

On being generous in your work



Poet Ocean Vuong discusses what it means to tackle new forms, the generosity required to be both a reader and a writer, and the radical notion of taking language into your own hands.

March 15, 2022 - Ocean Vuong is an American poet and essayist based in New York City. Even though his most recent book, 2016's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, was a collection of poems, Vuong is now engaged in the task of writing what he calls "the ghost of a novel." His work is predicated on the notion that both reading and writing are acts that require generosity and a willingness to explore.

As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 3231 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Anxiety](#).

What's your mood when you write?

When I'm lost in the work, I'm curious. I don't know if curiosity is a balm, because it often gets me in trouble, but it gives me control. It becomes fuel, and it brings me out of myself and into the world, even if I've just been sitting at my desk and thinking about spirals, which is what I've been thinking about this morning.

The Italian philosopher Vico had this theory that time moves more in a spiral than it does in a line. He believes that's why we repeat ourselves, including our tragedies, and that if we are more faithful to this movement, we can move away from the epicenter through distance and time, but we have to confront it every time. I've been thinking about trauma—how it's repetitive, and how we recreate it, and how memory is fashioned by creation. Every time we remember, we create new neurons, which is why memory is so unreliable. I thought, "Well if the Greek root for 'poet' is 'creator,' then to remember is to create, and, therefore, to remember is to be a poet." I thought it was so neat. Everyone's a poet, as long as they remember.

You present, in some of your poems, that the future has already happened, and the past is happening still. Is writing a way to orient events among one another on that spiral?

The funny thing is, the biggest trouble I have with my writing is tense. In Vietnamese, we don't have past participles, so everything is spoken in the present, and whether it's past or present depends on the last word. Say you want to say, "I ate a bagel this morning for breakfast." You would say, "I am eating bagel already." Everything is present. The writing sometimes takes me out of time. I get to cater to the action, and the time resolves afterwards.

Sometimes I write a poem and I don't realize what tense I'm using, or I'm writing a passage, and I have to decide later. Editing becomes the place where the past and present start to connect. When I'm writing, the curiosity pulls me forward. The work gets done when my terror is outpaced by my sense of urgency to speak. When there are good days, I go a little faster than my terror, and there are bad days when my terror beats me, and I'm silent. That's the negotiation.

What are you afraid of?

I'm afraid, "What if none of this matters?" Maybe this is the working-class roots of my family, where I feel like—I sit two days in a hotel, I get 10,000 words—what if it doesn't matter? What if I could be doing something better with my hands for my community, my people? Maybe, in a queer body, that's always a question: "How can we be of service to one another?" At least for myself. That's how I think of art, is how we are service to one another.

Do you find a home, or other kinds of provision, for yourself and for others in your work?

I find a home in feeling. I feel at home in feeling. When I collaborate or talk with my friends, the place doesn't matter. We could be on Mars and it would feel like home, because I feel free. I can be myself. I can be uber-queer, uber-strange, and we can be uber-curious with one another. That's comforting. Perhaps it's even harder to protect a home that doesn't exist in a physical space, because we have to continually tend to this abstract feeling: "How do I create the parameters in which I am safe enough to be free amongst my peers?"

My whole artistic life has been in New York City—the past 11 years—and I learned that one has to work. Competition is a patriarchal structure that privileges conquest. The most pivotal thing for me as an artist was to be able to say "no" to those structures in order to say "yes" to the structures I want to create. That's why it's so scary.

In your dreams, what do those new structures look like?

I don't know if it's possible to say. I just feel the dream. I would articulate it as... Is it possible for queer joy—outsider-hood—to be so mundane that, in that simplicity, it's radical? To insist that this joy does not have to end in tragedy, in death, in loss? We can just simply sit at a table and be okay for the next five minutes. For a lot of queer people, we can't even say that. In most of our childhoods, we can't even say, "When was I okay for five minutes in my consciousness?"

You'll be teaching in the MFA program at UMass-Amherst this year. What will your classes be like?

I only know how to teach one way. In fact, I never thought I would be a teacher. I was always too afraid to speak in front of people. I was asked to do a workshop years ago, a one-off. As soon as I opened my mouth, people started writing things down, and I panicked. I said, "I don't know. I might change my mind tomorrow. Don't write this down."

I learned, relative to our creative spaces, that, for some reason, the art of recognizing one another in our goals was not privileged. In workshops, we often privilege correction as progress. There's this capitalistic anxiety to fix it. Even in the way we talk about writing: polish, cut, write, chop, tighten. I want it to be more about actual creation—looking at people making organic things with their imaginations.

