



# Burnings

*Ocean Vuong*

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## Burnings Ocean Vuong

“I was born because someone was starving...” ends one of Ocean Vuong’s poems, and in that poem, as in every other of his poems, Ocean manages to imbue the desperation of his being alive, with a savage beauty. It is not just that Ocean can render pain as a kind of loveliness, but that his poetic line will not let you forget the hurt or the garish brilliance of your triumph; will not let you look away. These poems shatter us detail by detail because Ocean leaves nothing unturned, because every lived thing in his poems demands to be fed by you; to nourish you in turn. You will not leave these poems dissatisfied. They will fill you utterly.”

-Roger Bonair-Agard, author of *Tarnish* and *Masquerade* and *Gully*

“Vuong’s perfectly crafted poems are intensely personal, and intensely universal. What he has to whisper to us sears our eyes and minds like a branding iron, burning. Whether his words are of wars past or present, they are inescapably palpable. This is the work of a gifted cantor, singing of pain, singing of healing.”

-Grady Harp, Amazon Top Reviewer and critic

“Ocean Vuong is a poet of rare lyrical gifts and urgent stories to tell. “Memory,” he writes, “has not forgotten you.” No, it hasn’t forgotten the burning city or the taste of blood nor the hanging of rags or the violence of war. Vuong’s poems are testament to the enduring power of poetry and its place in this human universe.”

-Hoa Nguyen, author of *Hectate Lochia* and *As Long as Trees Last*

## Burnings Details

Date : Published November 15th 2010 by Sibling Rivalry Press

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Author : Ocean Vuong

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## From Reader Review Burnings for online ebook

### Mark says

Superb poetry. This is the beginning of a wonderful poet. I read each poem more than once while going through this chapbook. I will now begin again.

Although it is hard to pick favorites among such great poems, I especially liked "Ars Poetica," "Song of My Mothers," "Revelation," "Gardening with the Son I will never have," and "Ode to Masturbation."

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### Neu says

*Burnings* by Ocean Vuong is collection of poems that punch you in the heart and linger in your thoughts. The first half of the collection focuses on feelings surrounding the Vietnam war, refugees and immigration. Painful and difficult to read but true and still relevant and crucial in today's society.

One of my favorites *Arrival by Fire* opens with a powerful Ilya Kaminsky quote, "What you call immigration, I call suicide." and segues into the struggles of immigration and being a refugee. My favorite lines from the poem were perhaps the most simple and straightforward,

*"When we reached the new wold, we dissipated into shadows, apologized for our clumsy tongues, our far and archaic gods. We changed our names to John, Christian, or Tina. How many mirrors have we tried to prove wrong?"*

The second half of the collection targets (forbidden) same sex love and are more explicit but just as good as the first half. Vuong's prose is beautiful, raw and simplistic and he is on point, focused and extremely lyrically gifted. I am looking forward to reading more of his work.

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### Kathleen says

Ocean Vuong's first chapbook is an extraordinary work. Ocean is in his early 20s, gay and Vietnamese. I am so haunted by his Vietnam: the refugee experience; a bloody history that is present as it is past; a family as loving as they are violent; the poetry of loving a man and gay sex; and heartbreaking politics in lands of terror.

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### Stephen says

AWESOME AWESOME CHAPBOOK! I can't wait until Mr. Vuong puts out a full collection. I will definitely teach this one in the future!

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## Grady says

### Connections and Compassion

It is very difficult to read the poetry of Ocean Vuong: he gets inside the marrow and hides there for even a few moldy moments of memories that we've tried to erase. Perhaps not for everyone, this response. Likely for most these poems he collectively and intuitively titles BURNINGS will be simply the virtuosic, luminous constructions of a vividly experienced/inherited life. Ocean Vuong is Vietnamese, now living and writing and teaching in Brooklyn. He was born in Saigon in 1988, well after the US withdrawal of troops from that grossly wrong war, but his parents and grandparents carry the napalm smells and bitter battles in every cell of their bodies: Vuong's inheritance. And now, years away from that fetid error, his poems ask, if not force, us to recall that cancer that will never go away. So for those of us who experienced the Vietnam of which he speaks these poems are pockets of pain and renewed compassion. And as an example, everyone, no matter what age will recall

THE PHOTO (after the infamous 1968 photo of a Viet Cong guerilla being executed by South Vietnam's national police chief)

What hurts the most  
is not how death  
is made permanent  
by the camera's flash,  
the irony of sunlight  
on gunmetal,  
but the hand gripping the pistol  
is a yellow hand,  
and the face squinting  
behind the barrel,  
a yellow face.

