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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.

Night Sky with Exit Wounds Details

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Author	:	Ocean Vuong
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From Reader Review Night Sky with Exit Wounds for online ebook

Larry H says

The most beautiful part of your body
is where it's headed, & remember
loneliness is still time spent
with the world.

To read Ocean Vuong's ***Night Sky with Exit Wounds*** is to be dazzled by gorgeous lyricism. I picked this up as part of my exploration of contemporary poetry I have been experimenting with over the last several weeks. It's amazing the breadth of talent that exists in this genre.

I realized after reading the first few sentences of Vuong's first poem just how talented he is. It certainly explains why this book won the 2016 Whiting Award and the 2017 T.S. Eliot Prize, because some of his stanzas simply took my breath away.

Use it to prove how the stars
were always what we knew
they were the exit wounds
of every
misfired word.

Vuong spent the first two years of his life living in a refugee camp, and he never knew his father. This sense of emptiness is palpable through many of the 35 poems in this collection, as Vuong imagines reasons why his father wasn't part of his life. He imagines his father meeting violent or tragic, accidental ends, or even being imprisoned. In several poems, he imagines encounters with his father at various stages of his life.

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.

Some of the poems touch on mythological themes, some touch on more realistic, violent ones, exploring the experience of Vietnamese refugees. One poem, "Aubade with Burning City," is based on the fact that Armed Forces Radio played the song "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 in 1975. The poem juxtaposes verse with lyric fragments from the song, to beautiful effect.

The more poetry I've been reading, the more I realize that just as I prefer "traditional" short stories over those which take more experimental forms and narratives, I feel the same way about poetry. At times, Vuong experiments with form, language, even writes a poem using footnotes, and those poems didn't work for me.

In the end, however, ***Night Sky with Exit Wounds*** is at times contemplative, fiery, even erotic. Vuong's power lies in his words, and the emotions he conveys through them. While poetry doesn't get the type of recognition fiction and other genres get, Vuong definitely deserves to be heralded as an artist for our time.

See all of my reviews at itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com, or check out my list of the best books I read in 2017 at https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-best-books-i-read-in-2017.html.

Meg Tuite says

Mesmerizing, unforgettable, and a heart open in your hand. Vuong holds back nothing. This is one to reread and keep on the desk. To hold tight to the connection of why we write!

"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..."

"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..."

Get this collection! You won't get closer to a heartbeat than this!

Roxane says

This is a lovely lovely book of poems. Nearly every poem ended in a way that left me saying "mmmmm" with pleasure or admiration or the quiet of feeling stunned by such beautiful words.

Tyler Goodson says

Read this one hundred times.

Jenna says

"There are seagulls above us. There are hands fluttering between the constellations, trying to hold on....

"Everyone can forget us -- as long as you remember."

-Ocean Vuong, from "Immigrant Haibun"

...

I admire Vuong's use of repetition, of theme and variation, in poems like "Threshold" and "Trojan." While I often gravitate toward more traditionally structured, more metrically restricted verse than Vuong's, I concede that it is exactly his preference for unmetered lines that allows him to use repetition to utmost effect: unlike in a traditionally structured poem like a villanelle, you never know in advance when -- or if -- a motif in a Vuong poem will recur, and it's this element of surprise, this element of organic timing, that enchants.

In addition to the poems I've already named, poems in this collection that positively surprised me include "Daily Bread" (I totally did not see the risky ending of this poem approaching).

Reading this book feels like being loved. Unlike some poems out there, Vuong's poems aren't mere defiances ("This is what I've lived, this is the way I see things, and I defy you to gainsay this, to hate this, to pick up the gauntlet I've dropped"), nor are they mere demonstrations of strength, of wit, of skill. Rather, they're full-blown interactive cinematic experiences that connect with you, the Reader; they let you in; they embrace. I think this is because this poet lives by surrounding himself with people he loves, and writing for people he loves. Reading his poems, you don't get the sense that he is one of those poets of fiction who lives alone in a lair, squinting at the world outside as though it were a sea-monster and poking at it from time to time with a long stick. Reading these poems makes me want to live a more loving life.

