

OCEAN VUONG

Introduction

Sally Wen Mao

SALLY WEN MAO is the author of *Mad Honey Symposium* (Alice James Books), the winner of the 2012 Kinereth Gensler Award, a *Poets & Writers* Top Ten Debut of 2014, and a *Publishers Weekly* Top Ten Anticipated Pick. Her second book, *Oculus*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in 2019. Her work has also won a Pushcart Prize and has been anthologized in *The Best American Poetry*.

The recipient of fellowships and scholarships from Kundiman, Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Jerome Foundation, Hedgebrook, Vermont Studio Center, Saltonstall Foundation, and the prestigious 2016 Cullman Center at the New York Public Library, Mao has taught Creative Writing as a Visiting Professor at Cornell University, Hunter College, and the National University of Singapore, among others. Currently she resides in Washington, DC, as the 2018 Jenny McKean Moore Writer-in-Washington at George Washington University.

Sally Wen Mao's interdisciplinary work—whether it be essays, poems, fiction, or painting and drawing—are embodied interrogations of the brutal and repressive architectures of patriarchal silencing. Mao's poems, richly informed by science, history, the natural world, Anna Mae Wong, and the oft-forgotten facts of cultural and historic upheaval, drive their power from the fulcrum of alterity. Hers is a poetics of breaching—not to merely disrupt for the sake of the new, but to recalibrate and suggest new hierarchies from which to live and feel by. They work as both scalpel and flood, poems of brooded, subtle syntax that build and accrue toward inevitable and stifling ferocity. They challenge our culture's often too-calcified notions of love and romance, power and failure, and dismantle the belief that certainty is infallible strength.

Mao's work reclaims for itself an acidic possibility, corrosive to monuments of thought that never held the othered female body the way her very poems do: how they erect themselves, like bones, according to a life's desire to bend, stand, and dance on its own terms, both

out of joy as well as to keep from falling. “Live,” she writes, “as if kindness is a hoax.” And it is through this very upending of conventional values that we see the world anew—and demand of it a truth perhaps even words themselves cannot promise: yet *another* world—but in this one. Ultimately, here is a body of work that not only insists on its own resurrection, but then, refusing the very ground it arrives at, has chosen instead, like the perishable yet fearless insects she writes of, its own flight—its own impossibly real and wildly achieved altitudes.

SALLY WEN MAO

Ode to Exile

The bag over my head kept me from seeing
the sky's pink architecture. The beauty

of the celestial dome does not transcend sight.
After my arrest, I left my country, the one

whose rivers I bathed in as a child, the one that
gave me my primary education, my primal

dreams. And in the new country, I was free
to watch the sky. Except this sky

was different, this sky didn't glow like a pink
orb, this sky underwhelmed me.

I didn't love this sky. I didn't love this country,
though everyone told me to be grateful.

So I shut up. I grew up. This tale is not about
gratitude. This tale is not about assimilation.

This tale is about omissions, exits, how I escaped
the pitiable doubleness of that narrative,

moved to another country, then another, and in each
I saw a sky that didn't match the one I used

to have. Physics says that light pollution keeps
the cells in our eyes from truly witnessing

the heavens. In my journey, I forgot about clarity
or smog. I forgot about comparisons,

or philosophies, or revolutions, or regimes.

 Instead, I watched the kites scar the trees,

the ducks swim across the depthless lake.

 Every city reminded me of another city.

Oh, I was lonely. I spoke nine dead languages.

 I spoke then I shouted until they answered.

The cities, the suburbs, the plains. I said to any living
thing: *I've arrived. I'm here. Are you listening?*

your language: passerine,
swift, we wish we didn't learn

this—how to make love
in contempt, how the shudder

meant *touch me now,*
then stay

the hell away from me.

Ode to Estrangement

My mother does not want to outlive
her mother. What's the point
of a bedridden life, she asks.
Nothing's wiser than the femaleness
of blood. Nothing wakes us
more than this fission, this rupture.
You will outlive your mother
by seventeen years. Your skin
will crumple the way hers never
could. Nerves, neglect, how
an old house damages us. Our lives,
a sculpture, the spine bared to
gooseflesh, wounds scalped fresh
and dear. Disarmed, a daughter
sits still and pretty, marries
her mother's worry—to be 30, 40, 50,
and unmoored. To sprout
shame, without child. Once,
I saved a woman's life.
I strapped myself to an ambulance
and held her hand. In the hospital
room, I fed her fresh longan, peeled.
When the doctors didn't show,
I unshackled her. On a taxi we crossed
the Williamsburg Bridge—
she choked, a nest of stones
in her lungs, but we laughed all the way
to the next hospital. Years later,
in another taxi, our friendship
would end. Women come and go
like men sometimes. A fury she unleashed
like a murder of crows. Thank you
for worshiping what didn't exist

inside me. Anne Sexton writes,
 “I sang her out. I caught her down.
 I stamped her out with a song.”
Sweet mother, I am not afraid of the world
 outside, but I am terrified of living
 in a panopticon. Do you understand
why I can’t admit this? This is why
 I was silent on Lombard Street,
the gardens all zigzagged like my heart.
 Sweet mother, I sensed love
 in your maledictions. Mother,
 with our devotion, we pummel
 each other to the ground.

I will never dance for you

Hunting is a cocksure rite of passage
Hurting is the origin of everything

May they rip you or ripen you
Remove the bullets & tell me what you find

My quitting!
I quit the search party
I quit the chase, I quit the object of my affliction

I quit the floor, I quit the sit-in
I quit the tiny room with the spring mattress

I quit spring and summer and fall and winter
I quit!!!!

I quit the plums shriveling in their own liquids
I quit the quince trees in the yard next door

I quit the bunting formation heading swiftly toward the sea

I quit the spit in my mouth
I quit the throb and the sob and the yelp and the yowl

I quit the wilderness
I quit the story with its arms cut off

Good girls can't
Good girls can't be gods
You wanted me wet but not awake

Come at me, come starve me
These ribs, these legs, this hotbed of knots

on my shoulder, this cursive curse

you want to grip, grope

When we make a racket out of sweat,
when we twist our parts

you restrain me
gild and geld me
when I shudder
you shutter

you erect fences
you erect

borders, your erectile missive
laying claim to my horror

Try to train me to obey
my borders, make me kneel, make me spend

all the moneyshots
until we are spent, until we are nothing

I've got nothing for you
So fuck you

This dance
taunts you with my aliveness
my wretchedness
you push me against a wall

lean in, gnaw my ear
I tear up, untorn
my penumbra glows
my crown turns blue

regal with rage
and I won't dance, motherfucker,

I won't dance for you