Dear Ma,

I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. I am writing to go back to the time, at the rest stop in Virginia, when you stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hanging over the soda machine by the rest rooms, your face darkened by its antlers. In the car, you kept shaking your head. *I don't understand why they would do that. Can't they see it's a corpse? A corpse should move on, not stay forever like that.*

I am thinking, only now, about that buck's head, its black glass eyes. How perhaps it was not the grotesque that shook you but that the taxidermy embodied a death that won't finish, a death that dies perpetually as we walk past it to relieve ourselves. The war
you lived through is long gone, but its ricochets have become taxidermy, enclosed by your own familiar flesh.

Autumn. Somewhere over Michigan, a colony of monarch butterflies, numbering more than fifteen thousand, are beginning their yearly migration south. In the span of two months, from September to November, they will move, one wing beat at a time, from southern Canada and the United States to portions of central Mexico, where they will spend the winter.

They perch among us, on chain-link fences, clotheslines still blurred from the just-hung weight of clothes, windowsills, the hood of a faded-blue Chevy, their wings folding slowly, as if being put away, before snapping once, into flight.

It only takes a single night of frost to kill off an entire generation. To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing.

I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*. But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free.

That time when I was five or six and, playing a prank, leapt out at you from behind the hallway door, shouting *Boom!* You screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutching your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. I stood, confused, my toy Army helmet tilted on my head. I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn’t know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. *Boom.*

That time, in third grade, with the help of Mrs. Callahan, my E.S.L. teacher, I read the first book that I loved, a children’s book called “Thunder Cake,” by Patricia Polacco. In the story, a girl and her grandmother spot a storm brewing on the green horizon. But, instead of shuttering the windows or nailing boards on the doors, they set out to bake a cake. I was struck by this curious act, its precarious refusal of convention. As Mrs.
Callahan stood behind me, her mouth at my ear, her hand on my hand, the story unfurled, the storm rolled in as she spoke, then once more as I repeated the words.

The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning. My mouth a blaze of touch.

The time I tried to teach you to read the way Mrs. Callahan taught me, my lips to your ear, my hand on yours, the words moving underneath the shadows we made. But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered. After a while, after the stutters, the false starts, the words warped or locked in your throat, after failure, you slammed the book shut. I don’t need to read, you said, pushing away from the table. I can see—it’s gotten me this far, hasn’t it?
Then the time you hit me with the remote control. A bruise I would lie about to my teachers. *I fell playing tag.*

That time, at forty-six, when you had a sudden desire to color. *Let’s go to Walmart,* you said one morning. *I need coloring books.* For months, you filled the space between your arms with all the shades you couldn’t pronounce. *Magenta, vermilion, marigold, pewter, juniper, cinnamon.* Each day, for hours, you slumped over landscapes of farms, pastures, Paris, two horses on a windswept plain, the face of a girl with black hair and skin you left blank, left white. You hung them all over the house, which started to look like an elementary-school classroom. When I asked you, *Why coloring, why now?*, you put down the sapphire pencil and stared, dreamlike, at a half-finished garden. *I just go away in it for a while,* you said, *but I feel everything, like I'm still here, in this room.*

The time you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hardwood dotted with blood.

*Have you ever made a scene,* you said, filling in a Thomas Kinkade house, *and then put yourself inside it? Have you ever watched yourself from behind, going deeper and deeper into that landscape, away from you?*

How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands merging on the page?

*I'm sorry,* you said, bandaging the cut on my forehead. *Grab your coat. I'll get you McDonald's.* Head throbbing, I dipped chicken tenders in ketchup as you watched. *You have to get bigger and stronger, O.K.?*

*O.K., Ma.*  

The first time you came to my poetry reading. After, while the room stood and clapped, I walked back to my seat beside you. You clutched my hand, your eyes red and wet, and said, *I never thought I'd live to see so many old white people clapping for my son.*

I didn’t quite understand until, weeks later, I visited you at the nail salon and watched as you knelt, head bent, washing the feet of one old white woman after another.
Those Saturdays at the end of the month when, if you had money left over after the bills, we’d go to the mall. Some people dressed up to go to church or dinner parties; we dressed to go to a commercial center off an interstate. You would wake up early, spend an hour doing your makeup, put on your best sequinned black dress, your one pair of gold hoop earrings, black lamé shoes. Then you would kneel and smear a handful of pomade through my hair, comb it over.

In the egalitarian, sanitized, temperature-controlled space of the mall, isolated from the context of one’s life, one gets to reinvent one’s past, oneself. And that’s what we did. Seeing us there, a stranger couldn’t tell that we bought our groceries at the local corner store on Franklin Avenue, where the doorway was littered with used food-stamps receipts, where staples like milk and eggs cost three times more than they did in the suburbs, where the apples, wrinkled and bruised, lay in a cardboard box soaked on the bottom with pig’s blood leaking from the crate of loose pork chops in a puddle of long-melted ice.

The time with your fists, shouting in the parking lot, the bright sun etching your hair red. My arms shielding my head and face as your knuckles thunked around me.

Those Saturdays, we’d walk until, one by one, the shops pulled shut their steel gates. Then we’d make our way to the parking lot where we’d wait for the bus, our breaths floating above us, the makeup drying on your face. Our hands empty except for our hands.

Out my window this morning, just before sunrise, a deer stood in a fog so dense and bright that the second one, not too far away, looked like the unfinished shadow of the first.