Like all photographs  
this one fails  
to reveal the picture.  
Like where the bullet  
entered his skull,  
the phantom of a rose  
leapt into light, or how,  
after smoke cleared,  
from behind the fool  
with blood on his cheek  
and the dead dog by his feet.

a white man  
was lighting a cigarette.

Ocean Vuong expresses the mind of a refugee as defined as any poet of our time. His poems can arrest the movement of our eyes, forcing them to accept the wrong that cannot be righted. But they can also create strange lullabies he recalls from the past, his past, our past:

KISSING IN VIETNAMESE

My grandmother kisses  
as if bombs are bursting in the backyard,  
where mint and jasmine lace their perfumes  
through the kitchen window,  
as if somewhere, a body is falling apart  
and flames are making their way back  
through the vessels in a young boy's thigh,  
as if to walk out the door, your torso  
would dance with exit wounds.

When my grandmother kisses, there would be  
no flashy smooching, no western music  
of pursed lips, she kisses as if to breathe  
you inside her, nose pressed to cheek  
so that your scent pearls into drops of gold  
inside her lungs, as if while she holds you,  
death also, is clutching your wrist.

My grandmother kisses as if history  
never ended, as if somewhere,  
a body is still  
falling apart.

The second part of this collection is rich with songs of love, same sex love that has endured hiding and hoping until moments release the indescribable and yet remain somewhat foreign by outsiders' views:  
**REVELATION**

Because we were boys,  
I could only touch you in the dark.  
Where we pretended the sins  
promised by our fathers  
could not find us.

In the path of trembling hands,  
the hair on our thighs rose  
against the night, and I dreamed  
the extraordinary things  
light would do to the parts I touched:  
tuft of hair, silk of foreskin, the wet pearl  
emerging from its sheath.

As I tasted myself inside your mouth,  
the breath's warm blooming,  
as those fig leaves lay torn by our feet,  
somewhere, someone was beginning to sing.

I had to touch my lips  
to know that hymn  
was mine.

Vuong's perfectly crafted poems are intensely personal, and intensely universal. What he has to whisper to us

sears our eyes and minds like a branding iron, burning. Whether his words are of wars past or present, they are inescapably palpable. This is the work of a gifted cantor, singing of pain, singing of healing.

Grady Harp

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### **Meg Eden says**

Ocean Vuong is an incredible poet--if you ever hear him speak in person, everything he says is poetry. He has such a reverence and respect for poetic language, which is clear in his writing. Well done.

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### **Molly says**

(Lines that were so good; need to go back and add line breaks.)--

may the sea receive them as it does two pearls of soft rain.

This is not a metaphor for angels—but there are halo shards locked in their mouths.

the edge of that field where your father once prayed with a pistol in his mouth.

whose bodies became bed frames for men who touched breasts as they would the tops of skulls.

how she softly exhaled as I pulled closer knowing this was not right: a boy reaching out and into the shell of a husband. I only knew the warmth spreading between us, that the wings on her shoulders were really my hands.

screams funneling back into their throats.

we were heat escaping our bones.

distance—the night and all her unlit stars pouring from their mouths.

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### **Jee Koh says**

Ocean Vuong's poems are quieter on the page than his dramatic reading style may suggest, and the poems benefit from their quiet inwardness. *Burnings* is the first collection of this Brooklyn College undergraduate, and already it showcases a significant lyrical talent.

The book is divided into two sections. The first consists of poems about Vietnam, and Vuong's flight, with his family, to the United States. The second section takes for its subject gay love. The two sections have the same number of poems (12) but they are not equal in quality. The first section is superior. It shows a remarkable sensitivity to the plight of women, and finds the images and structures to express that empathy.

The poem "The Touch" is emblematic of the section. The child sleeps with the mother on a hardwood floor, "bones cushioned/ with cardboard," and feels the mother shaking with crying. He wraps his arms around her waist, "the way a man does," but knows that the action, parsed as "a boy reaching out// and into the shell of a husband," is "not right." The illicit touch here is also inadequate. Despite the "warmth spreading" between them, the poem concludes that the "wings" on the mother's shoulders are only a boy's "hands." At the same time, however, putting a hand on a shaking shoulder is still a gesture of comfort. The poem captures the complex emotions of that touch in delicate and flexible couplets.

