

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. You’ve just heard Buddhist poet and novelist Ocean Vuong discussing his new book, *Time Is a Mother*. Written in the aftermath of Vuong’s mother’s death, the collection offers an intimate portrait of grief, loss, and survival. In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Ocean to discuss Buddhist rituals of mourning, the poem as a death meditation, and how to navigate the eight worldly winds as a writer. To close, he reads a poem from his new collection.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with poet and writer Ocean Vuong and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Ocean. Hi, Sharon. It’s great to be with you both.

Ocean Vuong: Thank you for having me. It’s a pleasure.

James Shaheen: It’s a pleasure for us too, and congratulations on your new book.

Ocean Vuong: Thank you, thank you. It’s strange, publishing, I think, particularly as a Buddhist because it’s just another manifestation of your ideas. So I try not to see it as a parade, which is very antithetical to how my publisher wants to see it, but we make it work. I do all this stuff, but in my heart, I have to remind myself that this is not the top of the mountain, if you will.

James Shaheen: Right. The new collection is *Time Is a Mother*, and I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it.

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



Ocean Vuong: It’s hard to say. I write one poem at a time, and I write very slowly. My first collection took eight years; this one took about six. I realized that so much of my work is around loss and grief, and so much of Buddhism is the investigation therein, and so I think, for me, the American enterprise of curiosity and artmaking is one in which we reckon with loss. This is a country filled with ghosts. And so the private and then the personal and then the social loss all came to a head after I lost my mother to breast cancer in November 2019, and then in March, we were in COVID. So it was a profound moment that I think we all go through when we lose our mothers, our parents, that this is samsara. This is why we’re here. This is *dukkha*. And the question for the artist is how do I make sense of it? To me, language is the perfect architecture in which you can build something where we can then enter collectively, because it’s a communal tool, in order to feel and think, and so poems happened to be the perfect medium for that.

James Shaheen: Did you write most of this in lockdown during the pandemic, or had it already begun?

Ocean Vuong: I wrote about half of it before. But after losing my mother, and then being in lockdown, I looked at the material, and I realized I’m always grieving. The poem is always an elegy and a love poem as well. And I think that’s also very close to my Buddhist practice, particularly with doing death meditation. For me, the poem is a profound death meditation. It’s a place where death doesn’t even have to be mentioned in order to be felt, which is something that I’m really interested in as an artist: how do I have a felt absence effect in the work? Sometimes you can feel that death and dying haunt the work without it having to be named.

James Shaheen: You grew up in a Buddhist family, and you’ve described your introduction to Buddhism as coming through rituals and care. Can you share more about the Buddhism of your childhood?

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



Ocean Vuong: Yeah, like most Vietnamese Mahayana traditions, it's heavily ritualistic: incense and making offerings. Because a lot of my family was illiterate, they were not that privy to the lectures or the sutras or the teachings. They would hear the oral teachings at the temple. But most of it was this adherence to these rituals. And it wasn't until my mother passed that I realized the great wisdom and value in having these rituals and why so many Buddhist traditions have been doing this for over 1,000 years in so many contexts, kneeling on this tiled floor for two hours and prostrating over 100 times, holding an incense to your forehead as it burns and burns your fingers. Your hands are trembling from the ache. I realized that this whole ritual was for us. It wasn't for the statues or the bodhisattvas. It was for the grievers because now our pain, the pain that we felt inside, was now manifested bodily, and in fact, that act was a sort of communion with body and soul. And so I felt utterly relieved to see those around me, my family members, the sangha, in so much bodily pain from all this, which is on the one hand nothing compared to the pain of the heart of losing your mother, but it suddenly made sense. It was a realignment of body and soul. And I said, Oh, this is why. This is why we've been doing it. And whether you believe it or not or understand the teachings or not, the rituals kind of force you, or rather recruit you into aligning with your suffering. So it's a prolonged meditation. It was no different than walking meditation.

James Shaheen: You later studied Buddhist texts. How did that change your relationship to the Buddhism you grew up with? Or did it simply affirm it or deepen it?