In my workshop, I privilege reading in the context of the writer, and in the first four or five weeks, we don't critique at all. We just say what we see. "I see trees repeating. I see line breaks in the tercets. I think this poem is trying to..." We start to collaborate and build this structure of recognition for ourselves, so that, when the critiques do come, they're always in service of the idiosyncratic person. There are no rules that could just be forced upon the work.

Are you able to have that mode of association and discovery when you're writing your own work?

I don't know any other way. When I'm writing, it's often walking, moving, rolling on carpets, thinking, reading, talking to people. That's where the work happens to me: in life. The rest is just in text, which is hard enough. Don't get me wrong: You pull your hair out trying to figure it out, but that part, as long as you're diligent, will come together. The impulse behind it—why you built your arc, why it's important, what you put in it—that's the hard work.

You're working on a novel now, your first—what is its central arc, and how is building that going?

I never planned on writing a novel. I had this mentality that, "Oh Ocean, you worked so hard to sit at the poetry table. The novel table better wait for the next lifetime." But I wrote these little essays, and my friends encouraged me. My work is always sparked by other people. I never think I can do anything until someone I believe in says, "Try it." I just kept going.

I was interested in writing the ghost of a novel. That was a big question—I didn't know it was possible. I was thinking about art, and restoration. I have this uneasy relationship with how we have this desire to restore other culture; artifacts; art. Looking at the violences that we've done to one another as a species, I get anxious about restoration, because, in some cases, we are also erasing acts of violence. If it's broken, we rebuild it; we lose the traces of what made those breaks in the first place.

We think of the Greek statues: The Renaissance idea of purity came from misbelieving that the statues were always marble-white. In fact, they painted them. They were so colorful. They were super garish and bright. We misunderstood that, and we created something completely different—something quite destructive, favoring fairness and lightness, in order to satisfy a Biblical narrative of angelic lightness and purity, as opposed to darkness.

What if I wrote a novel that is so fractured—so in pieces—that it becomes the epicenter of the break itself? As if to say, "I'm going to refuse to create a whole finished product, but [make] the phantom of a product—the shards in the dirt. Art exists there, too." Even though a life is broken, it's still worthy and capable of a complete story if we look at it in the ground zero, to the point where we can not even imagine what it looked like before the fracture.

I'm thinking about what happened to our country in the West, with the Native American genocides. Natives were seen as landscapes to be tamed and eradicated, so I think about what happens to the imagination—to the cultural psyche—when an act of violence is such total obliteration, so complete, we can no longer trace it. That's why we're at the Dakota Pipeline. Everything seems so related, therefore we're in the spiral. Sometimes, it looks more like a toilet-bowl spiral.

Does your family read your writing? I've read that they think of your profession as "scholar." Is that still the case?

The book is about that. It's this long letter to my mother that she'll never be able to read in English. The idea of this phantom novel is also speaking to the phantom readership of the mother, of my family. I'm creating a text that they will probably never understand, or even encounter. What does that mean in the context of erasure and survival? Perhaps is it worth it to utter it anyway—just to be a mind speaking.

Do you find that there is a liberty in that as well as a loss?

Absolutely. In my book of poems [*Night Sky With Exit Wounds*], one of the last poems I wrote was "Notebook Fragments." It's in the structure of a diary entry. For many of us on the outside, the journal became this liberated place where we get to unleash ourselves and speak perhaps more truly, more fully, than we can even to our loved ones. I wanted to honor that tradition of weird, queer boys and girls writing in their journals—that this form is just as legitimate for art as the sonnet; the canto; the sestina. There is liberty in speaking, even if no one is going to hear it. We've been doing it forever in our diaries, so why can't that, too, be literature?

Is keeping a diary something that you've fixed into a routine or ritual, or is there the urgency of, "This is what I do. This is who I am. I record?"

It's the latter. Then, they also fuse, right? The urgency becomes ritual. That's how I create, and so the diary becomes an extension of myself and of my interaction with the world. I see something; I write it down. It's a way to recapture it. It's this container; this ignition of the memory. If memory is creation, then we open a notebook, and by writing words, all of a sudden, it's this piazza of the imagination where we've put all of our favorite interesting things. We come in, and we get to talk, and elaborate, and check up on everybody.

If the reader is extending trust and care to the writer, how do you do the same for yourself as you write?

If I look at Ocean writing, he has abandoned himself, and it becomes only consciousness. At first, I didn't like it—I was writing beyond body. Then I realized that everyone has something beyond body. We live here, but we also have the DNA of the mind; the personhood.