Eros becomes its own theme in the second section. Here, the romantic strain in Vuong's poems betrays it. "Moonless" is a rather simple celebration of sex. Lines like "the stars forgot their duties/ as constellations and fell,/ dusting our shoulders/ with the swirl of galaxies" are sentimental and grandiose. "In Defense of Poverty" romanticizes being poor; it wanders along a "trail of blood" to curl in front of "the oven's mouth," the images incidental rather than essential to the poem. Other poems reach for easy metaphors, comparing the anus to a sanctum and the body to a lyre. The last poem forces the recognition of beauty in terror. A young girl who has just received sight describes the planes hitting the Twin Towers as "beautiful." I cannot believe that any child--any one--would say that.

More believable, more moving, is the man-child who hears to his surprise a lullaby from the old country in "Saigon, Again," my favorite poem of the first section, and of the book. The song comes from a woman hanging rags on a balcony, and "weaves through the gray sheet/ forming her silhouette." It ties the ragged, darkened pieces of the past together for a moment. The speaker wants to sing with the woman to see her shadow "freeze" but what comes out of his mouth is "impossibly small." The poem finds an unforgettable image to represent the pain of separation, from mother, home and self. It is this natal drama that Vuong tells with delicate maturity.

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### **T.S. says**

Whoa. Vuong's work is destined to go into that great literary canon giving a voice to the refugee and immigrant experience. While his chapbook covers a range of issues, I was most intrigued, stirred, and moved by those in the beginning that centered around war and refugee. Vuong explores the refugee themes of borderlessness, abandonment, and, survival in some of my favorite pieces: "If You Are a Refugee," "Song of My Mothers," "Kissing in Vietnamese," "The Touch," and "Arrival by Fire," which gets kicked off with one of my favorite Ilya Kaminsky quotes, "What you call immigration, I call suicide."

In the second part of the chapbook, Vuong moves on to explore other themes, but always with that hint of war-torness haunting in the background. I probably would not have appreciated the second section as much if it were not for "Song on a Subway," "Gardening with the Son I Will Never Have," and "Seeing It As It Is." It is "Seeing It As It Is," the last poem in the chapbook, that Vuong pulls out all the stops and melds his world with ours in an image that is both beautiful and terrifying. When you reflect on this, you realize that there has been an element of non-duality haunting you on most every page since you read the first poem, "Ars Poetica." It is a powerful image thought on which to end this collection of poetry, and one that resonates long after you have put the book down.

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## Dustin Champ says

To be honest. I wanted to hate this book--the author is so young (barely 22, I think). I approached it with doubt, keeping my eye out for any slippages evinced through the ignorance of youth. But I have to admit, these poems terrified me in a deeper place. I was shocked, really. in part because Vuong's voice is rich with wisdom and compassion. He approaches history not to simply document, but to become--his lines pierce into the moment in order to obtain a piece of the past. The poems are bold and hold no apologies. Yet Vuong is able to do what very few young writers can--have restraint. What's most surprising to me is the originality of the voice. I've read a lot of poetry and Vuong's is distinct and truly his. My only nitpicking is that he, like most young writers, does not experiment too much with form. He allows the poem's language to dictate the lines. What results is a very musical and textured tone, but if this young man continues to explore and diversify his craft, the sky is the limit. Nonetheless, this is the beginning of an extraordinary poetic career and I am glad to witness it's genesis.

(I'm not sure if I'm allowed to do this but I'm going to paste one of my favorite poems from the book here)

## REVELATION

Because we were boys,  
I could only touch you in the dark.  
Where we pretended the sins  
promised by our fathers  
could not find us.

In the path of trembling hands,  
the hair on our thighs rose  
against the night, and I dreamed  
the extraordinary things  
light would do to the parts I touched:  
tuft of hair, silk of foreskin, the wet pearl  
emerging from its sheath.

As I tasted myself inside your mouth,  
the breath's warm blooming,  
as those fig leaves lay torn by our feet,  
somewhere, someone was beginning to sing.  
I had to touch my lips  
to know that hymn  
was mine.

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## Collin Kelley says

This slim chapbook provides more emotional gut punches than a collection two or three times its size. Vuong

writes with clear-eyed, lyrical precision about leaving Vietnam as a child, immigrating to America and the awakening of his sexuality. Photographs – of the poet in a refugee camp as a toddler and of the infamous execution of a Viet Cong guerrilla in 1968 – and examining dreams of a homeland that he cannot remember, but are hardwired into his being, are the first steps toward understanding his past and finding a foothold in his new country. Once in New York, the revelation of his desire for men is a "hymn" he must keep secret for the sake of tradition. There are candid poems about sex and masturbation, of finding the music inside one's own body. In the haunting final poem, a blind girl has her sight restored and the first thing she sees is one of the planes slamming into the World Trade Center. And there is a horrible beauty and music there, too.