Ocean Vuong: It deepened and expanded it because now I realized, “Oh, this makes sense.” That incense was about intention. It was about making offerings. It was about mentally, bodily meditation, somatic meditation, about intention. When you put the fruit on the altar, my mother would say, “The Buddha is hungry,” or “Our ancestors are hungry,” or “Look at this, there's so much dust on there. We have to be better, we have to clean up the dust and be at our best when we're offering something to our ancestors and the Buddha.” And it was this profound moment of

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



dignifying being present. It was relieving your own concerns, your own selfishness, and literally cleaning and sweeping the small altar. And it was still impactful, even if you don't know the teachings. Knowing the teachings really do just affirm this. This was all part of the practice. And the beauty of it is that it works whether you understand it or not. That's not always true with literature. You do have to know the words as a medium to finish the book and talk about it. But so much of the ritualistic aspects of it recruit the community to commit to mindfulness, even without knowledge of the text. And that was really beautiful.

James Shaheen: You've also spoken about the tension you experienced between being a Buddhist and being a poet. In fact, you said that you plan to stop writing at some point. Can you share a little bit more about this tension? Will you actually stop writing?

Ocean Vuong: In the contemporary context that I live in, being an author, publicity, touring, those are things that I'm speaking specifically to that I feel are very antithetical to being a successful, or rather a skillful, Buddhist. I think of the eight winds. The tree must stay firm in the eight winds, and it's really hard when you enter spaces and there's a worshipful attitude to it. I joke and say if I were to assess myself, I would say I'm severely overrated because there's so much praise out there. And there's also criticism. But I think I realized that for me, the work is finished. So if my work is finished, the writing is complete, why does the praise still live on? I think I'm very skeptical of that. I'm suspicious of that energy, and I'm very wary of that because to me, making a book is akin to sending a raft downriver, and you have to stay on the shore to live your life. You can't live on the raft. I think I've seen a lot of my peers live on that raft, and that raft starts to chip away and before you know it, they're neck deep in the river, and it's a big struggle. It's a big shock when that raft goes away. And so for me, there has to be a difference between living and making. You make something, you send it down river, but you have to stay on the steady ground of the shore. So I don't know. I haven't found a way to do it well. If I do, then I hope I can still write because I love this. This is the only thing that I can do really well. I

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



would still write for myself, but I guess what I mean is this public, commercialized function of publication.

James Shaheen: That’s what I wanted to ask about, the act of writing itself. It seems to me that when we do something really well, we have to get out of our own way.

Ocean Vuong: Absolutely. You realize that you’re really a conductor of energies. I talked about this when people asked me about the themes and subjects in my books. When I wrote my first book of poems, right away, my peers and editors and even teachers would say, “Well, now what are you going to do? You already wrote about the Vietnam War and American violence,” as if I should now write about Mars. But there’s this capitalistic anxiety to reinvent yourself, to kind of see the book as an ultimate and finite container of ideas. That’s akin to this market anxiety of “Now better tasting,” Now, with a brand new look.” We see this when we shop all the time. But I wanted to have a different approach to my work in seeing the books as conductors. They’re conduits of the same energy. They are material manifestations of conductors, and every book actually carries the same themes and obsessions, but with a different medium, a different approach.

James Shaheen: One more question before I turn this over to Sharon for a moment. How do you stay on shore? How do you stay grounded?

Ocean Vuong: It’s hard. You have to keep doing it. When the praise comes, it feels good, and then you have to watch it. It’s like watching the breath: “Oh, there it is. I feel the rush of dopamine.” And then when you start watching it, you realize it’s divorced from you, and there’s a certain truth that happens when you realize, “Oh, this has nothing to do with me. This is someone else’s projection, which is valid, but I can’t hold on to it.” I can’t become possessive of good news because then I will drift away. It will take me down with the current. And sometimes

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



I'm good at it, and sometimes I'm not. I'm not among the monastics, who can be very stoic and control their demeanor. Sometimes I get a good email, and I scream and jump. So to me, that would be a failing, but sometimes, it goes beyond you, and then you get swept away a bit. So I don't think I'm firmly on the shore. I think I get pulled a little bit, and then I struggle upstream back on the banks soaking wet. That's actually probably more accurate to my experience.

Sharon Salzberg: So you grew up surrounded by storytellers, and you've spoken about how you see writing as a kind of communal exchange. I'm wondering if you can share more about how the styles of storytelling you encountered as a child influence your poetry.