We have a fingerprint. We articulate it with ink and pressing our thumb down. What about the fingerprint of the self? The stranger-obsessive I went, the closer I got to everyone, because I was going into the space that did not have a social architecture. Even when we order a coffee or talk to people in public, there's a social performance we do just to get by, to do the tasks that we have to. We have this private language, and body language, that we use to talk to friends and loved ones. We have a secret one that we use for ourselves, while we're in a room on our own. We pick our nose, whatever.

Then there's this unknown. So much of my art, when it excites me, comes from that. It's very human, but it does not have a socially recognized architecture. I want to go there, and it feels like leaving the body behind, but of course it's always there. Everything is done through the body. The better answer is that it leaves a recognizable social identity behind and goes towards questions. When I'm reading something wild, it came from that space.

I like this poet Mary Ruefle. She has this line—the poem starts with, "Every time there's a blizzard, I want to go home and have sex." She writes about birds having sex, dogs having sex. You can't say that at a committee meeting or at a dinner party. She's said goodbye to the social structures and gone into herself. It's like, "Okay, bye. I'm going to my blizzard where I have sex."

Do you ever feel that particular brand of closeness with human-ness among other people, or do you think it is specific to this act of writing? Can you have it in communion?

I think so. We are working with language, and it's not like we didn't discover one another until we had writing. Our ancestors were talking all along. A lot of times, the way they tell stories reveals more about themselves than about what they're talking about. What we say we see says a lot about who we are. In *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, what does it say about the speaker who looks up at the sky and sees ruptures? There's an autobiography in the gaze, in the sight.

My big project is to ask, "What happens if we took language into our own hands or own mouths?" And asked an idiosyncratic question, instead of, "How are you?" "Good, good, good." "Bye." The danger is that we go through our whole life talking, but never finding out who we are to one another. It's okay at Starbucks. "I'm sorry. I don't want to know everything about you here, drinking a cappuccino." That's enough for now, but what about our friends? Our loved ones? What happens when we do want to build that connection, that submersion, and all we have is, "How are you?"

A lot of times, we do feel that's all we have. Just a little tweak in the language opens up so much, "When was the last time you saw somebody that make you happy? Are you joyful today? It's okay if you're not." You say that to someone, and at first, they go, "What's wrong? Are you okay?" It's like, "No, no, no. I just want to know." When we do that, the person relaxes, "Oh." We give each other permission to go there. All the times we say, "Not at the dinner table. Not now. Don't talk about that," and we move through silences as people, we lose sight of one another. That's how the resentment comes.

If we talk long enough to anybody, we get to the space, but we're not that far away. I echo Robert Hayden's mantra: "Nothing human is foreign to me." There are days where I'm good at that, and days where I'm bad at that, but I try to work towards it.

How has it felt to embark on this brand-new form?

I was loitering on the edge for so long, never thinking that I had the courage to do it, and I still feel very hesitant all the time about whether I belong here, whether I should be doing this. I've learned that doubt is a source of energy. You don't have to be always certain. We live in a culture that fetishizes certainty. "What's your stance? What's your position?" As a writer, luckily, I don't have to have a stance. I just have to have questions, and I get to build a landscape where I get to explore them. We're complicated. We are hurricanes in a way, you know?

It takes a collaboration. I never expected anyone would care. Everything in my life, I had to have this sort of official documentation for. You enter a country, you go to the welfare office. So much of our lives are controlled by these checkpoints that we can't side-step. To be a citizen is to pay taxes, whose funds are used for war and drones. To be a citizen is to move through checkpoints to support your life. Everything has a stamp. Being a writer, you never get a stamp. It's either you jump off the cliff and fly, or you don't.

What does having a sense of uncompetitive support meant for your work?

It is a true, equal cooperation, because we need listeners. This is also my artwork—talking to you, talking to anyone. I don't have that border between art and life. I don't want a

border. This is how I want to live, and I get to choose. I get to attend to it with care and to make decisions with my own agency. Just like how I choose which words go on the page, I get to sit here and choose this time spent with you to create these ideas. Then, actually, my thoughts are enhanced towards books too. I don't think anything is a sacrifice for the art. I think it enhances it, if we tend to it.

I'm always collaborating. Simone Weil says, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." That's my mantra to myself: Pay attention to people, what they care about, their worlds, their words, their aesthetics, their life. I look at Simone Weil and say, "Why don't we edit that?" What if we were so ambitious—to change the word "rarest" to "most common?" What would we then say? "Attention is the most common and purest form of generosity." That's what I'm working toward.

