

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

OCEAN VUONG

On Earth
We're Briefly
Gorgeous

'A MASTERPIECE'
MAX PORTER

ALSO BY OCEAN VUONG

Night Sky with Exit Wounds



on earth

we're briefly

gorgeous

A Novel

OCEAN VUONG

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For my mother

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*But let me see if—using these words as a little plot of land
and my life as a cornerstone—
I can build you a center.*

—Qiu Miaojin

*I want to tell you the truth, and already I have told you
about the wide rivers.*

—Joan Didion



I

L et me begin again.

Dear Ma,

I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. I am writing to go back to the time, at the rest stop in Virginia, when you stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hung over the soda machine by the restrooms, its antlers shadowing your face. In the car, you kept shaking your head. “I don’t understand why they would do that. Can’t they see it’s a corpse? A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that.”

I think now of that buck, how you stared into its black glass eyes and saw your reflection, your whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror. How it was not the grotesque mounting of a decapitated animal that shook you—but that the taxidermy embodied a death that won’t finish, a death that keeps dying as we walk past it to relieve ourselves.

I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*. But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey.

Autumn. Somewhere over Michigan, a colony of monarch butterflies, numbering more than fifteen thousand, are beginning their yearly migration south. In the span of two months, from September to November, they will move, one wing beat at a time, from southern Canada and the United States to portions of central Mexico, where they will spend the winter.

They perch among us, on windowsills and chain-link fences, clotheslines still blurred from the just-hung weight of clothes, the

hood of a faded-blue Chevy, their wings folding slowly, as if being put away, before snapping once, into flight.

It only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation. To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing.

That time when I was five or six and, playing a prank, leapt out at you from behind the hallway door, shouting, “Boom!” You screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. I stood bewildered, my toy army helmet tilted on my head. I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn’t know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom.

That time, in third grade, with the help of Mrs. Callahan, my ESL teacher, I read the first book that I loved, a children’s book called *Thunder Cake*, by Patricia Polacco. In the story, when a girl and her grandmother spot a storm brewing on the green horizon, instead of shuttering the windows or nailing boards on the doors, they set out to bake a cake. I was unmoored by this act, its precarious yet bold refusal of common sense. As Mrs. Callahan stood behind me, her mouth at my ear, I was pulled deeper into the current of language. The story unfurled, its storm rolled in as she spoke, then rolled in once more as I repeated the words. To bake a cake in the eye of a storm; to feed yourself sugar on the cusp of danger.



The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning. My mouth a blaze of touch.

The time I tried to teach you to read the way Mrs. Callahan taught me, my lips to your ear, my hand on yours, the words moving underneath the shadows we made. But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered. After the stutters and false starts, the sentences warped or locked in your throat, after the embarrassment of failure, you slammed the book shut. “I don’t

need to read,” you said, your expression crunched, and pushed away from the table. “I can *see*—it’s gotten me this far, hasn’t it?”

Then the time with the remote control. A bruised welt on my forearm I would lie about to my teachers. “I fell playing tag.”

The time, at forty-six, when you had a sudden desire to color. “Let’s go to Walmart,” you said one morning. “I need coloring books.” For months, you filled the space between your arms with all the shades you couldn’t pronounce. *Magenta, vermilion, marigold, pewter, juniper, cinnamon*. Each day, for hours, you slumped over landscapes of farms, pastures, Paris, two horses on a windswept plain, the face of a girl with black hair and skin you left blank, left white. You hung them all over the house, which started to resemble an elementary school classroom. When I asked you, “Why coloring, why now?” you put down the sapphire pencil and stared, dreamlike, at a half-finished garden. “I just go away in it for a while,” you said, “but I feel everything. Like I’m still here, in this room.”

The time you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hardwood dotted with blood.

“Have you ever made a scene,” you said, filling in a Thomas Kinkade house, “and then put yourself inside it? Have you ever watched yourself from behind, going further and deeper into that landscape, away from you?”

How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging?

“I’m sorry,” you said, bandaging the cut on my forehead. “Grab your coat. I’ll get you McDonald’s.” Head throbbing, I dipped chicken nuggets in ketchup as you watched. “You have to get bigger and stronger, okay?”



I reread Roland Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* yesterday, the book he wrote each day for a year after his mother’s death. *I have known the body of my mother, he writes, sick and then dying*. And that’s where I stopped. Where I decided to write to you. You who are still alive.

Those Saturdays at the end of the month when, if you had money left over after the bills, we'd go to the mall. Some people dressed up to go to church or dinner parties; we dressed to the nines to go to a commercial center off I-91. You would wake up early, spend an hour doing your makeup, put on your best sequined black dress, your one pair of gold hoop earrings, black lamé shoes. Then you would kneel and smear a handful of pomade through my hair, comb it over.

Seeing us there, a stranger couldn't tell that we bought our groceries at the local corner store on Franklin Avenue, where the doorway was littered with used food stamp receipts, where staples like milk and eggs cost three times more than they did in the suburbs, where the apples, wrinkled and bruised, lay in a cardboard box soaked on the bottom with pig's blood that had leaked from the crate of loose pork chops, the ice long melted.