Ocean Vuong: Absolutely. I think when we think of the refugee, we often think of a passive, needful, and often pandering subject and a victim of something. There's this perennial victimhood that is reductive to the identity of people, people who are very complex. For me, I like to reorient how we see refugees as people who are actually incredibly creative and innovative and have to make life-saving decisions not only for themselves but for the people they love. In other words, nobody survives by accident. Survival is an innovative act. I saw that right away with the women in my family in the stories they decided to tell. They had to make decisions. The mind can only hold so much, so what do you remember? What do you leave behind? They're doing cultural work. As a culture, we're having discussions now of which work do we read and which work should we leave in the past. Who do we carry? Who's problematic? Which texts are harmful? We're doing this all the time as a culture, and often it's in institutions and discussions and syllabuses. I'm in institutions now as a professor, and this happens. But I realized these women were doing this already on the boats. As they're fleeing, they're deciding: What do I give to my children, to my grandchildren? What stories do I pass on so that they can make use of? And then before you know it, you're at the heart of civilization. You can go back to the epic poets of *Gilgamesh* or Homer and the *Iliad*. Those texts were so vital to the flourishing of our cultures because they were civic treaties. It's all about one's obligation to the community

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



through reciprocal civic bonds. I felt the same thing happened with how they told stories because there was always a lesson. There was always a purpose. There was always an allegory or parable. Even when they told their own stories, you realize that they were edited down every time they told them, and these were actually master classes for a young future writer. I realized that I was at the heart of a master class. How my grandmother would pause over details, what details to leave in, what to gloss over, how she sped up time and how she slowed it down. I would learn much later in college in Faulkner and Whitman and Toni Morrison, and I realized my grandmother was doing this intuitively. And so when I look at my personal canon of creativity, the women who raised me are right up there with the Faulkners and the Joyces and the Virginia Woolfs and James Baldwins.

James Shaheen: You’ve talked about the “language lab” and the linguistic innovation that takes place in queer communities of color. I’m wondering if you can share a little bit about the role poetry plays in articulating different possible futures.

Ocean Vuong: Yeah, it was always poetry’s role. I always felt that as long as there were soldiers, there were poets, and I think that’s always true, that the history of poetry is the history of displacement. It’s the history of war. It’s our species-wide condition. And that’s why I think it can never die, regardless of how we read it. There’s this conversation about the crisis of printing, but now there’s Twitter poetry, there’s Instagram poetry because it’s so portable. Anytime you have a marginalized community, you realize that innovation occurs at the most portable and malleable forms of art. This is true with hip-hop and how hip-hop blurs into poetry for communities of color in spoken-word traditions. You just need the self, the body, and it could happen anywhere. It has the power to interrupt. You don’t need a plot or context. There doesn’t need to be a setup. A poem can happen at any given moment. The power to interrupt and the power to be portable is why it can cross so many borders and so many communities and why it means so much to so many people because you can participate in it. I tell my students this. I tell

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



them that to be a nurse or a doctor, you have to get a nursing degree, you have to go to medical school for eight years, maybe a decade. But if you want to be a poet, you could do it tonight. You could do it right now. And there's an incredible exhilaration of power that the form really offers you.

Sharon Salzberg: Poetry itself I find intimidating, even though I love language and words and I write. There's something about that particular kind of creation. Maybe I have to think of it more as just speaking a truth and not getting fancier than that because in my mind, it's incredibly beyond me.

Ocean Vuong: Yeah, poetry is up against so much, and often, particularly in the 20th century, it was kind of cajoled into institutions. The project of canonization, started by Matthew Arnold in the 19th century, was to prevent the working class and the peasantry from revolting. He saw that the Enlightenment created a lot of suspicion amongst Europe with the church, and so the church was losing its hold on its power over the populace. Matthew Arnold was asking how do we prevent what happened in France and America? How do we prevent revolutions? This was at the time of Marx, *Das Kapital* and the Communist Manifesto, and so he said, “What if we replace the church and Christianity with literature?” And that's what began the English canon. The English canon was very middle class. The books and the poems that went in there were a way to kind of empathize with those who live under chandeliers so that we realize that the rich also suffer. It's actually interesting because at the heart of that is Buddhist rhetoric, but for absolutely sinister means. It's like, “We all suffer, so therefore, don't overthrow us. We're just like you. We suffer too.” And so right away, it's now institutionalized, and there's a sense that you have to decode it to know its secrets. That was the great flaw of the institutionalization of poetry in the 20th century. And it still sticks. People feel frustrated with poetry because they feel like it's beyond them because we're taught to plunder a text for a thesis. As soon as we're in elementary school, it's like, what's the summary of this passage? Critical thinking and close reading tell us