You can color that in. You can call it “The History of Memory.”
Migration can be triggered by the angle of sunlight, indicating a change in season, temperature, plant life, and nourishment. Female monarchs lay eggs along the route. Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, or the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.

What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?

That time at the Chinese butcher, you pointed to the roasted pig hanging from its hook. *Its ribs are just like a person's after they're burned.* You let out a clipped chuckle, then paused, took out your pocketbook, your brow pinched, and recounted our money.

What is a country but a life sentence?

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The time with a gallon of milk. A shattering on the side of my head, then the steady white rain on the kitchen tiles.

The time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me because I was too scared to do it alone. How you threw up for hours afterward. How, in my screeching joy, I forgot to say thank you.

The time we went to Goodwill and piled the cart with items that had a yellow tag, because on that day a yellow tag meant an additional fifty per cent off. I pushed the cart and leaped on the back bar, gliding, feeling rich with our bounty of discarded treasures. It was your birthday. We were splurging. *Do I look like a real American?* you asked, pressing a white dress to your length. I nodded, grinning. The cart was so full by then I no longer saw what was ahead of me.

The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying, *Get out. Get out.* And I ran out the door, down the black summer streets. I ran until I forgot I was ten, until my heartbeat was all I could remember of my name.

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The time, in New York City, a week after uncle Phuong died, I stepped onto the uptown 2 train and saw his face, clear and round as the doors opened, looking right at me, alive. I gasped—but knew better, that it was only a man who resembled him. Still, it upended me to see what I thought I’d never see again—the features so exact, heavy jaw, open brow. His name lunged to the fore of my mouth before I caught it. Aboveground, I sat on a hydrant and called you. *Ma, I saw him. Ma, I swear I saw him. I know it’s stupid but I saw Uncle on the train.* I was having a panic attack. And you knew it. For a while you said nothing, then started to hum the melody to “Happy Birthday.” It was not my birthday but it was the only song you knew in English, and you kept going. And I listened, the phone pressed so close to my ear that, for the rest of the night, a red rectangle was imprinted on my cheek.

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If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, neuron, and hippocampus; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast.

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The time, at the nail salon, I overheard you consoling a customer over her recent loss. While you painted her nails, she spoke, between tears. *I lost my baby, my little girl, Julie. I can’t believe it, she was my strongest, my oldest.* You nodded, your eyes sober behind your mask. *It’s O.K., it’s O.K.*, you said, *don’t cry. Your Julie, you went on, how she die? Cancer,* the lady said. *And in the back yard, too! She died right there in the back yard, dammit.*

You put down her hand, took off your mask. *Cancer.* You leaned forward. *My mom, too, she die from the cancer.* The room went quiet. Your co-workers shifted in their seats. *But what happen in back yard, why she die there?*

The woman wiped her eyes, looked into your face. *That’s where she lives. Julie’s my horse.*

You nodded, put on your mask, and got back to painting her nails. After the woman left, you flung the mask across the room. *A fucking horse? Holy shit, I was ready to go to*
her daughter’s grave with flowers! For the rest of the day, while you worked on one hand or another, you would look up and shout, You guys, it was a fucking horse!

The time, at fourteen, when I finally said stop. Your hand in the air, my face stinging from the first blow. Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please. I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies. You turned away and, without a word, put on your wool coat and walked to the store. I’m getting eggs, you said over your shoulder, as if nothing had happened. But we both knew it was over. You’d never hit me again.

Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes.

When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?

The time I woke into an ink-blue hour, my head—no, the house filled with soft music. My feet on cool hardwood, I walked to your room. Your bed was empty. Ma, I said, my body still as a cut flower over the music. It was Chopin, and it was coming from the closet. The door etched in amber light, like the entrance to a place on fire. I sat outside it, listening to the overture and, underneath that, your steady breathing. I don’t know how long I was there. But at one point I went back to bed, pulled the covers to my chin until it stopped, not the song but my shaking. Ma, I said again, to no one, Come back. Come back out.

The time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, I’m not a monster. I’m a mother.

What do we mean when we say survivor? Maybe a survivor is nothing but the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts.

The morning closed in around us.
I put down the book. The heads of the green beans went on snapping. They thunked in the steel sink like fingers. *You’re not a monster,* I said.

But I lied.

What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum,* a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.

I read that parents suffering from P.T.S.D. are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war, to say that to possess a heartbeat is not as simple as the heart’s task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body.

I don’t know.

What I do know is that, back at Goodwill, you handed me the white dress, your eyes glazed and wide. *Can you read this,* you said, *and tell me if it’s reproof?* I searched the hem, looked at the print on the tag and, not yet able to read myself, said, *Yes.* Said it anyway. *Yes,* I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. *It’s fireproof.*

Days later, a neighborhood boy, riding by on his bike, would see me wearing that very dress in the front yard while you were at work. At recess, the kids would call me *monster,* call me *freak, fairy.*

Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your youth, in Vietnam. I imagine them flying out from the blazed blasts unscathed, their tiny black-and-red wings flickering like charred debris, so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof.

*That’s so good to know,* you said, staring off, stone-faced, over my shoulder, the dress held to your chest. *That’s so good.*
This piece was drawn from a talk that Ocean Vuong will deliver at the Smithsonian’s Asian American Literary Festival in July.

Ocean Vuong, a poet and essayist, is the author of “Night Sky with Exit Wounds,” which won the 2016 Whiting Award. Read more »