"Let's get the fancy chocolates," you'd say, pointing to the Godiva chocolatier. We would get a small paper bag containing maybe five or six squares of chocolate we had picked at random. This was often all we bought at the mall. Then we'd walk, passing one back and forth until our fingers shone inky and sweet. "This is how you enjoy your life," you'd say, sucking your fingers, their pink nail polish chipped from a week of giving pedicures.

The time with your fists, shouting in the parking lot, the late sun etching your hair red. My arms shielding my head as your knuckles thudded around me.

Those Saturdays, we'd stroll the corridors until, one by one, the shops pulled shut their steel gates. Then we'd make our way to the bus stop down the street, our breaths floating above us, the makeup drying on your face. Our hands empty except for our hands.



Out my window this morning, just before sunrise, a deer stood in a fog so dense and bright that the second one, not too far away, looked like the unfinished shadow of the first.

You can color that in. You can call it "The History of Memory."

Migration can be triggered by the angle of sunlight, indicating a change in season, temperature, plant life, and food supply. Female monarchs lay eggs along the route. Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, more than the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.

What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?

That time at the Chinese butcher, you pointed to the roasted pig hanging from its hook. “The ribs are just like a person’s after they’re burned.” You let out a clipped chuckle, then paused, took out your pocketbook, your face pinched, and recounted our money.

What is a country but a life sentence?

The time with a gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone, then a steady white rain on the kitchen tiles.

The time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me because I was too scared to do it alone. How you threw up afterward, your whole head in the garbage can. How, in my screeching delight, I forgot to say *Thank you*.

The time we went to Goodwill and piled the cart with items that had a yellow tag, because on that day a yellow tag meant an additional fifty percent off. I pushed the cart and leaped on the back bar, gliding, feeling rich with our bounty of discarded treasures. It was your birthday. We were splurging. “Do I look like a real American?” you said, pressing a white dress to your length. It was slightly too formal for you to have any occasion to wear, yet casual enough to hold a *possibility* of use. A chance. I nodded, grinning. The cart was so full by then I no longer saw what was ahead of me.

The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, “Get out. Get out.” And I ran out the

door, down the black summer streets. I ran until I forgot I was ten, until my heartbeat was all I could hear of myself.

The time, in New York City, a week after cousin Phuong died in the car wreck, I stepped onto the uptown 2 train and saw his face, clear and round as the doors opened, looking right at me, alive. I gasped—but knew better, that it was only a man who resembled him. Still, it upended me to see what I thought I’d never see again—the features so exact, heavy jaw, open brow. His name lunged to the fore of my mouth before I caught it. Aboveground, I sat on a hydrant and called you. “Ma, I saw him,” I breathed. “Ma, I swear I saw him. I know it’s stupid but I saw Phuong on the train.” I was having a panic attack. And you knew it. For a while you said nothing, then started to hum the melody to “Happy Birthday.” It was not my birthday but it was the only song you knew in English, and you kept going. And I listened, the phone pressed so hard to my ear that, hours later, a pink rectangle was still imprinted on my cheek.

I am twenty-eight years old, 5ft 4in tall, 112lbs. I am handsome at exactly three angles and deadly from everywhere else. I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son.

If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast.

The time, at the nail salon, I overheard you consoling a customer over her recent loss. While you painted her nails, she spoke, between tears. “I lost my baby, my little girl, Julie. I can’t believe it, she was my strongest, my oldest.”

You nodded, eyes sober behind your mask. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” you said in English, “don’t cry. Your Julie,” you went on, “how she die?”

“Cancer,” the lady said. “And in the backyard, too! She died right there in the backyard, dammit.”

You put down her hand, took off your mask. Cancer. You leaned forward. “My mom, too, she die from the cancer.” The room went quiet. Your co-workers shifted in their seats. “But what happen in backyard, why she die there?”

The woman wiped her eyes. “That’s where she lives. Julie’s my horse.”

You nodded, put on your mask, and got back to painting her nails. After the woman left, you flung the mask across the room. “A fucking horse?” you said in Vietnamese. “Holy shit, I was ready to go to her daughter’s grave with flowers!” For the rest of the day, while you worked on one hand or another, you would look up and shout, “It was a fucking horse!” and we’d all laugh.



The time, at thirteen, when I finally said stop. Your hand in the air, my cheek bone stinging from the first blow. “Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please.” I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies. You turned away and, saying nothing, put on your brown wool coat and walked to the store. “I’m getting eggs,” you said over your shoulder, as if nothing had happened. But we both knew you’d never hit me again.

Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes.

When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?

The time I woke into an ink-blue hour, my head—no, the house—filled with soft music. My feet on cool hardwood, I walked to your room. Your bed was empty. “Ma,” I said, still as a cut flower over the music. It was Chopin, and it was coming from the closet. The door

etched in reddish light, like the entrance to a place on fire. I sat outside it, listening to the overture and, underneath that, your steady breathing. I don't know how long I was there. But at one point I went back to bed, pulled the covers to my chin until it stopped, not the song but my shaking. "Ma," I said again, to no one, "come back. Come back out."