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



that we are outside of meaning, and reading will help us enter, and then we become hunters in the text. But that's only one way of reading, and it's a failure of our pedagogy because another way to read is to read a poem the way we experience weather. What is the meaning of rain? Rain doesn't have a secret. It exists. It's the same with music. You experience music. Why do we cry listening to Bach? There's no meaning inherent in the notes. This is true with mantras. There's no inherent meaning, but the intention creates a profound effect on the sonic wave and then the brain and then the emotions. And so part of my work as an educator is to undo a lot of these strict ways of reading that have been hammered into our students, and they get really excited but also really nervous, just like you described. They're like, "Oh, my God, what do you mean, that could be anything?" And I say, "Yeah, just like weather and music, just experience it, and then you realize that there's so much pleasure." And I have to turn to the Eastern poets, who, by the way, were influenced by Buddhism, like Issa and Basho, the 18th- and 17th-century Japanese poets. One of my favorite Issa poems is the haiku, "Crickets on a log, floating downriver, still singing." You don't need to decode that. You can get a PhD on it if you like. Nobody will be upset. But you don't need to. It's there. To me, poetry is both rhetoric and the inaction of life as it is perceived. It's a phenomenological approach, and there's no right or wrong way to experience it.

Sharon Salzberg: That's beautiful. Thank you for that. I want to go back for a moment to the influences you had as a child. You attended Baptist church services with friends, where you say you developed an infatuation with Noah's ark and the idea of building a vessel for the future when the apocalypse comes. Can you speak a little bit more about Noah's Ark and what it means to you? What would you put in your vessel for the future?

Ocean Vuong: Yeah, I thought it was real. I was seven years old, going into a church. In the neighborhood I lived in Harford, it was mostly a Black and brown church. I experienced these myths, and to me, they made perfect sense with the myth of Leloi that my grandmother would tell me about, the king who defended the Chinese invasion in ancient Vietnam who went to the

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



lake and summoned the turtle who leapt out of the lake and gave him the sword to defend the country. I thought that was real, and so when I heard Noah’s Ark, I was like, “Yeah, that sounds right,” this great flood coming and then this responsibility of discernment, which is so important for Christian thinking. And I think for me, it’s important for Buddhism too. Another way to translate mindfulness is discernment. What good things will you put into what you make, regardless of what you’re making? You can be a shoemaker or a poet like myself, but when you think about that, it becomes no longer a task or a job but a vocation that is invested in a spiritual intention. And that makes the work so much better. And it also makes you so much better because you’re now imbuing the object and the task with a personhood, a DNA of a selfhood. You can see it in someone who cooks a meal. They cook the same recipe, but the person who cooks it with intention and with love, that meal comes out a lot better. We’ve all seen that when we’ve cooked a meal when we’re stressed or we’re hurried or anxious, it comes out not a little sloppy, not the way we want it. So Noah’s Ark was so important to me, because I realized thinking back on it is that I always had the agency to decide what words. If the poem is the arc, then which words? And you have to interrogate yourself, why this word, as opposed to the others? It’s a profound, elongated practice of imbuing care into what you do.

Sharon Salzberg: It’s almost like reclaiming the right to poetry or the right to creativity is like reclaiming the right to love. Because if we don’t have a sense of agency, if we think it’s all in the hands of another, someone judging us, someone assessing us, someone deciding if our effort is worthy or not, it’s like feeling that love is in the hands of another, and they either bestow it upon us or take it away, in which case we have nothing. But we can think of them both more as a capacity within ourselves that other people may ignite or inspire or threaten, but it’s ultimately ours. And we need to claim that with some joy and self-respect, and then it’s like a whole other endeavor.