Eric Norris says

I don’t know if you will enjoy the book Night Sky With Exit Wounds, by Ocean Vuong. That depends on you: how closely you read it, how often, and your individual taste. I read it twice. You might read it more. Or less. Or never. Or never again. Or learn it by heart. Always a nice thing to do with poetry.

I should warn you though. Buying it entails a small financial risk that you will have to undertake.

Unless you receive it as a gift for your birthday, or on Halloween, or some other happy occasion.

You might.

My chief criticism of this book, and it is a minor one, I think, is in the choice of titles: I do not see exit wounds as poetry. After two readings, I am not sure who is to blame for this. Either the author has failed to persuade me that a Night Sky With Exit Wounds is poetry or it is a failure of imagination on my part.

The fault is probably my own.

I can’t help seeing exit wounds as exit wounds. Only exit wounds. Exit wounds are not really poetry for me. I found some on the internet. I was surprised to discover that there are sites that specialize in exit wounds. There are. They cater to a very select group of connoisseurs, I suspect.

I wonder if the author consulted them while kicking around titles?

There are millions of photographs.

You see, when I think of exit wounds, I see trials. Not imaginary trials. Real ones. A private one, maybe, followed by a public one. I see a judge and a jury and someone else, with a black hood obscuring his identity. Everything else surrounding the exit wounds is somewhat hazy. The exit wounds eat up all the good publicity.

Sensational as it is, I find it a dark and nasty image. That might be me being squeamish, true. I do get dizzy giving blood. Yet, I can't help feeling there is more to my reaction than that.

Nobody who has run across a few shattered femurs with a plow while farming in France—nobody who has run away naked and barefoot, small and brown and screaming, from a hot Martini-Henry rifle—nobody who has had her recently raped guts blasted out, for fun, by a religious zany in Mesopotamia—the Cradle of Civilization—nobody but a fool would traffic in exit wounds casually.

No, no, I don't really care for the title.

First impressions count.

Consider the cover.

Have you seen the book's cover?

Let me describe it.

There is no night sky, first of all. No stars. Only people. Old fashioned people. Three innocent people with a doomed feel to them. Two adults and one child. Possibly the child is the author. They are blindfolded people. They are blindfolded by banners announcing a night filled with exit wounds and the author's name. There is a vaguely pornographic feel to the whole arrangement. The image is weirdly saturated. Stuffy. Snuffish.

No, I don't like it.

You might feel differently.

You might say that I am just being picky.

Maybe I am.

Again, I don't know.

I do know that the author had to approve that image for publication.

What was he thinking?

Now, please, before anyone panics, I am not from the F.B.I. I am not a prosecuting attorney. I have no training in the law. I am a professional nobody. I am simply looking through my notes, asking a few questions, and making a few remarks and observations.

I hold no particular brief against blindfolded people. Many are perfectly fine, upstanding citizens. Justice

herself is blindfolded, after all. Blindfolds have been used—with great success—by E.L. James, the author of Fifty Shades of Grey. As a graphic designer, Goya used blindfolds, too, in a number of popular prints about Napoleon's Peninsular Campaign. Blindfolds have a long and distinguished history. They are convenient devices to have on hand if you are planning to set up a trial or a sex dungeon or if you happen to be working with soldiers in the field.

I am less certain what those blindfolds are doing here.

What do they say?

I know, I know, to the nervous mobster granted anonymity in court, to the Conservative M.P. tied to a furry pink post in an English dungeon, to the Spanish peasant standing up against a broken blood-bespattered wall and facing men with muskets in the early nineteenth century, a blindfold might look attractive, sexy, even merciful: a perverse gesture of mercy, welcome as a cigarette, but ultimately pointless.