You once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creation. How so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing. The eye, alone in its socket, doesn't even know there's another one, just like it, an inch away, just as hungry, as empty. Opening the front door to the first snowfall of my life, you whispered, "Look."

The time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother."

What do we mean when we say survivor? Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts.

The morning closed in around us.

I put down the book. The heads of the green beans went on snapping. They thunked in the steel sink like fingers. "You're not a monster," I said.

But I lied.

What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.

I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war. To say

possessing a heartbeat is never as simple as the heart's task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body.

I don't know.

What I do know is that back at Goodwill you handed me the white dress, your eyes glazed and wide. "Can you read this," you said, "and tell me if it's fireproof?" I searched the hem, studied the print on the tag, and, not yet able to read myself, said, "Yeah." Said it anyway. "Yeah," I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. "It's fireproof."

Days later, a neighborhood boy, riding by on his bike, would see me wearing that very dress—I had put it on thinking I would look more like you—in the front yard while you were at work. At recess the next day, the kids would call me *freak*, *fairy*, *fag*. I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster*.

Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed, their tiny black-and-red wings jittering like debris that kept blowing, for thousands of miles across the sky, so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof.

"That's so good to know, baby." You stared off, stone-faced, over my shoulder, the dress held to your chest. "That's so good."

You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can't turn away from you. Which is why I have taken god's loneliest creation and put you inside it.

Look.

In a previous draft of this letter, one I've since deleted, I told you how I came to be a writer. How I, the first in our family to go to college, squandered it on a degree in English. How I fled my shitty high school to spend my days in New York lost in library stacks, reading obscure texts by dead people, most of whom never dreamed a face like mine floating over their sentences—and least of all that those sentences would save me. But none of that matters now. What matters is that all of it, even if I didn't know it then, brought me here, to this page, to tell you everything you'll never know.

What happened was that I was a boy once and bruiseless. I was eight when I stood in the one-bedroom apartment in Hartford staring at Grandma Lan's sleeping face. Despite being your mother, she is nothing like you; her skin three shades darker, the color of dirt after a rainstorm, spread over a skeletal face whose eyes shone like chipped glass. I can't say what made me leave the green pile of army men and walk over to where she lay under a blanket on the hardwood, arms folded across her chest. Her eyes moved behind their lids as she slept. Her forehead, lashed deep with lines, marked her fifty-six years. A fly landed on the side of her mouth, then skittered to the edge of her purplish lips. Her left cheek spasmed a few seconds. The skin, pocked with large black pores, rippled in the sunlight. I had never seen so much movement in sleep before—except in dogs who run in dreams none of us will ever know.

But it was stillness, I realize now, that I sought, not of her body, which kept ticking as she slept, but of her mind. Only in this twitching quiet did her brain, wild and explosive during waking hours, cool itself into something like calm. I'm watching a stranger, I thought, one whose lips creased into an expression of contentment alien to the Lan I knew awake, the one whose sentences rambled and rattled out of her, her schizophrenia only worse now since the war.

But wildness is how I had always known her. Ever since I could remember, she flickered before me, dipping in and out of sense. Which was why, studying her now, tranquil in the afternoon light, was like looking back in time.

The eye opened. Glazed by a milky film of sleep, it widened to hold my image. I stood against myself, pinned by the shaft of light through the window. Then the second eye opened, this one slightly pink but clearer. “You hungry, Little Dog?” she asked, her face expressionless, as if still asleep.

I nodded.

“What should we eat in a time like this?” She gestured around the room.

A rhetorical question, I decided, and bit my lip.

But I was wrong. “I said *What* can we eat?” She sat up, her shoulder-length hair splayed out behind her like a cartoon character just blasted with TNT. She crawled over, squatted before the toy army men, picked one up from the pile, pinched it between her fingers, and studied it. Her nails, perfectly painted and manicured by you, with your usual precision, were the only unblemished thing about her. Decorous and ruby-glossed, they stood out from her callused and chapped knuckles as she held the soldier, a radio operator, and examined it as though a newly unearthed artifact.

A radio mounted to his back, the soldier crouches on one knee, shouting forever into the receiver. His attire suggests he’s fighting in WWII. “Who yoo arrgh, messieur?” she asked the plastic man in broken English and French. In one jerking motion, she pressed his radio to her ear and listened intently, her eyes on me. “You know what they telling me, Little Dog?” she whispered in Vietnamese. “They say—” She dipped her head to one side, leaned in to me, her breath a mix of Ricola cough drops and the meaty scent of sleep, the little green man’s head swallowed by her ear. “They say good soldiers only win when their grandmas feed them.” She let out a single, clipped cackle—then stopped, her expression suddenly blank, and placed the radio man in my hand, closed it into a fist. Like that she rose and shuffled off to the kitchen, her sandals clapping behind her. I clutched the message, the plastic antennae stabbing my palm as the