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



Ocean Vuong: That’s such a beautiful way of thinking about it because I think we slip in too easily to seeing love as a transactional endeavor where it’s like, Do you love me? And do I love you? And so there’s almost this one-to-one transaction that we demand of each other. And it’s so much more beautiful and proactive to see it as a capacious potentiality that we have.

James Shaheen: You know, you talked about Noah’s Ark and the turtle leaping out of the lake and how you believed these things. I associate those sorts of beliefs with my childhood, and it’s kind of like the obsession with literal truth ends up stamping those out. You mentioned at one point that you begin with truth and move toward art. I wonder if there’s anything analogous to coming back to that symbolic language as opposed to this forced literal truth that expunges any kind of creative thinking in terms of myth or the stories that we learned as children.

Ocean Vuong: Yeah, I think about this all the time. I think for me, as an artist, there has to be an allegiance to wonder and awe and mystery and a willingness to quest beyond facts and truth. I think that’s the artist’s role: to go to the cliff of knowledge and look over it and say, “It looks terrifying and there’s no light, but what can I see with my little flashlight, with my little lamp?” Sometimes you set your lamp down, and you just start digging. Sometimes there’s nothing there, and sometimes, all of a sudden, there’s a flash of bone, and you stumble on something. I think that is a very difficult endeavor for the soul. It’s very expensive on the soul to do that work because there’s very little support for it because it’s so ephemeral and malleable and abstract, whereas science and truth and the real and the literal is how adults traffic. It’s the currency of the real that we value in the West. Empirical knowledge is something that is a testament to make anything happen. And it’s hard. I think this is why a lot of artists get snuffed out throughout adulthood. They get snuffed out when they start to commercialize, when they start to talk to presses or galleries or museums, who can only see “the numbers,” which is such a sinister way of thinking about it, but that is the world that we live in. And so for me, it’s all about this balance. I put on a different hat when I go in to talk to the commercial side of things, and I understand and

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



respect that that's what we have to do because the material limitations that we currently live in dictate that I need the book to speak to people, just like I have a library, and behind every library is a marketing team and a publicity department. And so until I can beam my poems into others' heads, and vice versa, this is what we have to work with. But a lot of creativity gets snuffed out along the way. I actually think that adulthood, or growing up, if we take it into our own hands, is actually the perfect medium to preserve this because we're stronger, we have more experience, and we're better at protecting our sense of wonder, whereas when we're children, it gets knocked out so quickly. Sometimes it's strong enough to last through childhood, but we don't have the tools to defend it and to protect it and to preserve it, and so by the time we grow older, we get very cold and bitter. But I think on the other hand, if we make it our adulthood work to revitalize that fire of wonder, we realize we have a lot of skills as adults to really keep that: meditation skills, mindfulness, we can read more. We have so much more capacity to defend this. I don't see it as innocence, but I see it as wonder. And it's not about age. You can keep that wonder for as long as you live. It's about the social pressure to snuff it out in order to be “productive.” We can easily undo that, and in fact, as adults, I think we're better suited to undo that.

James Shaheen: You often say that you write to the terrified versions of yourself. Can you say a little bit about how fear factors in your work and what you mean by that?

Ocean Vuong: I often tell my students, “You should scare yourself, but you shouldn't be scared of yourself.” Often people also ask me, “How can you be so vulnerable in your work? How do you do that? What does it take? And doesn't it destroy you?” Sometimes I guiltily say, “Not at all,” because this is what I chose to do. And I think this is informed by Buddhism, which is that the world is dark, and it could very well get darker. If you're going to be an artist, you have to look at it. It's what we signed up for, to look long and hard at what is the most difficult part of samsara, of the human condition, and to make meaning out of it, to make something out of it, so that it could be shared and understood. There's this idea of questing towards phenomena, which

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



is so important to Buddhists. To me, this is right there with the task of the artist, and so I don't see it as a burden or a difficulty. To me, to get close to the terror is to get close to the human, and that's the job. That's the job description.

James Shaheen: You begin this latest collection, *Time Is a Mother*, with a line from the Peruvian poet César Vallejo, who writes, “Forgive me, Lord: I've died so little.” Can you share a little bit about that epigraph and the relationship you see between poetry and death?