Still, gestures of mercy are nice gestures to make. I often make gestures of mercy myself, perverse and pointless as those gestures might seem to some. Ask any innocent person who has been condemned to death, the ones with the most skin in the game, they all say the same thing: blindfolds are little reminders of what we might be, ideally—civilized.

Looked at from this angle, every act of creation is a shot in the dark, really. Night Sky With Exit Wounds is no exception to this rule. Ocean Vuong is no exception to this rule. This review and this reviewer are no exception to this rule. We might be snatched from our lives and called to account for ourselves in the Heavens at any time. It is a dangerous world out there. You never know.

Bearing that in mind, the last thing I wish to do is discourage Ocean Vuong, E.L. James, Goya, you, me, the man down the street from having their say in their own merry way—in books, in bed, on the battlefield, up an alley, past the poetry reading, piercing the night with screams. That is why they make earplugs, as well as blindfolds. To deny any artist the liberty of his own voice would, I think, violate the 1st Amendment, and plunge the literary world—not a very mentally healthy institution in the best of times—into a nail-biting, never-ending downward spiral of despair and rage.

However.

It must be said, that, lining up people—dressing their eyes with banners—execution-style—on the cover—before they enjoy a moment's life in the reader's imagination—seems a bit, well, cold.

I don't get it.

Look at those people.

Those poor people.

Absent eyes, dead skies, exit wounds: "...dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips to beg the voice and utterance of my tongue..." one might say. It is not that exit wounds bother me politically, in theory, per se. There are the blindfolds to fall back on, as I pointed out earlier. And art. There is Greek tragedy, where everything gooey and gory happens off stage. I have seen worse on tumblr, frankly, in flagrant full-color. Some pretty fresh images, too.

I guess what bothers me is how inhuman it all feels. How disturbingly deliberate. How contrived. How tacky. How little these hypothetical exit wounds correspond to their grisly reality. How that gap between art and life gapes at us through empty space and is never transcended. Not for an instant. Not anywhere. Not with one single, solitary, unpremeditated tear.

It is not a pretty picture.

Anyway, for me, the most extraordinary thing about the book—the thing that sets it apart from so many other recent books in my imagination—is that I actually bought a copy based on the buzz—which I almost never do—and that I read the book carefully and seriously—which I always do—beginning with the front cover. When I close a book, I always like to look back at the front cover, retrospectively, to see where I have been.

That's where I am now.

Of course, I know you shouldn't judge a book by the front cover. I am not doing that today. But, sometimes, superficial as it is, the cover of a book has something important to say, too.

Something just as important as the blurb on the back.

Or what's inside.

You will have to judge that for yourself.

Trish says

Published in 2016, this is Ocean Vuong's first full collection of poetry. We will never know how a boy emerges, so young, with a talent so great. A poem chosen at random lights deep, protected nodes in our brain and attaches to our viscera. We recognize his work as surely as we appreciate a painting, or a piece of music. He appears a conduit, not a creator.

One of the poems in this collection has a title referencing a Mark Rothko painting. Glancing at it, we know immediately why he pairs it with these words.

> *Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown, 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.

It was the phrase *How we live like water: wetting a new tongue with no telling what we've been through*. That phrase stopped me.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Vuong says “life is always more complicated than the headlines allow; poetry comes in when the news is not enough.” Vuong won awards for this collection, and gained recognition. He now is an associate professor in the MFA program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and writing a novel.

In an interview with *Lit Hub* Vuong explains

> “I’m writing a novel composed of woven inter-genre fragments. To me, a book made entirely out of unbridged fractures feels most faithful to the physical and psychological displacement I experience as a human being. I’m interested in a novel that consciously rejects the notion that something has to be whole in order to tell a complete story. I also want to interrogate the arbitrary measurements of a “successful” literary work, particularly as it relates to canonical Western values. For example, we traditionally privilege congruency and balance in fiction, we want our themes linked, our conflicts “resolved,” and our plots “ironed out.” But when one arrives at the page through colonized, plundered, and erased histories and diasporas, to write a smooth and cohesive novel is to ultimately write a lie.”