Ocean Vuong recommends:

"Red Dawn" by [Enzo](#)

Take the long way home, if you can.

[Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#) by Annie Dillard

Competition, prizes and awards are part of a patriarchal construct that destroys love and creativity by creating and protecting a singular hierarchical commodification of quality that does not, ever, represent the myriad successful expressions of art and art making. If you must use that construct, you use it the way one uses public transport. Get on, then get off at your stop and find your people. Don't live on the bus, and most importantly, don't get trapped on it.

The agency for joy is safety—and vice versa. It is not a place, but a feeling. But you can see it, even in the dark.

Name

Ocean Vuong

Vocation

poet, writer

Fact

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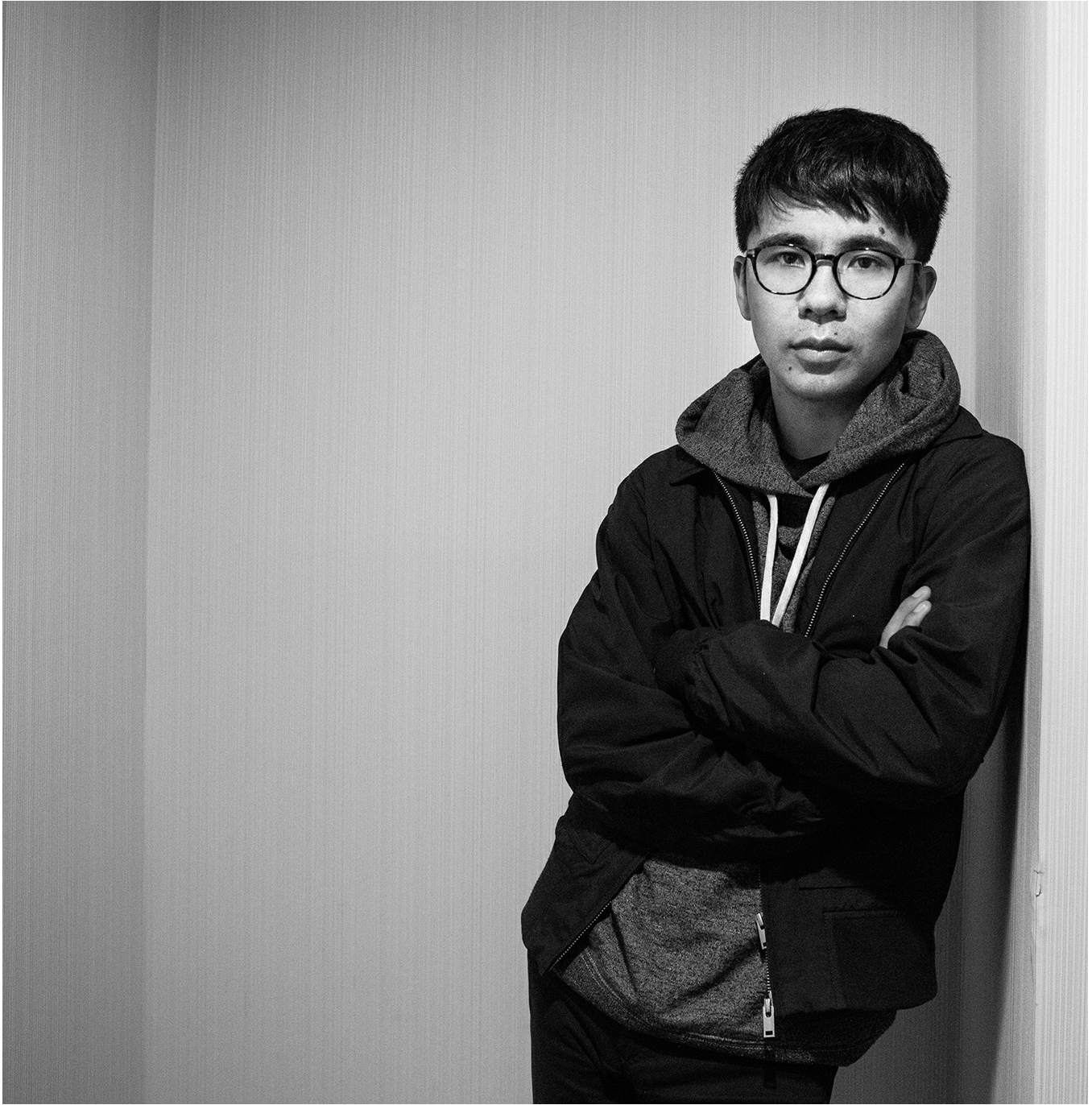


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