Ocean Vuong: I love Vallejo. To me, it has that quintessential plea to a higher being, which is poetry's classical condition. Before Homer began the *Iliad*, he pleaded to the muses: “Help me do this. I can't do it myself.” I love that. In Buddhism, I think that same plea occurs, but it's more horizontal. It's less vertical, and it's more horizontal. It's a plea to the world: “Help me do this, world.” The books, the people we know, our teachers, present and gone. That's actually the spiritual crisis of the artist is to say that I'm not there. And I think what he means by that is I know so little. To die so little, to suffer so little is, to know so little, and that pain is also a vehicle of knowledge. It may very well be knowledge itself. And so I think that is actually the seat of a lot of my work, and I wrote that to remind myself that. We're never there. If the destination is clear in sight, then there's no point of going, no point of navigating the world. And so everything begins with this cry but also this admittance that we're still so far from the knowledge that we need.

Sharon Salzberg: You've mentioned that you live across the street from a cemetery, and you've been practicing death meditation since the age of 15. I'm wondering if your relationship to this practice has changed over the years and how it might have influenced your writing.

Ocean Vuong: It influenced my writing, and it influenced my life. You do death meditation, and it's hard to really be mad at anybody after because you get close to this condition that as

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



mammals, we are so terrified of. I think that's such a beautiful thing. You see an ant and you slap the table next to it, and it scurries in absolute frantic energy trying to preserve its life. I think that's such a beautiful fact that we're all in this to stay longer, and then the fact that we have to leave reminds us that there is that final door. When we think about passing through that final door, it's hard to have these petty thoughts about who does the dishes or who takes out the garbage or something a colleague said in a committee meeting or what have you. It all fades away. And so it's a really powerful tool to center ourselves back to what matters, back to that Noah's Ark. To me, those two philosophies go hand in hand, those two meditations. The death meditation takes us back to the seat, the workshop of the Ark. It's like now that the silly pettiness is out of me, for now, I can get to work and I can build something valuable and useful to myself and others. Ever since I was 15, that has been my North Star. But I would say that despite how much death meditation I've done, it never prepared me for the death of my mother. I thought that I was some sort of expert, particularly among my family. There were about eight of us there, and I was kind of leading the way. I was able to read the signs of death, and I could tell my aunts and uncles what's happening. And when my mother took her last breath, all of a sudden, I realized I was just kneeling next to her bed wailing, screaming into her sheets. And I realized that there's nothing that you can do to prepare you for the ultimate truth. There's still, in retrospect, a beauty in that, in watching death occur, because it is the ultimate truth. Honesty, for example, is truth that requires a medium. Honesty is the vehicle of truth. But death needs no vehicle. It is itself. And I've never seen something so truthful before and so devastating at the same time.

James Shaheen: I want to ask you about the poem, “Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker.” It feels like a death meditation itself. I wonder if you could talk about that poem and the ways that our losses are archived and remembered.

Ocean Vuong: I really love that poem because I couldn't have written it as a younger poet. I've been doing this now for almost 15 years, and it was only now that I could write a poem like that.

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



It's essentially a poem that I made up. It's not actually anybody's Amazon history, but it's a found poem. There's no syntax. There are no literary techniques. As a younger poet, I would be very insecure about writing a poem without my techniques. It required me to be quite mature and confident in language that the words themselves have their own narrative and that what you're really doing is just arranging. That sequencing and pattern making is a huge part of being an artist. If I wrote this 10 years ago, I would be too ashamed of this: "Oh, God, I have to do more here." But the profound effect of that poem is that the artifacts of living, the detritus, the debris of living is actually actualized in the object. And again, this is what the Japanese haiku poets already understood, contemporaneously to Shakespeare, who wrote in the English fashion of rhetoric. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" is all about rhetoric and then proving the argument. So the Western sonnet is very similar to an essay, whereas the Eastern haiku is about presenting ideas and objects as they are. And so, to me, I'm very proud of that poem because it was using my more global literary theory approach and an Eastern philosophy to say that these objects are enough. There doesn't have to be a linguistic rhetoric that happens, that is performed, and it's also meditation of time. Throughout these months, what's purchased, what's not purchased? You can map an entire life that way, by the residue of living.

