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The
EMPEROR
of
GLADNESS

A NOVEL

Ocean Vuong



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LONDON

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The hardest thing in the world is to live only once.

But it's beautiful here, even the ghosts agree. Mornings, when the light rinses this place the shade of oatmeal, they rise as mist over the rye across the tracks and stumble toward the black-spined pines searching for their names, names that no longer live in any living thing's mouth. Our town is raised up from a scab of land along a river in New England. When the prehistoric glaciers melted, the valley became a world-sized lake, and when that dried up it left a silvery trickle along the basin called the Connecticut: Algonquin for "long tidal river." The sediment here is rich with every particle welcoming to life. As you approach, you'll be flanked by wide stretches of thumb-sized buds shooting lucent through April mud. Within months these saplings will stand as packed rows of broadleaf tobacco and silver queen corn. Beyond the graveyard whose stones have lost their names to years, there's a covered bridge laid over a dried-up brook whose memory of water never reached this century. Cross that and you'll find us. Turn right at Conway's Sugar Shack, gutted and shuttered, with windows blown out and the wooden sign that reads WE SWEETEN SOON AS THE CROCUS BLOOM, rubbed to braille by wind. In spring the cherry blossoms foam across the county from every patch of green unclaimed

by farms or strip malls. They came to us from centuries of shit, dropped over this place by geese whenever summer beckons their hollow bones north.

Our lawns are overrun with ragweed and quack grass, one of them offering a row of red and pink tulips each spring, heads snared through the chain-link they lean on. The nearby porch overflows with rideable plastic toys, a wagon, tricycles, a fire truck, their primary colors now faded to Easter hues. A milk crate with a flap of old tire nailed across its opening is a mailbox set on a rotted sideboard, *Ramirez 47* written on the rubber in Wite-Out. Beside this is a tin bird feeder the shape of Bill Clinton's head. Seeds spill from his laughing mouth and fall like applause each time the wind comes off the freighter that blows through this place in the night's unseen hours. Though the train never stops in our town, its whistle can be heard in every living room three miles out. *Nothing* stops here but us, really. Hartford, the capital built on insurance firms, firearms, and hospital equipment, bureaucracies of death and catastrophe, is only twelve minutes by car down the interstate, and everyone rushes past us, either on their way in or to get the hell out. We are the blur in the windows of your trains and minivans, your Greyhounds, our faces mangled by wind and speed like castaway Munch paintings. The only things we share with the city are the ambulances, being close enough to Hartford for them to come fetch us when we're near dead or rattling away on steel gurneys without next of kin. We live on the edges but die in the heart of the state. We pay taxes on every check to stand on the sinking banks of a river that becomes the morgue of our dreams.

Down our back roads, the potholes are so wide and deep that, days after a summer downpour, minnows dart freely in the green-clear pools. And out of the dark of an unlit porch, someone's laugh cuts the air so quick you could mistake it for a gasped-back sob. That beige shack flanked by goldenrods is the WWII Club, a bar with three stools

and a wood-paneled vending machine stocked only with Marlboros and honey buns. Across from that are brick row houses. First built for men who worked the paper mill on Jennings Road, they now house veterans who come home from every battlefield you can think of to sit on plastic lawn chairs staring at the mountain ridge before shuffling back into smoky rooms where mini-TVs, the size of human torsos, lull them to sleep.

Look how the birches, blackened all night by starlings, shatter when dawn's first sparks touch their beaks. How the last crickets sing through fog hung over pastures pungent now with just-laid manure. In August, the train tracks blaze so hot the rubber on your soles would melt if you walked on them for more than a minute. Despite this heat everything green grows as if in retribution for the barren, cauterized winter, moss so lush between the wooden rail ties that, at a certain angle of thick, verdant light, it looks like algae, like the glacial flood returned overnight and made us into what we were becoming all along: biblical.

Follow the tracks till they fork off and sink into a path of trampled weeds leading to a junkyard packed with school buses in various stages of amnesia, some so old they're no longer yellow but sit grey as shipwrecks. Furred with ivy, their dented hoods pooled with crisp leaves, they are relics of our mislearning. Walk through this yard—as some have done on their way home from the night shift at the Myers sock factory or just out wandering on Sunday afternoons alone with their minds—and you walk through generations of wanderlust burned between faux-leather seats. At the lot's far edge lies the week-old roadkill, its eye socket filled with warm Coca-Cola, the act of a girl who, bored on her way from school, poured her drink into that finite dark of sightless visions.

