

GEOFF DYER ON THE RELIGION OF SOCCER
SHAKEDOWN BRIDGE: THE PERILS OF PRIVATE INFRASTRUCTURE

HARPER'S

HARPER'S MAGAZINE/DECEMBER 2017 \$6.99



DEAR ROSE

By Ocean Vuong

Introduction by Ben Lerner

Oceans and roses are surely among the most shopworn images in poetry, as Ocean Vuong is well aware: “I place your finger on a flower so/familiar it’s almost synthetic.” In this poem, however, Rose is not only the English name of the speaker’s mother, Hong, but a metaphor for displacement: from Vietnamese to English, and from speech to writing, since this is a poem addressed to a mother who cannot read it. The rose is no longer Shakespeare’s (or whoever’s) symbol of fleeting beauty. Instead, “like something ruptured/by a bullet,” the rose is a wound or, later, the open mouth of the infant Ocean. We’ve been told that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but Hong, who has become Rose as a result of a colonial war, knows that a name must “bear the scent of its corpses.”

Part of the power of this poem derives from its eloquent ambivalence about its own power. A book seems to open like a door, only to shut like a coffin lid. The poet admits that he imposes the significance he hopes to discover in the zigzagging patterns of ants. In lieu of action, vacillation: “I put in the fish sauce I take out/the fish sauce.” Other voices discourage him: “stop writing/about your mother they said.” And so on. Vuong’s compelling mixture of determination and doubt shapes the form of the poem, which combines a strict stanzaic pattern with heavily enjambed lines, one meaning dissolving into another across the margins like the “linear/fish-spine dissolved by time” in the sauce that Rose prepares. The fish sauce is Rose’s art and, like Ocean’s, it both preserves and destroys, transforms and crushes—a composition that depends on decomposition: “these words these/insects anchovies bullets salvaged/& exiled by art.”

I first met Ocean Vuong when he passed through one of my undergraduate classes at Brooklyn College. My pedagogic strategy was to recommend books and quickly get out of the way. His first collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2016 and won the Whiting Award and the Forward Prize, among other honors. “Dear Rose” is from a manuscript in progress. Vuong began teaching at the University of Massachusetts Amherst this fall.

DEAR ROSE

if you’re reading this then you survived
my life into this one this one with
my name crossed out then found
halfway in your mouth if you’re reading this
then the bullet does not know you
yet but I know mom you can’t
read napalm fallen on your schoolhouse
at six & that was it they say

a word is only what it signifies
that’s how I know the arrow
-head in my back means
I’m beautiful a word like bullet

hovers in an amber afternoon on its way
to meaning the book opens like a door
but the only one you ever read
was a coffin its hinges swung

shut on lush descriptions
of a brother & the bullet still
the fastest finger pointing
to life I point to you to me to
-day a Thursday I took a long walk
alone it didn’t work kept stopping
to touch my shadow just in case
feeling is the only truth

I’m capable of & there down
there between thumb & forefinger

an ant racing in circles then zigzags
I wanted significance but think
it was just the load he was bearing
that unhinged him: another ant
curled & cold lifted on
his shoulders they looked like a set

of quotations missing speech it's said
they can carry over 5,000x their mass
but it's often bread crumbs
not brothers that get carried
home but maybe going too far
is to admit the day ends anywhere
but here no no mom this
is your name I say pointing

to Hong on the birth certificate thin
as dust Hong I say which means
rose I place your finger on a flower so
familiar it's almost synthetic red
plastic petals dewed with glue I leave
it out of my poems I turn from
its face—clichéd oversized
head frayed at the edges

like something ruptured
by a bullet seeking language
a kind of person which is to say
I was born because you
were starving but how can anything
be found with only two hands
with only two hands you dumped
a garbage bag of anchovies into the glass jar

the day was harmless a breeze hovering
in amber light above us gray

New England branches swayed without
touching to make fish sauce you said
you must bear the scent of its corpses
salted & crushed a year in a jar tall
as a boy they dropped with slick
thumps like bullets each word must stop

somewhere—why not a yellow
poet I put in the fish sauce I take out
the fish sauce I dance
on the line until I am the line
they cross or cross
out they nearly killed me
you said for being white
with a toilet plunger you pushed the fish

down sound of bones like gravel
the violet vein on your wrist glistened
your father was a white soldier
I had amber hair you said they called me
traitor called me ghost
girl they smeared my face with cow shit
at the market to make me brown
like you & your father the eyes glared

from inside the jar they shot
my brother you said looking down
but away from the dead
eyes my little brother
if reading is to live
in two worlds at once why
is he not here my friend said you can do
anything in a poem

so I stepped right out of it
to be entered is to be re





-defined the bullet achieves its name
by pushing the body into itself flesh
refugeed into flesh I was struck
by these words we say I was struck by
this passage it moved right through
opened me up these eyes reading

not yet closed not yet healed
shut am full of leaden meaning which parts
a red sea inside me sinew dusted to soft tissue
my blood a borderless translation
of errors in the reader's
hands a gaping rose which is
your name Hong I say which also means
pink the shade every bullet meets

before finding its truest self Calvino said
human instinct is to laugh
when someone falls the soldiers
were cracking up as they fired
your brother running his sky
-blue shirt pink on the ground
our evolution as hunters Calvino went on
the collapsed body a signal

of meat thus hunger
leads to lethal
joy it's almost perfect
you smiled your nose deep
in the jar as if to be hunted
is to finally be seen alive briefly
as if the bullet makes you real
by making you less

which is perfect
in poems the text
amplified by murder
-ous deletions

leads to inevitable
art the pristine prisoner
in his marble coffin the length
of a fish is a timeline

across the page to document days
the dead a measurement
of living distance
the body blooming
as it decays Pink
Rose Hong Mom
are you reading this dear
reader are you my mom

is she in language I cannot
find her without you this world
I've made you cannot enter within months
their meat will melt into brown
mucus rot almost-sauce the linear
fish-spine dissolved by time
at last pungent scent of ghosts you said
you named me after a body

of water cause it's the largest thing you knew
after god I stare at the silvered layers
the shadowed line between two pressed fish
is a finger in the dark gently
remembered in the dark his finger
on my lips mom his shh
your friend the man watching me
while you worked the late

shift in the Timex clock factory why
am I thinking this now the gasped mouths
mottled pocked fins gently the door its blade
of amber light widening as it opened
shh it sounds like an animal
being drowned as you churned