones beneath its sidewalks, then through  
the refugee camp sick with smoke & half-sung

hymns, a shack rusted black & lit with Bà Ngoai's  
last candle, the hogs' faces we held in our hands

& mistook for brothers, let it enter a room illuminated  
with snow, furnished only with laughter, Wonder Bread

& mayonnaise raised to cracked lips as testament  
to a triumph no one recalls, let it brush the newborn's

flushed cheek as he's lifted in his father's arms, wreathed  
with fishgut & Marlboros, everyone cheering as another

brown gook crumbles under John Wayne's M16, Vietnam  
burning on the screen, let it slide through their ears,

clean, like a promise, before piercing the poster  
of Michael Jackson glistening over the couch, into

the supermarket where a Hapa woman is ready  
to believe every white man possessing her nose

is her father, may it sing, briefly, inside her mouth,  
before laying her down between jars of tomato

& blue boxes of pasta, the deep-red apple rolling  
from her palm, then into the prison cell

where her husband sits staring at the moon  
until he's convinced it's the last wafer

god refused him, let it hit his jaw like a kiss  
we've forgotten how to give one another, hissing

back to '68, Ha Long Bay: the sky replaced  
with fire, the sky only the dead

look up to, may it reach the grandfather fucking  
the pregnant farmgirl in the back of his army jeep,

his blond hair flickering in napalm-blasted wind, let it pin  
him down to dust where his future daughters rise,

fingers blistered with salt & Agent Orange, let them  
tear open his olive fatigues, clutch that name hanging

from his neck, that name they press to their tongues  
to relearn the word *live, live, live*—but if

for nothing else, let me weave this deathbeam

the way a blind woman stitches a flap of skin back  
to her daughter's ribs. Yes—let me believe I was born  
to cock back this rifle, smooth & slick, like a true  
Charlie, like the footsteps of ghosts misted through rain  
as I lower myself between the sights—& pray  
that nothing moves.

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II

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Thanksgiving 2006

Brooklyn's too cold tonight

& all my friends are three years away.

My mother said I could be anything

I wanted—but I chose to live.

On the stoop of an old brownstone,

a cigarette flares, then fades.

I walk to it: a razor

sharpened with silence.

His jawline etched in smoke.

The mouth where I reenter

this city. Stranger, palpable

echo, here is my hand, filled with blood thin

as a widow's tears. I am ready.

I am ready to be every animal

you leave behind.

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## Homewrecker

& this is how we danced: our mothers'  
white dresses spilling from our feet, late August

turning our hands dark red. & this is how we loved:  
a fifth of vodka & an afternoon in the attic, your fingers

through my hair—my hair a wildfire. We covered  
our ears & your father's tantrum turned

to heartbeats. When our lips touched the day closed  
into a coffin. In the museum of the heart

there are two headless people building a burning house.  
There was always the shotgun above

the fireplace. Always another hour to kill—only to beg  
some god to give it back. If not the attic, the car. If not

the car, the dream. If not the boy, his clothes. If not alive,  
put down the phone. Because the year is a distance

we've traveled in circles. Which is to say: this is how  
we danced: alone in sleeping bodies. Which is to say:

this is how we loved: a knife on the tongue turning  
into a tongue.

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Of Thee I Sing

We made it, baby.

We're riding in the back of the black  
limousine. They have lined  
the road to shout our names.

They have faith in your golden hair  
& pressed grey suit.

They have a good citizen  
in me. I love my country.

I pretend nothing is wrong.  
I pretend not to see the man  
& his blond daughter diving

for cover, that you're not saying  
my name & it's not coming out  
like a slaughterhouse.

I'm not Jackie O yet  
& there isn't a hole in your head, a brief  
rainbow through a mist

of rust. I love my country  
but who am I kidding? I'm holding  
your still-hot thoughts in,

darling, my sweet, sweet  
Jack. I'm reaching across the trunk  
for a shard of your memory,  
the one where we kiss & the nation

glitters. Your slumped back.

Your hand letting go. You're all over  
the seat now, deepening

my fuchsia dress. But I'm a good  
citizen, surrounded by Jesus

& ambulances. I love  
this country. The twisted faces.

My country. The blue sky. Black  
limousine. My one white glove

glistening pink—with all  
our American dreams.