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### **Vicky says**

my star rating is arbitrary-please disregard-it's part of my own note-to-self for this website

these poems made me think about how, just because i overshare, i give "too much information", does not mean i reached the depth of vulnerability that ocean vuong reaches in these poems, published just at age 22, omg

i was reading, reading, mostly on the subway, and then it was near the end, the ode to masturbation actually, where i thought, wow.

i'm inspired to be more true

and i learned about sibling rivalry press

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### **Robb Todd says**

Ocean Vuong knows just what to say. My first book by him and I anticipate more will pass my eyes soon. He has a sharp focus and is relentless with what he sees and the way he carves his words onto the page.

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### **George Seaton says**

My review at "Out in Print"

<http://blog.outinprint.net/2011/05/19...>

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### **Jenna says**

I forget exactly how I first heard about Ocean Vuong. It must have been a few years back, around the time his first chapbook, *Burnings*, burst onto the literary scene to a response of widespread awed whispers. This was some time before Vuong began seeing his poems published in *Poetry Magazine*, some time before he achieved top-level recognition as a Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship winner and Best New Poets honoree. On learning the bare essentials of this rising poet's biography (born in 1988, immigrated from Vietnam to the

U.S. as a child, made an early splash publishing his poems in Asian-American-friendly and gay-friendly online literary magazines while still a Brooklyn College undergraduate), my knee-jerk reaction was, "Wow! This guy is *young*!"

Now that I've read *Burnings*, I am well poised to reassure all skepticism-paralyzed potential readers that Vuong's poems come across as being as mature as those of most any contemporary U.S. poet ten or fifteen years his senior. The poems in *Burnings* are marked by a blood-deep knowledge of life's darker, more violent side, a "School of Hard Knocks" kind of knowledge that Vuong absorbed growing up in a family of war refugees with a more than passing familiarity with starvation, bare-knuckled domestic strife, and the kind of difficult choices that a merciless society is quick to label as sexual transgressions. Not everyone born into a family like Vuong's grows up to be a fine poet, of course: Vuong's knowledge of life is that of someone gifted with an instinct for listening, not just with his ears but also with his skin, lymph, and bones. His cadences are graceful and assured, his images usually fresh and often shocking in their violence -- not shocking in a gratuitous or fake way, but in a way that generally feels necessary and convincing.

The chapbook begins with a poem called "Ars Poetica" that invites comparison to Mark Strand's classic "The Tunnel" in the Zen-like way it emphasizes the symmetry between Self and Other:

*When two ships emerge  
from a wall of fog,  
their sails lit with sheets of fire,  
there will be a traveler on each deck  
with the same face,  
watching flames reflect  
in the other's eyes...*

The rest of the chapbook is divided into two sections. The first is primarily concerned with Vuong's family history, with the harrowing experiences of Vietnam War survivors and refugees:

*...the naked man crouched  
by the charred house, licking soot  
from his fingers to keep the bodies  
he can no longer hold.*

In poems like "Song of My Mothers" and "My Mother Remembers Her Mother," Vuong eloquently pays tribute to the strong female figures who prefigured him:

*Sing of the sisters who held hands  
while soldiers took turns,  
who fled by closing their eyes,  
only to find their bodies  
too cold to return to.*

Eloquence comes naturally to Vuong: the language that rolls off his tongue is inherently lyrical and lovely. This engenders interesting contrasts when he is writing about war atrocities, a subject neither inherently lyrical nor lovely. When Vuong is instead writing about sex or love or music, as in this chapbook's second section, his natural eloquence runs in parallel with his subject matter rather than perpendicular to it, and then his poems run the risk of seeming too sweet, too love-drenched, too entirely given over to ecstasy:

...[S]omewhere, someone was beginning to sing.

*I had to touch my lips  
to know that hymn was mine.*

It would be all too easy for a lesser poet to make a misstep into gross sentimentality here. Vuong, however, has what can only be described as a natural poetic instinct, and it keeps *Burnings* anchored to solid ground, even when Vuong is expressing his teeteringly optimistic worldview that, in spite of its horrors and brutalities, "This world//is beautiful" and remains worthy of our love.

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