

*Night Sky With Exit Wounds, A Review.*

Listening to Ocean Vuong read his own writing is like being whispered to by a loved one in the morning, when you're so fresh to the day that sleep still pulls your eyelids shut, when you feel the soft pressure of a kiss to your forehead, and your partner shuffles out of bed to make coffee. Vuong's voice curves over each line like he's considering every syllable, even now. He reads the words in complete gentleness and humility. But still, listening to him read his work feels foreign to me.

I picked up *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* from the poetry section of a local bookstore chain because I decided that if I wanted to write poetry now, I might as well read a lot of it. I had only written prose for a very long time as a form of escapism, but now, on the cusp of adulthood, I needed a way to process my history with a bit more clarity. Poetry is the ideal vessel for this, of taking the overwhelming joy or disparity of life and compartmentalizing it into more digestible stanzas of things.

The nature of Vuong's work is that it seems to act as some sort of confession booth. There are truths of his that bleed out on every page, and though you may not know Vuong at the end of *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, you definitely understand some core realities about him. One, is that Ocean Vuong loves his mother. This is depicted in almost everything he's ever written, including whenever he signs his own name. In "Head First," Vuong embodies his mother in order to thank her. He writes, "only a mother can walk / with the weight of a second / beating heart." He also writes, "When they ask you / where you're from, / tell them your name / was fleshed from the toothless mouth / of a war-woman." It would be too simple to say that his

writing celebrates his mother, but it would be inappropriate to say that his poetry celebrates anything, but it communicates truth, and the truth is that he loves her, so much that he will write it over, and over again.

“Seventh Circle of Earth,” starts with a quote from the Dallas Voice about a gay couple who was murdered in their home by immolation. I have this poem printed up and pasted to my wall. Every single time I go to read it, I start sobbing. The poem itself is soft. It’s a love poem, but it isn’t just that. It’s about loving another man and knowing that you’re running out of time, but also knowing that this is the most beautiful thing you can create. And every time that I read it, it feels like an expression of what I love. It feels like the body of every complicated love poem I want to create. And it also reminds me of everything I’m trying to forget.

The thing about Ocean Vuong's writing is that every single line accomplishes this. It feels like every stanza, I have to set the book down for a breath of something. Every poem communicates something delicate that I would never know how to begin to encapsulate myself. And it is beautiful, and as I tore through this book, I cried about a dozen times, and only fully understood half of it. It’s the kind of book you want to read over and over again because you know every time you do it’ll help you understand something intrinsic about yourself. I went through this poetry book like a wildfire, and then I went through it again, and every single time I thought I was touching a different kind of greatness.

What Ocean Vuong accomplishes in his work is something that I idolize. His ability to capture a moment of conflict in his writing, to capture love, and to capture the opposite of love, makes me feel as I am reading it like I’m discovering something new all over again.

And so, you'll understand in what ways hearing him read his own writing wasn't as exciting as I expected to be, and that is a good thing. I strongly believe that his work is so good that everyone who reads it feels a sense of belonging to it, and when he reads, with that melodic, soothing, morning voice, the way he grazed each line didn't match the way that I felt belonging to. Which exists the art as it is to the artist, and then the art in practice. Which, in all, exists the creation of long standing brilliance.