Vuong brings with him the possibility of a vision that is articulate enough to share, brave enough to bolster. It's a kind of blessing, a grace note we don't really deserve, his voice.

Vuong’s poetry is available as an ebook from many libraries. He’s what we call a ‘literary light.’

Boustrophedon says

This is the first full-length collection by Ocean Vuong, a rather thoughtless writer who is careless with words and who has never crossed a pathos he didn't immediately take. Voung has a second-rate imagination that never goes beyond his favorite subject, which is Vuong (see his New Yorker poem, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," which is literally addressed to himself, as an example). Page after page exhibits poor writing: in "Prayer for the Newly Damned" he writes "what becomes of the shepherds/ when the sheep are cannibals?" Nothing happens to the shepherds when the sheep are cannibals; the word he meant to use but did not is "carnivorous" or "carnivores." Patterns emerge. Vuong chooses words with as much accuracy as a blindfolded child pinning a tail on a donkey. Take a recent poem of his not in this collection, "Tell Me Something Good," which goes "his bald head ringed with red hair, like a planet on fire." If the planet were on fire, which is impossible of course, but no matter the inane metaphor, the planet would be engulfed in fire, not ringed, which suggests a different, non-engulfing image. Or this trite simile from "Aubade with Burning City": "On the nightstand, a sprig of magnolia expands like a secret heard for the first time." Every line of every poem sounds like it means something, until one actually dissects it and realizes there is nothing

underneath the thick sentimentality. (One might also note that reviews rarely engage with the poems on a line-by-line basis, which would reveal their shallowness.) And every line is so overwrought as to be insincere: "For hunger is to give / the body what it knows / it cannot keep." Vuong is almost thirty; that previous example is not what I consider to be worthy of a so-called emerging poet.

Though Vuong is not emerging. This is his third book if we count his two chapbooks, which we should because they are not much slimmer than this collection. I don't think Vuong will ever get better. He has his market--which I imagine overlaps with buyers of Thomas Kinkade paintings or Precious Moments figurines--and he is easily marketable (and exotifiable: publications love to make note of his unusual name and his concocted backstory, which often becomes the focus instead of the poems).

Anyway, recommended if you like poems that seem like they just peed themselves in the corner of the room.

Ellie says

A powerful collection of poems, about desire, longing, war, and loss. Vuong writes of the shattering effects of the Vietnamese war for the people of Vietnam. His poems are shot through with desire: for others, for sex, for meaning, as well as loss: of people, of love. The world and he are the scars of love and longing, stars the exit wounds of the bullets of pain we survive (or don't).

I felt drunk reading these poems, drunk on the words. Rich and as laden with beauty as a flower is with scent. I read each poem multiple times, each reading deepening the experience.

Read this book.

Michael says

Sparse and suggestive, the poems benefit from several readings: Vuong's language has a way of blossoming when read closely. Favorites included "Homewrecker," "Into the Breach," and "Anaphora as a Coping Mechanism."

Kathleen says

"Silly me. I thought love was real / & the body imaginary."

Ken says

Probably I shouldn't write this review until I reread this book. It's easy enough to do. One book from 35 poems. Probably I shouldn't write this because it came with such high expectations, which are, let's face it, a writer's worst enemies. Me, I'll take low expectations any day. If someone finds something good, I'll be happy. And maybe they will, too.

Ocean has a way with words. Words that demand attention. I still remember the *Beloit Poetry Journal* poem of his I read, "Telemachus." I loved that poem. And here it is, washed ashore in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds.* I hoped I would find another poem that I loved more, but I still loved this one best:

Telemachus

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

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

beyond the shore is no longer
where he 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 and begin
the faithful work of drowning.

Wow. And the father theme is a painful refrain that keeps repeating in this book. Father and prison. Father and alcohol. Father and violence. The exit wounds are all over the page. Here he is again in a poem that landed in some magazine or other called *The New Yorker*:

Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuoung

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 tripwire.
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 into.
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.

