Warmly, Ocean: A Month After the Reading, Poet and Essayist Ocean Vuong Reflects on Craft and Teaching

“The most beautiful part of your body is where it’s headed,” says Ocean Vuong in his

popular poem “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” but it seems he’s already arrived at an

arresting destination – home to his native New England and professionally as UMass Amherst’s

newest assistant professor of poetics. Vuong is a Ruth Lilly fellow from the Poetry Foundation

and has received honors ranging from the Pushcart Prize to the Stanley Kunitz Prize for Younger

Poets, with his poets and essays featured in The Atlantic, The Nation, New Republic, The New

Yorker, and The New York Times among other places. Born in Saigon, he immigrated to the

U.S. at the age of two as a child refugee, and on October 12th, Vuong read from his debut poetry

collection *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* as part of the MFA program’s Visiting Writers Series to

more than a hundred people packed into Memorial Hall. This event also served to officially

welcome Vuong to campus as the newest member of the poetry faculty, complete with a catered

reception and book signing. People poured into the event from the crisp fall evening, and once

the folding chairs ran out they sat in the aisles until it was standing room only. Memorial Hall is

a holdover of both American and collegiate history, initially built for student social life and to

commemorate UMass veterans of World War I and subsequent wars, an especially poignant

setting for Vuong’s reading as his own work is heavily influenced by his own familial

experiences with the Vietnam War. “I write about life, love, and death,” says Vuong. “It’s a little

bit glib, but it’s true.” Despite the large crowd, the gathering of mostly MFA students and faculty

felt intimate once the lights dimmed and Vuong was introduced to the Memorial Hall podium in

front of an antique fireplace, American flag, and memorial plaque.

The reading began with an introduction by Betsy Wheeler, managing director of the

Juniper Summer Institute, Randall Knoper, the UMass English department chair, and Jeff Parker,

associate professor and MFA program director. “The pessimist has no stake in innovation,” said

Parker on what stood out about Vuong’s application for the position. “Literary innovation is an

act of hopefulness.”

Vuong read from several poems from his collection to a captivated audience, many of

whom had read his poetry in their classes. *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* is an acclaimed poetry

collection that has won the Whiting Award, the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection, and

was a finalist for the Kate Tufts Discovery Award as well as for the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry.

Vuong has been hailed by Pulitzer-prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen, this year’s Troy lecturer at

UMass, as the “Walt Whitman of Vietnamese- American literature” among other praise from

national and international sources. However, as eager audience members formed a long line for

the book signing, it became apparent that Vuong’s warm personality draws one in as much his

accolades. “I loved [the reading],” said Jenny Spec-Sherson, a fifth-grade English teacher. “I was

fighting back tears, it was amazing.” Vuong had ended the reading with his signature “Someday

I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,”to an emotionally entranced audience. Now, they would have the

opportunity to pick his brain at the signing, where many started conversations with Vuong about

life and writing. Vuong hopes to continue these conversations in his graduate classes – he

teaches Imaginative Writing: Poetry this fall and plans to teach it again next spring semester as

well as Form and Theory of Poetry: A Myriad Consciousness: The Hybrid, Its Tradition,

Innovations, and Radical Possibilities. This class examines textual and formal hybridity in

poetry, focusing on genre boundaries as well as authors such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Arthur

Rimbaud, and Claudia Rankine, among others.

A month after the reading, Vuong is still going strong as a permanent faculty member and

fixture in his office, Room E358 in South College. “I’m adjusting well, I’m learning as I go. I

like my students, and I love that the intellectual discourse [at UMass] starts in the writing

program but expands from there…to bring diverse voices to campus,” says Vuong. As for

pairing writing with teaching, he’s only written one poem this year due to the tumultuous

American atmosphere. However, his craft in any amount can’t help but catch the eye. Vuong

writes in an evocative, unapologetic style that is also especially popular with the young and

emerging writers’ community. “The lyric poem is an immediate utterance of the voice, a

barbarian ‘yawp’ or ‘yelp’, and I think being unapologetic is vital to my thinking as a writer.

Especially as a queer person of color from a diaspora of war…the strongest thinking comes from

the aftermath of the apology,” he says.

As for Vuong’s homecoming to New England, his dedication to enhancing the voices of

marginalized communities in the area is clear. “I grew up in Hartford, so this is home. The

Pioneer Valley is in many ways a microcosm of America where we live in a predominantly white

place where the voices of people of color…often pass through and are transient. I think about

what might be possible if the voices of people of color stayed longer. How can this space, which

is often lip service, become more conducive to long-staying POC voices?” On the intricacies of

being a person of color in the writing business, Vuong has “never imagined [he] was speaking

for any type of audience – not a white one, not an Asian one, but to my younger self, or my other

selves in the background.” When asked whether he catered his writing style for other types of

audiences, such as magazines and publications, Vuong gave some essential insight into his craft

as well as some wise words for fellow writers. The late afternoon light drained from his office

desk and outside his window, the first campus street lights were beginning to turn on. “I privilege

surprise, when I stun myself. You can write to get into something but then you lose your soul.

The rest of your life you’re bound by schedules, time, and the body…why should we confine

ourselves to further limitations?”