If you aim for Gladness and miss, you'll find us. For we are called East Gladness. Gladness itself being no more, renamed to Millsap nearly a century ago after Tony Millsap, the boy who returned from

the Great War with no limbs and became a hero—proof you could lose almost all of yourself in this country and still gain a whole town. A handful of us wanted to be East Millsap to soak the shine and fill the stores, but the rest were too proud to name ourselves after a kid whose wheelchair never glided over our sidewalks.

Lasting seven months, winter begins by late September, when the frost glitters on the courthouse lawn and over the hoods of cars banked along the roads. As maples, poplars, and sassafras sway, the light filters amber through their leaving leaves. Even the steeple of the boarded-up Lutheran church grows from dove-white to day-old butter by noon.

Though skeptical, we are not ambivalent to hope. Under all this our main drag glows with its two Irish bars, a diner, a florist, the God First beauty salon, the Panda Gate China Wok, a hole-in-the-wall taco joint with no name, a funeral home painted sky blue to comfort the ravages that lie in its calling, a laundromat whose back entrance leads to a basement housing exactly three coin-operated porn booths. Two doors down is the American Legion, where they sell Saran-wrapped slices of pumpkin bread and black coffee every Friday under a windblown tarp. There's the migrant farm laborer's law office behind the YMCA, which last year finally had one of its wings converted to a needle exchange. There's the huge Victorian on Lilac and Main. Home to our first mayor, it's now a halfway house for recovering addicts, the walkway lined with polyester roses that poke out blue and violet from snowbanks after blizzards.

There's the two-story Cape on the corner painted only high as the eldest son could reach, then abandoned the winter he joined the Marines, leaving it half olive green for the past seven years. In late July, a black mini-fridge sits by the road, an extension cord running to the house. Inside, rows of blueberries sweat in green paper pints beside a coffee can with a Post-it that reads *Blueberries \$5 Pay What You Can*.

It's a town where high school kids, having nowhere to go on Friday nights, park their stepfathers' trucks in the unlit edges of the Walmart parking lot, drinking Smirnoff out of Poland Spring bottles and blasting Weezer and Lil Wayne until they look down one night to find a baby in their arms and realize they're thirtysomething and the Walmart hasn't changed except for its logo, brighter now, lending a bluish glow to their time-gaunt faces. It's where fathers in blue jeans flecked with wood stain stand at the edges of football fields, watching their sons steam in the reddened dawn, one hand in their pocket, the other gripping a cup of Dunkin' Donuts. They could be statues for what it means to wait for a boy to crush himself into manhood. And each morning you'd sit on the frost-dusted bleachers, a worn copy of *To the Lighthouse* on your lap, and watch the players on the field, blue tomahawks shivering on their jerseys, their plastic pads crackling in the mist. And when you'd turn the page it would slip right off the binding, flutter through the field, gathering inky blotches through the wet grass until it tangles between the boys' legs and disintegrates under a pair of black cleats. The words gone to ground. That town.

Against all odds, we have a library. It used to be an armory that once housed a group of runaway slaves en route to Nova Scotia, cause for the bronze statue of Sojourner Truth at the center fountain, three years now without water. Across from that statue stands the four-foot-eight Lego model of a red T-Rex, the pieces glued into permanence. It is the height of a boy named Adam Munsey, who, a few feet away, was crushed by the very school bus that was to pick him up, the driver shit-faced on a handle of Southern Comfort after staying up all night to watch the Patriots win the 2002 Super Bowl. Further up, where the street widens into Route 4 and the sidewalk crumbles to dust and patches of northern poppy and blue asters spray over the green to your right, you'll find the Colt factory where the founder, Samuel Colt, became one of the wealthiest men in America, selling revolvers to both

sides during the Civil War. Now it's a Coca-Cola plant where polished red trucks line the old brick loading bays as the sun slips behind the mountains in the west.

There's Cumberland Road, which takes you to York County Women's Corrections, lined this time of year with pumpkins that flush the drab fields with stretches of ochre—bounties for jackrabbits and starved possums hoarding for winter. Hugging the river beyond are slabs of sandstone pocked with *Podokesaurus* footprints, made over 195 million years ago, running right up to the Wendy's parking lot. Then the other franchises: Burger King, AutoZone, Mattress Firm, Family Dollar, Dollar General. Then the Nite-E-Nite Motel with its five babyshit yellow doors facing the Kahoots nightclub across the street, which promises NEW GIRLS EVERY SEVEN MONTHS! Beyond that are the hand-painted signs: BRYON'S INSTA-BAIL, FIREWOOD \$25 OFF YOUR FIRST CORD, NO FRACKING IN THE NAME OF JESUS, a faded MARTHA BEAN FOR 2006 CITY COMPROLLER. And one in elegant red script that reads, as if in prophecy, GUNS AHEAD.