Some cool lines I jotted from the book, lines that sound like the ocean cupped to your ear:

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

"Even my name knelt down inside me..."

"Found the way a green bottle might appear at a boy's feet, containing a year he has never touched"

"He moves like any other fracture, revealing the briefest doors..."

"...as the field shreds itself with cricket cries"

As you can see, OV knows his way around a word. He is a deft master of unexpected word pairs. I admit, it didn't always work and sometimes led to the big, "Huh?" but when it does work, it is rewarding work, well-worth sweating over.

And so I toil. And recommend YOU toil, too. Despite occasional misfires, some real winners here. And my old friend Telemachus, too. Forgive us, Father, for we have sinned...

Steven Critelli says

Notwithstanding his youth, by the time *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* was published in early 2016, Ocean Vuong was already well-known as a exciting new poet, with poems in *American Poetry Review, Gulf Coast, The New Yorker, The Poetry Review* and other prominent poetry journals. So it was with much anticipation that I read this book. I regrettably say I was disappointed, partly because I expected a lot more in the way of a wunderkind's talent, with poetry that was as sophisticated as it was effusively expressive. Too many poems fall within a class that meets Terry Eagleton's characterization of Dylan Thomas' "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," in which "an elaborateness of form conceals a paucity of content." Perhaps, Thomas's work is a fitting parallel, where his word music and emotion often outstripped the ideas that eventually drowned in the poem. The best poetry informs, opens vistas on the way we perceive ourselves. Thomas wrote some remarkable poems, but Thomas's reputation has dimmed considerably for the very faults to which Vuong falls prey.

As an initial observation, Vuong's linguistic choices sometimes confused me. "Threshold" begins: "In the body, where everything has a price/I was a beggar." This sentence, as the poem later bears out, requires a broadly metaphoric construction, one not limited to the body as *corpus* -- but rather to the effect of "in a *life*, where everything has its price, I was a beggar" -- and "beggar" is indicative of the absence of something essential, which in this case is not monetary at all. At the poem's conclusion we find the "price" trope leveraged as a word game ("I didn't know the *cost*/of entering a song – was to *lose*/your way back" (my italics)), which diminishes its aesthetic effect. Thus, the ordinary expectations aroused by the poem's introductory line are frustrated. I also had difficulty with the poem's only simile, an awkward and perplexing figure: "His voice—//it filled me to the core/like a *skeleton*" (my italics). One cannot easily shrug the morbidity of "skeleton," but even more to the point, the comparison is inept; a skeleton doesn't "fill" a body. The sense, I believe, is that the father's voice provided something that was elementally missing from the son's life, and this became the "skeleton" (or perhaps skeleton key) to his life; although, as we later learn, the father was mainly notable for his absence, and so it is difficult for the reader to make the emotional connection that Vuong evidently feels. In this and more than a few other poems, Vuong betrays a cognitive dissonance where the art collapses under its own weight.

"Threshold" serves as a preamble that sets the tone for the rest of the book. It figures the poet, as a child, on his knees and looking through the keyhole of the bathroom door as his father sings in the shower. His submissiveness is practiced in order to gain access to his father's inner life and, as we learn in later poems, to make the mythic connection between his "Telemachus" (the title of the following poem) and his father's

"Odysseus." Though, in poems like "Telemachus," "Odysseus Redux," "Eurydice," "Trojan" and others, Vuong's narrative persona takes on an air of grandiosity. If this were theater, it would come off as a serious case of overacting:

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.
("Odysseus Redux")