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## Because It's Summer

you ride your bike to the park bruised  
with 9pm the maples draped with plastic bags  
shredded from days the cornfield  
freshly razed & you've lied  
about where you're going you're supposed  
to be out with a woman you can't find  
a name for but he's waiting  
in the baseball field behind the dugout  
flecked with newports torn condoms  
he's waiting with sticky palms & mint  
on his breath a cheap haircut  
& his sister's levis  
stench of piss rising from wet grass  
it's june after all & you're young  
until september he looks different  
from his picture but it doesn't matter  
because you kissed your mother  
on the cheek before coming  
this far because the fly's dark slit is enough  
to speak through the zipper a thin scream  
where you plant your mouth  
to hear the sound of birds  
hitting water snap of elastic  
waistbands four hands quickening



into dozens: a swarm of want you wear  
like a bridal veil but you don't  
deserve it: the boy &  
his loneliness the boy who finds you  
beautiful only because you're not  
a mirror because you don't have  
enough faces to abandon you've come  
this far to be no one & it's june  
until morning you're young until a pop song  
plays in a dead kid's room water spilling in  
from every corner of summer & you want  
to tell him *it's okay* that the night is also a grave  
we climb out of but he's already fixing  
his collar the cornfield a cruelty steaming  
with manure you smear your neck with  
lipstick you dress with shaky hands  
you say *thank you thank you thank you*  
because you haven't learned the purpose  
of *forgive me* because that's what you say  
when a stranger steps out of summer  
& offers you another hour to live

## Into the Breach

*The only motive that there ever was was to ...  
keep them with me as long as possible, even if  
it meant just keeping a part of them.*

Jeffrey Dahmer

I pull into the field & cut the engine.

It's simple: I just don't know  
how to love a man

gently. Tenderness  
a thing to be beaten

into. Fireflies strung  
through sapphired air.

You're so quiet you're almost

tomorrow.

The body was made soft  
to keep us

from loneliness.  
You said that

as if the car were filling

with river water.

Don't worry.

There's no water.

Only your eyes

closing.

My tongue

in the crux of your chest.

Little black hairs

like the legs

of vanished insects.

I never wanted

the flesh.

How it never fails

to fail

so accurately.

But what if I broke through

the skin's thin page

anyway

& found the heart

not the size of a fist  
but your mouth opening

to the width  
of Jerusalem. What then?

To love another  
man—is to leave

no one behind

to forgive me.

I want to leave  
no one behind.

To keep  
& be kept.

The way a field turns  
its secrets

into peonies.

The way light  
keeps its shadow

by swallowing it.

## Anaphora as Coping Mechanism

Can't sleep

so you put on his grey boots—nothing else—and step  
inside the rain. *Even though he's gone*, you think, *I still want  
to be clean*. If only the rain were gasoline, your tongue  
a lit match, & you can change without disappearing. If only  
he dies the second his name becomes a tooth  
in your mouth. But he doesn't. He dies when they wheel him  
away & the priest ushers you out of the room, your palms  
two puddles of rain. He dies as your heart beats faster,  
as another war coppers the sky. He dies each night  
you close your eyes & hear his slow exhale. Your fist choking  
the dark. Your fist through the bathroom mirror. He dies  
at the party where everyone laughs & all you want is to go  
into the kitchen & make seven omelets before burning  
down the house. All you want is to run into the woods & beg  
the wolf to fuck you up. He dies when you wake  
& it's November forever. A Hendrix record melted  
on a rusted needle. He dies the morning he kisses you  
for two minutes too long, when he says *Wait* followed by  
*I have something to say* & you quickly grab your favorite  
pink pillow & smother him as he cries into the soft  
& darkening fabric. You hold still until he's very quiet,  
until the walls dissolve & you're both standing in the crowded train  
again. Look how it rocks you back & forth like a slow dance

seen from the distance of years. You're still a freshman. You're still  
terrified of having only two hands. & he doesn't know your name

yet

but he smiles anyway. His teeth reflected in the window  
reflecting your lips as you mouth *Hello*—your tongue  
a lit match.