James Shaheen: Did you take these lines from an actual history and put them together, arrange them, and select particular lines or not?

Ocean Vuong: No, I totally created this narrative to the utmost verisimilitude that I could. But I searched these things on Amazon, and it was really fun to see how things are presented linguistically on an Amazon page.

James Shaheen: It was very beautiful, but also very believable.

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



Ocean Vuong: That’s why I start with truth and then end with art. I think the best art makes life more real. It’s actually a cycle. You start with a sense of truth, and then you see that there’s only reportage. The artist must make something of the material, so the truth is the material, and then you orchestrate the architecture, just like you described in that poem, through invention and imagination. And then through that cycle, you read the poem, or you have written the poem, and then you’re released back into the world, and the world somehow feels truer, more real, more felt. That’s the magic of art is that it magnifies life. It’s not really a departure from life—it just makes life more felt and true.

Sharon Salzberg: We’re living through a time of so much personal and collective loss, and I find it really interesting that in dominant US culture there’s such a premium on being in control, so the inevitable truths of life, getting sick, getting old, or dying, almost feel like you’ve lost control and it’s a personal humiliation. As you were describing your mother’s death and your response, I thought that there are so many people in this time who have fallen to their knees weeping and wailing. Some people feel they can’t disclose that even, that that needs to be hidden in some way, and what a tragedy that is—that this is the very thing that should bring us closer together, the dukkha in life and the suffering and vulnerability we all have. I also thought of the role of creation or making something like poetry in one’s grief process because there’s also such a thing as legacy. It’s the way a person’s life lives past the body. Working with, for example, survivors of gun violence, many of whom have been parents who’ve lost a child, their great wish is that the child’s life not been negated, that it be expressed in some way, that one realizes that this was a being, they had impact on their family, they had influence in their community, they were examples of something. And I find that itself very beautiful and healing in that process. I’m just wondering about the book and the poetry in your own process of grief.

Ocean Vuong: The common narrative around writing is that it should be cathartic. I don’t feel that way. I think it’s a conduit of energy, and the grief is also an energy. And so it’s never been

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



cathartic for me, but there is a satisfaction in building something that could then be shared. I think for me, a book is like a town square. You fashion it the way you dreamed it, but the best part of it is that people get to inhabit it and engage with it and feel however they want to feel and bring their own griefs and joys to it. Ultimately, the poet is an architect. You build a space, a linguistic space, and whatever folks bring to it is valid. That’s really important to me. But I don’t think I’m any more free of the feelings through it. I know more. You might realize, “Ah, I can express this feeling this way,” so you feel perhaps more grounded. But you’re not washed of any of the grief or the feelings.

James Shaheen: Ocean, I’m hoping you can read a couple of poems for us from the collection. Could you read “Almost Human”?

Ocean Vuong: “Almost Human.” It’s been a long time since my body. Unbearable, I put it down on the earth the way my old man rolled dice. It’s been a long time since time. But I had weight back there. Had substance & sinew, damage you could see by looking between your hands & hearing blood. It was called reading, they told me, too late. But too late. I red. I made a killing in language & was surrounded by ghosts. I used my arsenal of defunct verbs & broke into a library of second chances, the E.R. Where they bandaged my head, even as the black words kept seeping through, like this. Back there, I couldn’t get the boys to look at me even in my best jean jacket. It was 2006 or 1865 or .327. What a time to be alive! they said, this time louder, more assault rifles. Did I tell you? I come from a people of sculptors whose masterpiece was rubble. We tried. Indecent, tongue-tied, bowl-cut & diabetic, I had a feeling. The floorboards creaked as I wept motionless by the rehab window. If words, as they claimed, had no weight in our world, why did we keep sinking, Doctor—I mean Lord—why did the water swallow our almost human hands as we sang? Like this.

Life As It Is

Episode #9 with Ocean Vuong

“Getting Close to the Terror with Ocean Vuong”

April 27, 2022



James Shaheen: Wow. Ocean Vuong, it’s been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Ocean’s new book, *Time Is a Mother*, available wherever books are sold. Thank you so much, Ocean.

Ocean Vuong: Thank you so much, both of you, for having me. It was a pleasure.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you.

James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to *Life As It Is* with Ocean Vuong. We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!