What do you really know about what you know of New England?

Past the concrete slab where the Citgo once stood, a deer steps cautious into a grove of milkweed, as if the last of its kind, then leaps into the brush where the creek spills into the river flowing under King Philip's Bridge. A freighter bridge named for the Wampanoag chief who led a rebellion here to take back his land from Puritans, its cement abutment loops with colorful graffiti that reads *SpyKids 2*, *Guerra a los ricos*, *Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!!!*, *Laura & Jonny '92*, *niños malos*, and *9/11 was an inside job*.

It is also the last way out of town.

And it's the very bridge the boy crossed one afternoon on September 15 in 2009. Rain pelted the oversize UPS jacket draped over his shoulders as he walked cradled in the heart of the valley, the land sweeping away from him toward boulderous clouds sinking into the

horizon. He was nineteen, in the midnight of his childhood and a lifetime from first light. He had not been forgiven and neither are you. The sky a benevolent grey as the afternoon drained to evening and the cold turned his breath to fog. Under his boots the tracks hummed from steady gales slamming the steel straps. Yes, it *is* beautiful here, which is why the ghosts never leave. I need you to know this as the town rinsed to a blur behind him. I need you to understand, as black water churned like chemically softened granite below, the lights coming on one by one along the cobalt banks, that the boy belonged to a cherished portion of this world as he glanced over his shoulder and saw the phone lines sagging with crows resigned to dusk and the red water tower in the distance announcing us—EAST GLADNESS—in faded white paint, before he turned from this place, swung one leg over the rail and decided, like a good son, to jump.

Though it was true the boy had run out of paths to take, out of ways to salvage his failures, he never planned on jumping off King Philip's Bridge that evening. It was only when he glimpsed, between the rail ties, the river swirling so massive below, a place you could slip cleanly into, that something in him both jolted and withered at once. They would say he drowned, of course, like that sophomore from Hebron they fetched from the shallows last summer, who got wasted at a house party and waded out past midnight singing to himself, only to wash ashore the next morning dressed in everything but his shoes. There was no shame, the boy thought, in losing yourself to something as natural as gravity—where one doesn't *jump* but is pulled, blameless, toward the sea. If nothing else, this would hurt his mother least.

But once he raised his leg and lifted himself over the railing, he spotted the second platform below, jutting far enough to make the leap impossible. He paused, stared across the swirling valley charred by the gloam, and glimpsed the spot where the river turned toward Chester County, where the towns are so small you could light a cigarette as you drive in and be someplace else before you blow your first drag out the window. He sucked in a breath, let it mist over him, then toed his

way to the lower platform, where he thumbed off his pack until a mute white splash winked below and it was gone. Grasping the steel cables, he inched himself toward the bridge's center, where the fall would be highest, the current below churning through the metal beams.

A few yards in, he paused. The bridge was over a hundred feet tall, he knew, from a field trip back in middle school. It was once the town's most prized achievement, meant to bring passenger trains and money into the heart of Main Street. But the trains never stopped, passing the town on their way to Boston, Providence, Buffalo, Portland, even Montreal. Now only the freighters cut through, carrying strapped lumber or barrels of grain from Ontario. The bridge was painted bright yellow to signal this errant optimism, the color gone now save for a few bolts buried deep enough in the beams to be spared from weather.

Streetlights had come on over the mud shelves hugging the bank, giving the water the brushstroked glow of sunlight touching wet pavement on summer mornings—the kind of light you'd see nowhere else. "Sorry," he whispered to no one over the rush as the wires slickened under his palms. The rain, pouring steady for three days, drenched his hair and ran cold down his neck. The girl back at New Hope had mentioned, without him asking, that if you dive after breaking the surface and rush to touch the river bottom, it'll be enough, that the rapids will drag you forward and all you have to do is close your eyes until the icy water grows warm and quiet in your lungs and your pineal gland floods your brain with DMT and before you know it you're flying in a clear, windless sky, free from the human cage of your body.

What she didn't mention was that when you come up to the edge, there'll be another edge, inside you, one that's both passable and insurmountable at once. He swallowed hard and looked down at his boot wobbling over the beam. That's when he saw the corpse floating