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## Seventh Circle of Earth

*On April 27, 2011, a gay couple, Michael Humphrey  
and Clayton Capshaw, was murdered by immolation  
in their home in Dallas, Texas.*

*Dallas Voice*

### 1

As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, /  
was enough / to erase myself. To forget / we built this house  
knowing / it won't last. How / does anyone stop / regret / without  
cutting / off his hands? / Another torch

### 2

streams through / the kitchen window, / another errant dove. / It's  
funny. I always knew / I'd be warmest beside / my man. / But don't  
laugh. Understand me / when I say I burn best / when crowned /  
with your scent: that earth-sweat / & Old Spice I seek out each night  
/ the days

### 3

refuse me. / Our faces blackening / in the photographs along the  
wall. / Don't laugh. Just tell me the story / again, / of the sparrows  
who flew from falling Rome, / their blazed wings. / How ruin nested  
inside each thimble throat / & made it sing

4

until the notes threaded to this / smoke rising / from your nostrils.  
Speak— / until your voice is nothing / but the crackle / of charred

5

bones. But don't laugh / when these walls collapse / & only sparks /  
not sparrows / fly out. / When they come / to sift through these  
cinders—& pluck my tongue, / this fisted rose, / charcoaled &  
choked / from your gone

6

mouth. / Each black petal / blasted / with what's left / of our  
laughter. / Laughter ashed / to air / to honey to baby / darling, / look.  
Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still

7

American.



On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

*I*

Tell me it was for the hunger  
& nothing less. For hunger is to give  
the body what it knows

it cannot keep. That this amber light  
whittled down by another war  
is all that pins my hand to your chest.

*I*

You, drowning  
                    between my arms—  
stay.

You, pushing your body  
                    into the river  
only to be left  
                    with yourself—  
stay.

*I*

I'll tell you how we're wrong enough to be forgiven. How one night,

after backhanding mother, then taking a chain saw to the kitchen  
table, my  
father went to kneel in the bathroom until we heard his muffled cries  
through  
the walls. & so I learned—that a man in climax was the closest thing  
to surrender.

*I*

Say surrender. Say alabaster. Switchblade.  
Honeysuckle. Goldenrod. Say autumn.  
Say autumn despite the green  
in your eyes. Beauty despite  
daylight. Say you'd kill for it. Unbreakable dawn  
mounting in your throat.  
My thrashing beneath you  
like a sparrow stunned  
with falling.

*I*

Dusk: a blade of honey between our shadows, draining.

*I*

I wanted to disappear—so I opened the door to a stranger's car. He  
was divorced. He was sobbing into his hands (hands that tasted like  
rust). The pink breast-cancer ribbon on his key chain swayed in the

ignition. Don't we touch each other just to prove we are still here? I was still here once. The moon, distant & flickering, trapped itself in beads of sweat on my neck. I let the fog spill through the cracked window & cover my fangs. When I left, the Buick kept sitting there, a dumb bull in pasture, its eyes searing my shadow onto the side of suburban houses. At home, I threw myself on the bed like a torch & watched the flames gnaw through my mother's house until the sky appeared, bloodshot & massive. How I wanted to be that sky—to be filled every flight & fall at once.

*I*

Say amen. Say amend.

Say yes. Say yes

anyway.

*I*

In the shower, sweating under cold water, I scrubbed & scrubbed.

*I*

It's not too late. Our heads haloed  
with gnats & summer too early to leave  
any marks. Your hand  
under my shirt as static  
intensifies on the radio.

Your other hand pointing  
your daddy's revolver  
to the sky. Stars dropping one  
by one in the crosshairs.  
This means I won't be  
afraid if we're already  
here. Already more than skin  
can hold. That a boy sleeping  
beside a boy  
must make a field  
full of ticking. That to say your name  
is to hear the sound of clocks  
being turned back another hour  
& morning  
finds our clothes  
on your mother's front porch, shed  
like week-old lilies.

## Eurydice

It's more like the sound  
a doe makes  
when the arrowhead  
replaces the day  
with an answer  
to the rib's hollowed  
hum. We saw it coming  
but kept walking through the hole  
in the garden. Because the leaves  
were pure green & the fire  
only a pink brushstroke  
in the distance. It's not  
about the light—but how dark  
it makes you depending  
on where you stand.  
Depending on where you stand  
your name can sound like a full moon  
shredded in a dead doe's pelt.  
Your name changed when touched  
by gravity. Gravity breaking  
our kneecaps just to show us  
the sky. Why did we  
keep saying Yes—  
even with all those birds.

