POETRY FOUNDATION

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

BY OCEAN VUONG

i

Tell me it was for the hunger
& nothing less. For hunger is to give
the body what it knows

it cannot keep. That this amber light
whittled down by another war
is all that pins my hand

to your chest.

i

You, drowning
between my arms —
stay.

You, pushing your body
into the river
only to be left
with yourself —
stay.

i

I'll tell you how we're wrong enough to be forgiven. How one night, after backhanding
mother, then taking a chainsaw to the kitchen table, my father went to kneel
in the bathroom until we heard his muffled cries through the walls.
And so I learned that a man, in climax, was the closest thing
to surrender.

i

Say surrender. Say alabaster. Switchblade.
Honeysuckle. Goldenrod. Say autumn.
Say autumn despite the green
in your eyes. Beauty despite
daylight. Say you'd kill for it. Unbreakable dawn
mounting in your throat.
My thrashing beneath you
like a sparrow stunned
with falling.

i

Dusk: a blade of honey between our shadows, draining.

i

I wanted to disappear — so I opened the door to a stranger's car. He was divorced. He was still alive. He was sobbing into his hands (hands that tasted like rust). The pink breast cancer ribbon on his keychain swayed in the ignition. Don't we touch each other just to prove we are still here? I was still here once. The moon, distant & flickering, trapped itself in beads of sweat on my neck. I let the fog spill through the cracked window & cover my fangs. When I left, the Buick kept sitting there, a dumb bull in pasture, its eyes searing my shadow onto the side of suburban houses. At home, I threw myself on the bed like a torch & watched the flames gnaw through my mother's house until the sky appeared, bloodshot & massive. How I wanted to be that sky — to hold every flying & falling at once.

i

Say amen. Say amend.

Say yes. Say yes

anyway.

i

In the shower, sweating under cold water, I scrubbed & scrubbed.

i

In the life before this one, you could tell
two people were in love
because when they drove the pickup
over the bridge, their wings
would grow back just in time.

Some days I am still inside the pickup.
Some days I keep waiting.

i

It's not too late. Our heads haloed
with gnats & summer too early
to leave any marks.
Your hand under my shirt as static
intensifies on the radio.
Your other hand pointing
your daddy's revolver
to the sky. Stars falling one

by one in the cross hairs.
        This means I won't be
afraid if we're already
        here. Already more
than skin can hold. That a body
        beside a body
must make a field
        full of ticking. That your name
is only the sound of clocks
        being set back another hour
& morning
        finds our clothes
on your mother's front porch, shed
        like week-old lilies.

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