This has the miasma of T.S. Eliot's orotund Tiresias. The risk of this epic association with classic myth today, however, is that it acts as a foil to contemporary existence, as Jean-François Lyotard argued. If used seriously, as it was until the mid-20th century, one must retreat to the notion that grand narratives universally speak to us, despite the fact that our diverse orientations, perspectives, desires and needs say otherwise. But the real reason for treating classic Greek, Latin and Hebrew myth as a disability is, of course, that the old myths are as dead as the languages that first contained them, and contemporary readers who are not scholars cannot be expected to understand their purpose in a given poem. It would have been more interesting if Vuong had exploited Vietnamese myth and folklore, rather than the old Greek tales with all their Freudian baggage. Indeed, when Vuong brings the Vietnam war into a number of poems (such as "A Little Closer to the Edge," "Aubade for Burning City" and "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds"), it admirably serves as the field upon which the vital myth of family can freely stir the blood of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

As a rule, Vuong tries too hard to make his conceits startling. He turns tricks with enjambments three too many times and introduces metaphors and symbols that don't seem to serve a purpose other than for shock effect. For Vuong no intensification of the image is enough, with shatterings, cracks, swellings, gasps, breakings and trauma galore, in turn made even more so by the replete introductions of bones, bullets, bombs, feculence, ordure, sex and death. The senses are heavily assaulted in poem after poem, and one wonders whether the gentle reader, at some point, will give up on Vuong's pretensions and perforce accept the poetry as surreal projections of a mind needy for attention.

Further, Vuong lets no conceit rest on his laurels, but he must extend it to the breaking point as in, for example, "Devotion":

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.

While the conceit (the purported difference between "prayer and mercy" in the motion of the tongue) is flawed from inception, as a practical matter of versification, the last phrase, "sharpened with too much air," adds little to the expression and dulls the pointed combination of sexuality with the poetic by pushing the conceit "too much." This happens in many other poems, where figurations are overburdened and force the tropes from sense into nonsense.

We observe this fault clearly in his "Ode to Masturbation," a catalogue of one over-the-top trope after another, with the mixed effect of exhilarating images and ideas that repeatedly lose their way:

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 . . .

The transitions are vacant intensifications, for Vuong uses words to arouse the reader's emotions and nothing else. So we have phrases like "sanford towns/whose trees know/the weight of history/can bend their branches/to breaking//lines whose roots burrow/through stones and hard facts," essentially an aleatory run-on of ideas that provide a surplus of "special effects" to make a blockbuster out of a poem with too little to say. The poem fails most notably in its conclusion:

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

Because of their conjunction here, the words "bright" and "empty" lose their compass; the phrase "bullets pass/right through you/thinking/they have found/the sky," which ingenuously ascribes sentience to the inanimate (a Romantic affectation), makes "bullets" cartoonish and "sky" virtually nonexistent; and the awe the poet intends to instill with the last trope is flat-footed, as Vuong, one more time, exhausts Christian myth as metaphor (in a poem purportedly about masturbation). Yet, it is the vain mortgaging of all that was invested to bring us to this point in the poem, which Vuong then cheaply rolls into a simple grammatical trope, that bathetically reduces its value to nil. Here masturbation becomes just another metaphor for logorrhea.

Certainly Vuong's main fault is that he makes problematic choices because he overwrites. In "The Smallest Measure," he portrays a father teaching his son to hunt, drawing forth the boy's sympathetic response to the hunted doe, which does double duty as the poet's alter ego in bloated language:

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.

One might casually overlook Vuong's self-indulgence in caricature with phrases like "Heavy with summer," "any god-forsaken thing" and "snout, carved/ from centuries of hunger," as well as the now customary Vuong signature of trauma in "low peach bruising//in the season's clutch" (describing the maturing peach). Vuong's device here is to make the poem from the doe's POV, endowing it not only with a poetic sensibility, but with omniscience as well. The matter is further complicated by the following lines:

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.