Who would believe us  
now? My voice cracking  
like bones inside the radio.  
Silly me. I thought love was real  
& the body imaginary.  
I thought a little chord  
was all it took. But here we are—  
standing in the cold field  
again. Him calling for the girl.  
The girl beside him.  
Frosted grass snapping  
beneath her hooves.

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

The TV said the planes have hit the buildings.  
& I said *Yes* because you asked me  
to stay. Maybe we pray on our knees because god  
only listens when we're this close  
to the devil. There is so much I want to tell you.  
How my greatest accolade was to walk  
across the Brooklyn Bridge  
& not think of flight. How we live like water: wetting  
a new tongue with no telling  
what we've been through. They say the sky is blue  
but I know it's black seen through too much distance.  
You will always remember what you were doing  
when it hurts the most. There is so much  
I need to tell you—but I only earned  
one life. & I took nothing. Nothing. Like a pair of teeth  
at the end. The TV kept saying *The planes...*  
*The planes...* & I stood waiting in the room  
made of broken mockingbirds. Their wings throbbing  
into four blurred walls. & you were there.  
You were the window.

## Queen Under The Hill

I approach a field. A black piano waits  
at its center. I kneel to play  
what I can. A single key. A tooth  
tossed down a well. My fingers  
sliding the slimy gums. Slick lips. Snout. Not  
a piano—but a mare  
draped in a black sheet. White mouth  
sticking out like a fist. I kneel  
at my beast. The sheet sunken  
at her ribs. A dented piano  
where rain, collected  
from the night, reflects  
a blue sky fallen  
into the side of a horse. Blue  
thumbprint pressed  
from above. As if something needed  
to be snuffed out, leaving  
this black blossom dropped  
on a field where I am only  
a visitor. A word exiled  
from the prayer, flickering. Wind  
streaks the pale grass flat  
around us—the horse & I  
a watercolor hung too soon



& dripping. Green waves  
surround this black rock  
where I sit turning bones  
to sonatas. Fingers blurred,  
I play what I know  
from listening to orchards  
unleash their sweetest  
wrongs. The dent in this  
horse wide enough to live  
by. Puddle of sky  
on earth. As if to look down  
on the dead is to look up  
at my own face, trampled  
by music. If I lift the sheet  
I will reveal the heart huge  
as a stillbirth. If I lift the sheet  
I will sleep beside her  
as a four-legged shadow, hoof homed  
to hoof. If I close my eyes  
I'm inside the piano again  
& only. If I close my eyes  
no one can hurt me.

III

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## Torso of Air

Suppose you do change your life.  
& the body is more than

a portion of night—sealed  
with bruises. Suppose you woke

& found your shadow replaced  
by a black wolf. The boy, beautiful

& gone. So you take the knife to the wall  
instead. You carve & carve

until a coin of light appears  
& you get to look in, at last,

on happiness. The eye  
staring back from the other side—

waiting.

## 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  
& trickled 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?

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## 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.

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.

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Deto(nation)

There's a joke that ends with—*huh?*  
It's the bomb saying here is your father.

Now here is your father inside  
your lungs. Look how lighter

the earth is—afterward.  
To even write *father*

is to carve a portion of the day  
out of a bomb-bright page.

There's enough light to drown in  
but never enough to enter the bones

& stay. *Don't stay here*, he said, *my boy*  
*broken by the names of flowers. Don't cry*

*anymore.* So I ran. I ran into the night.  
The night: my shadow growing

toward my father

## Ode to Masturbation

because you  
    were never  
holy  
    only beautiful  
enough  
    to be found

with a hook  
    in your mouth  
water shook  
    like sparks  
when they pulled  
    you out

& sometimes  
    your hand  
is all you have  
    to hold  
yourself to this  
    world & it's

the sound not  
    the prayer  
that enters  
    the thunder not

the lightning  
that wakes you

in the backseat  
midnight's neon  
parking lot  
holy water  
smeared  
between

your thighs  
where no man  
ever drowned  
from too much  
thirst  
the cumshot

an art  
-iculation  
of chewed stars  
so lift  
the joy  
-crusted thumb

& teach  
the tongue  
of unbridled  
nourishment  
to be lost in  
an image

is to find within it  
a door  
so close  
your eyes  
& open  
reach down

with every rib  
humming  
the desperation  
of unstruck  
piano keys  
some call this

being human but you  
already know  
it's the briefest form  
of forever yes  
even the saints  
remember this the *if*

under every  
utterance  
beneath  
the breath brimmed  
like cherry blossoms  
foaming into no one's  
springtime

how often these lines  
resemble claw marks  
of your brothers  
being dragged  
away from you

you whose name  
not heard  
by the ear  
but the smallest  
bones  
in the graves you

who ignite the april air  
with all your petals'  
*here here here* you  
who twist  
through barbed  
-wired light

despite knowing  
how color beckons  
decapitation  
i reach down  
looking for you  
in american dirt

in towns with names  
like hope  
celebration

success & sweet  
lips like little  
saigon

laramie money  
& sanford towns  
whose trees know  
the weight of history  
can bend their branches  
to breaking

lines whose roots burrow  
through stones  
& hard facts  
gathering  
the memory of rust  
& iron

mandibles  
& amethyst yes  
touch yourself  
like this  
part the softest hurt's  
unhealable

hunger  
after all  
the lord cut you  
here  
to remind us where

he came  
from pin this antlered  
    heartbeat back  
to earth  
    cry out  
until the dark fluents  
    each faceless

beast banished  
    from the ark  
as you scrape the salt  
    off the cock-clit  
& call it  
    *daylight*

don't  
    be afraid  
to be this  
    luminous  
to be so bright so  
    empty

the bullets pass  
    right through you  
thinking  
    they have found  
the sky as you reach  
    down press

a hand  
to this blood  
-warm body  
like a word  
being nailed  
to its meaning  
  
& lives

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## Notebook Fragments

A scar's width of warmth on a worn man's neck.

That's all I wanted to be.

Sometimes I ask for too much just to feel my mouth overflow.

Discovery: My longest pubic hair is 1.2 inches.

Good or bad?

7:18 a.m. Kevin overdosed last night. His sister left a message.

Couldn't listen

to all of it. That makes three this year.

I promise to stop soon.

Spilled orange juice all over the table this morning. Sudden sunlight

I couldn't wipe away.

My hands were daylight all through the night.

Woke at 1 a.m and, for no reason, ran through Duffy's cornfield.

Boxers only.

Corn was dry. I sounded like a fire,

for no reason.

Grandma said *In the war they would grab a baby, a soldier at each ankle, and pull ...*

*Just like that.*

It's finally spring! Daffodils everywhere.

Just like that.

There are over 13,000 unidentified body parts from the World Trade Center

being stored in an underground repository in New York City.

Good or bad?

Shouldn't heaven be superheavy by now?

Maybe the rain is "sweet" because it falls  
through so much of the world.

*Even sweetness can scratch the throat, so stir the sugar well. —*

Grandma

4:37 a.m. How come depression makes me feel more alive?

Life is funny.

Note to self: If a guy tells you his favorite poet is Jack Kerouac,  
there's a very good chance he's a douchebag.

Note to self: If Orpheus were a woman I wouldn't be stuck down  
here.

Why do all my books leave me empty-handed?

In Vietnamese, the word for grenade is “bom,” from the French  
“pomme,”  
meaning “apple.”

Or was it American for “bomb”?

Woke up screaming with no sound. The room filling with a bluish  
water

called dawn. Went to kiss grandma on the forehead

just in case.

An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my  
mother exists.

Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me.

Yikes.

9:47 a.m. Jerked off four times already. My arm kills.

Eggplant = cà pháo = “grenade tomato.” Thus nourishment defined  
by extinction.

I met a man tonight. A high school English teacher  
from the next town. A small town. Maybe

I shouldn’t have, but he had the hands  
of someone I used to know. Someone I was used to.

The way they formed brief churches

over the table as he searched for the right words.

I met a man, not you. In his room the Bibles shook on the shelf  
from candlelight. His scrotum a bruised fruit. I kissed it  
lightly, the way one might kiss a grenade  
before hurling it into the night's mouth.

Maybe the tongue is also a key.

Yikes.

*I could eat you* he said, brushing my cheek with his knuckles.

I think I love my mom very much.

Some grenades explode with a vision of white flowers.

Baby's breath blooming in a darkened sky, across  
my chest.

Maybe the tongue is also a pin.

I'm gonna lose it when Whitney Houston dies.