The "woman's scent" in the "quiet praying" of the man could be a reference to the traditional hunt-seduction metaphor, or alternatively, a comment about sensitivity, empathy and even squeamishness (which is traditionally and unfairly made a female trait). Traditionally, if there is any praying in hunting, it is a prayer that God bless the hunter with success which, in turn, will please a woman who expects food on her table. This brings us back to the other side of the seduction metaphor. How the doe should sense the prayer from a women's scent or its relationship to hunting is as problematic as the doe POV, which unnecessarily complicates the poet's relationship to the material and makes us suspect the whole poem as metaphor, one adverse to the poem's professed theme.

When the boy cannot bring himself to pull the trigger and weeps, the father's understanding and gentleness is portrayed to great effect, as he takes the gun away from the boy and touches the boy's head with his own:

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.

The problem, however, is that the pathos in the gesture between father and son has been compromised by the comparison with that of the hunted animal drinking: one act is a matter of compassionate choice, the other an ordinary necessity of life. The Romantic strain in Vuong poetry elevates the natural scene of a doe drinking to a significance that in unearned and unduly presumptive. The *manner* and not the substance of the act is made to govern the simile. Also, the hunter is compared to the hunted (again, in the doe's mind) so that it distorts the tenor and vehicle relationship, the net effect of which renders it mawkish, giving it the character of a Disney cartoon rather than reveal a poetic truth. Even more disconcerting, the whiff of a sexual subtext that Vuong has subtly implied, whether consciously or unconsciously, runs at cross purposes with the theme of the poem, which is ostensibly about the emotional relationship between a father and son (one of the main discourses of the book).

These are just a few illustrations that reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the textual effect of the writing, where similes, metaphors and symbols are routinely overtaxed to weaken rather than strengthen the poetry, all too frequently going beyond what is clearly sufficient and adding the extra brick that topples the wall.

Lastly, a note about the book's rhetorical style as it relates to the poet's credibility. Vuong describes his

family history in graphically detailed and unequivocally melodramatic terms, and, as discussed above, drawn Greek myth into the mix. Though he was not born at the time when the Vietnam war events occurred, the journey that brought his family to the U.S. is depicted as nothing less than Promethean with Hollywood-style highlights (e.g., his parents make love in a bomb crater). The portrayals are vivid and affecting, and Vuong's poetry is luminous even as the subject matter is lurid and unsettling. But one questions the epic character of the underlying events, which Vuong could not have personally witnessed, just as one naturally questions his psychic impersonation of Jacqueline Kennedy ("Of Thee I Sing") at one of the most traumatic and intimately reported events in American history, viz., the assassination of her husband, the U.S. president, in 1963. I think it was a mistake to include "Of Thee I Sing" in this volume because the assassination, even absent reference to it, relates to the Vietnam war. One may rightly dismiss Vuong's quixotic projection into Jackie Kennedy's soul as pure camp, but if that occurs then the authenticity of his family portraits is suspect.

In the end I found the technical difficulties in narrative and figuration, as well as Vuong's melodramatic style, frustrating my attempts to enjoy many of the poems. These are common faults in young poets, even those who display exceptional talent, as Vuong. However, this debut falls woefully short of others I have read in the last year, particularly Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* and Andrew McMillan's *Physical*. Admittedly, those poets seem to me more self-aware about what is happening on the page. I'm not sure Vuong understands the aesthetic nature of his work yet. He's got poetry in his blood, no doubt, and I suspect that he will assert more control over his material as time goes on. Certainly, he's quite capable of renderings that can touch a raw nerve in the reader's cortex. His future success will depend upon a maturation that moves beyond the special effects. Thus, despite my overall opinion of this book (which, I acknowledge, runs against the grain of overwhelming public acclamation), there are some very good poems here that any poet would envy. Whether or not you are receptive to Vuong's charms, the book should be read, for its failures as much as for its successes.

Benji says

“I didn't know the cost
of entering a song - was to lose
your way back.”

Kate says

4/5stars

well this was infinitely better than most other poetry i've read in my life. but its still poetry lol i was lost for about 50% of it and everything went super over my head. BUT. stuff i DID understand, i quite liked. Excited to chat with Prof Vuong about his poetry this week!