I met a man. I promise to stop.

A pillaged village is a fine example of perfect rhyme. He said that.

He was white. Or maybe, I was just beside myself, next to him.

Either way, I forgot his name by heart.

I wonder what it feels like to move at the speed of thirst—if it's fast  
as lying on the kitchen floor with the lights off.

(Kristopher)

6:24 a.m. Greyhound station. One-way ticket to New York City:  
\$36.75.

6:57 a.m. I love you, mom.

When the prison guards burned his manuscripts, Nguyễn Chí Thiệu  
couldn't stop  
laughing—the 283 poems already inside him.

I dreamed I walked barefoot all the way to your house in the snow.  
Everything  
was the blue of smudged ink

and you were still alive. There was even a light the shade of sunrise  
inside  
your window.

*God must be a season*, grandma said, looking out at the blizzard  
drowning  
her garden.

My footsteps on the sidewalk were the smallest flights.

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.

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## The Smallest Measure

Behind the fallen oak,  
the Winchester rattles  
in a boy's early hands.

A copper beard grazes  
his ear. *Go ahead.*  
*She's all yours...*

Heavy with summer, I  
am the doe whose one hoof cocks  
like a question ready to open

roots. & like any god  
-forsaken thing, I want nothing more  
than my breaths. To lift

this snout, carved  
from centuries of hunger, toward the next  
low peach bruising

in the season's clutch.  
*Go ahead*, the voice thicker  
now, *drive her*

*home.* But the boy is crying  
into the carcass of a tree—cheeks smeared

with snot & chipped bark.

Once, I came near  
enough to a man to smell  
a woman's scent

in his quiet praying—  
as some will do before raising  
their weapons closer

to the sky. But through the grained mist  
that makes this morning's minutes,  
this smallest measure

of distance, I see two arms unhinging  
the rifle from the boy's grip,  
its metallic shine

sharpened through wet leaves.  
I see the rifle... the rifle coming  
down, then gone. I see

an orange cap touching  
an orange cap. No, a man  
bending over his son

the way the hunted,  
for centuries, must bend  
over its own reflection

to drink.



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## Daily Bread

*Củ Chi, Vietnam*

Red is only black remembering.  
Early dark & the baker wakes  
to press what's left of the year  
into flour & water. Or rather,  
he's reshaping the curve of her pale calf  
atmosphered by a landmine left over  
from the war he can't recall. A fistful  
of hay & the oven scarlets. Alfalfa.  
Forsythia. Foxglove. Bubbling  
dough. When it's done, he'll tear open  
the yeasty steam only to find  
his palms—the same  
as when he was young. When heaviness  
was not measured by weight  
but distance. He'll climb  
the spiral staircase & call her name.  
He'll imagine the softness of bread  
as he peels back the wool blanket, raises  
her phantom limb to his lips as each kiss  
dissolves down her air-light ankles.  
& he will never see the pleasure  
this brings to her face. Never

her face. Because in my hurry  
to make her real, make her  
here, I will forget to write  
a bit of light into the room.  
Because my hands were always brief  
& dim as my father's.  
& it will start to rain. I won't  
even think to put a roof over the house—  
her prosthetic leg on the nightstand,  
the *clack clack* as it fills to the brim. Listen,  
the year is gone. I know  
nothing of my country. I write things  
down. I build a life & tear it apart  
& the sun keeps shining. Crescent  
wave. Salt-spray. Tsunami. I have  
enough ink to give you the sea  
but not the ships, but it's my book  
& I'll say anything just to stay inside  
this skin. Sassafras. Douglas fir.  
Sextant & compass. Let's call this autumn  
where my father sits in a \$40 motel  
outside Fresno, rattling from the whiskey  
again. His fingers blurred  
like a photograph. Marvin on the stereo  
pleading *brother, brother*. & how  
could I have known, that by pressing  
this pen to paper, I was touching us  
back from extinction? That we were more

than black ink on the bone  
-white backs of angels facedown  
in the blazing orchard. Ink poured  
into the shape of a woman's calf. A woman  
I could go back & erase & erase  
but I won't. I won't tell you how  
the mouth will never be honest  
as its teeth. How this  
bread, daily broken, dipped  
in honey—& lifted  
with exodus tongues, like any other  
lie—is only true as your trust  
in hunger. How my father, all famine  
& fissure, will wake at 4 a.m.  
in a windowless room & not remember  
his legs. *Go head, baby*, he will say, *put yor han*  
*on mai bak*, because he will believe  
I am really there, that his son  
has been standing behind him all  
these years. *Put yor hans on mai showduh*,  
he will say to the cigarette smoke swirling  
into the ghost of a boy, *Now flap. Yeah, lye dat, baby.*  
*Flap lye yu waving gootbai. See?*  
*I telling yu... I telling yu. Yor daddy?*  
*He fly.*

## Odysseus Redux

He entered my room like a shepherd  
stepping out of a Caravaggio.

All that remains of the sentence  
is a line  
of black hair stranded  
at my feet.

Back from the wind, he called to me  
with a mouthful of crickets—  
smoke & jasmine rising  
from his hair. I waited  
for the night to wane  
into decades—before reaching  
for his hands. Then we danced  
without knowing it: my shadow  
deepening his on the shag.

Outside, the sun kept rising.  
One of its red petals fell  
through the window—& caught

on his tongue. I tried

to pluck it out

but was stopped

by my own face, the mirror,

its cracking, the crickets, every syllable

spilling through.

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## Logophobia

Afterward, I woke  
    into the red dark  
to write  
    gia đình  
on this yellow pad.

Looking through the letters  
    I can see  
into the earth  
    below, the blue blur  
of bones.

Quickly—  
    I drill the ink  
into a period.  
    The deepest hole,  
where the bullet,

after piercing  
    my father's back,  
has come  
    to rest.

Quickly—I climb  
  
inside.

I enter  
my life  
the way words  
entered me—

by falling  
through  
the silence  
of this wide  
open mouth

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## Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong

Ocean, don't be afraid.  
The end of the road is so far ahead  
it is already behind us.  
Don't worry. Your father is only your father  
until one of you forgets. Like how the spine  
won't remember its wings  
no matter how many times our knees  
kiss the pavement. Ocean,  
are you listening? The most beautiful part  
of your body is wherever  
your mother's shadow falls.  
Here's the house with childhood  
whittled down to a single red trip wire.  
Don't worry. Just call it *horizon*  
& you'll never reach it.  
Here's today. Jump. I promise it's not  
a lifeboat. Here's the man  
whose arms are wide enough to gather  
your leaving. & here the moment,  
just after the lights go out, when you can still see  
the faint torch between his legs.  
How you use it again & again  
to find your own hands.  
You asked for a second chance

& are given a mouth to empty out of.  
Don't be afraid, the gunfire  
is only the sound of people  
trying to live a little longer  
& failing. Ocean. Ocean—  
get up. The most beautiful part of your body  
is where it's headed. & remember,  
loneliness is still time spent  
with the world. Here's  
the room with everyone in it.  
Your dead friends passing  
through you like wind  
through a wind chime. Here's a desk  
with the gimp leg & a brick  
to make it last. Yes, here's a room  
so warm & blood-close,  
I swear, you will wake—  
& mistake these walls  
for skin.

## Devotion

Instead, the year begins  
with my knees  
scraping hardwood,  
another man leaving  
into my throat. Fresh snow  
crackling on the window,  
each flake a letter  
from an alphabet  
I've shut out for good.  
Because the difference  
between prayer & mercy  
is how you move  
the tongue. I press mine  
to the navel's familiar  
whorl, molasses threads  
descending toward  
devotion. & there's nothing  
more holy than holding  
a man's heartbeat between  
your teeth, sharpened  
with too much  
air. This mouth the last  
entry into January, silenced  
with fresh snow crackling

on the window.  
& so what—if my feathers  
are burning. I  
never asked for flight.  
Only to feel  
this fully, this  
entire, the way snow  
touches bare skin—& is,  
suddenly, snow  
no longer.

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## 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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Also by Ocean Vuong

*No*

*Burnings*

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## 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 Masturbation” 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.

Thank you to my dear friends, teachers, and edotprs for helping me.

Thank you, Peter, for Peter.

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ISBN: 978-1-55659-495-3

eISBN: 978-1-61932-156-4

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Ellie Mathews and Carl Youngmann as The North Press

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The Seattle Foundation

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C.D. Wright and Forrest Gander

Charles and Barbara Wright

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