

PAINTBRUSH & OTHER POEMS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Erin, to Rainy, to Savannah, to Anika, and to Meghan: I love you.

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We all fight our own private wars.  
— *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*,  
*Benjamin Alire Sáenz*

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Paintbrush & Other Poems” is a collection of poems documenting different facets of sadness and their contribution to mental illness. It seeks to use writing as a refuge, the way writing is often used, as well as a bridge between others to communicate the things in their life they may not be able to quite explain; it uses poetry as a way to find one fundamental truth, however small that truth may be and invites the reader to not only reflect on it but feel it. Ranging from topics of problems in relationships with others in the titular poem “Paintbrush,” to troubles with self to struggling to keep a handle on depressive symptoms, this collection explores through the use of language the reality of reconciling mental illness despite how hard that may be.



## INTRODUCTION

Writing is about a feeling. A feeling, perhaps, that is unknowable, or enormous, or a burden that seeks to be lightened, but it is still about a feeling. Art, at its core, I think, is about the space we navigate in ourselves — the distance between what we know and what we don't know, between the things that hurt the most. We create art to find that distance and bridge it, to wander into unfamiliar territory, to explore the parts inside of us we do not know how to name.

We consume art for similar reasons. I want to be seen — that is, I want the words to look and not the people. To be known by others is to be vulnerable; to be known by literature is to see yourself in a mirror. One is much less frightening than the other, and frankly, less embarrassing. When we find the pieces of art that name (or rename) the feelings inside of us, it becomes much easier to bear their weight.

I found myself writing this poetry book by accident. I am more of a novelist, by trade, and while I adore poetry, I always found myself drifting into my well-crafted fantasy world when I wanted to work on something creative. However, by the time I'd reached my last year of school, I was burnt out; on academics, on people, on writing. I'd reached a tipping point with my mental health. It did not seem to me that I could explain all the turmoil inside of me. I spent more time crying than I did doing my homework; I could not focus on anything assigned to me. The weight against my chest did not let up. I found myself indexing through Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, my favorite poetry book, again and again. Vuong managed to capture the essence of all the things I couldn't, all the things I wanted to tell the people I loved but couldn't manage. I withdrew. I wanted to say *Sorry for me. Sorry for being sad*. There does not seem to be a

real way to apologize for that.

I could not bear everything inside of me. I did the only thing I knew how to do: I wrote.

Some things are heavy. Sadness, grief, anger, hurt — they became tangible emotions that lay on my skin like a blanket. I did not know how to live with the emotions I was attempting to process, and I didn't know how to live with myself. As I began writing these poems, grief over entering my last year of college writhed within me. Childhood was well and truly dead; in less than a year, I'd be free to the world, where I'd have to make my own decisions for what I wanted. I was sad that I would be leaving everyone I loved, in a world I'd built so well for myself, that moments I wanted to cherish would eventually be distant memories. I was angry that I couldn't live with that. No matter how hard I tried, all I could imagine was that one day, I would not be standing in whatever place I was having whatever conversation I was having. That would fade someday, too. And I was hurt; I struggled with navigating relationships with other people and even just myself.

I still do. All of these things that I wade through in this poetry collection are still very real and accurate to my life now. Art is not a magical cure, but it seemed like a good first step. Some things are heavy; I write to make them less heavy. I write to reach in front of me and grab someone by the fabric of their shirt and whisper “Listen,” even if that person is just myself. In the end we all just want to be listened to. I wrote these poems because I could not live with myself, and at the end of the day, I am all I have left.

It's strange to think that I have taken a magnifying glass to all of my wounds and stared at them for hours and still, I only barely know how to make sense of them. I am

not the only one. In this world, we all have our bruises. The beautiful thing about poetry is that those bruises become easier to live with when we know how to process them.

I wrote the first poem in response to what felt like, at the time, my biggest bruise: my inability to communicate with the people I love and tell them how much I was suffering. "I Made This For You, But," became this apology that I didn't even mean to write, a *sorry* that came from what I thought was my erratic behavior; crying at random times, pulling away, spending too much time in my room. This was my first attempt at begging someone to listen to me.

What followed was an exploration in all of my bruises. "Cold Snap" is about trying to find common ground when you don't always know that you can. "Hands on the Sink" is the fragmented thoughts that you tell yourself during a breakdown, over and over again, to try to find some semblance of peace. "A Comprehensive List of the Places I've Cried," which is, like the title suggests, a list poem, is a look at all the places that become touched by depression, how when we are sad, we cannot always control that sadness and its outpour. "Paintbrush," the titular poem, is about loving a parent in an adult world, once the rose-colored glasses have shattered — lenses you will never get back, a truth you will never unsee. And the closing poem, "As I Know Her," is a poem of graciousness, a poem about being kind to yourself and all of your facets, even if you are unsure of how to love those parts.

I write to find the answer to the question I did not know I had, and I write to put a name to emotions so that someone else can, too. I write to communicate with the people I love because I do not know another way to be vulnerable with them. Writing does not make the pain go away. Rather, it draws the pain into something real, something tangible,

something I can hand someone and say, *Here. This is what I mean.* Sharing the poems means my pain is not entirely my own anymore. And I don't want it to be. The biggest thing I've learned in the months working on *Paintbrush & Other Poems* is that through everything — the ups, the downs, even the things that move me sideways — I have the people who love me. No matter what I am going through, no matter what my depression has done to me, no matter what I feel, I will always have them. And I am not alone.

Words are the best company, in my opinion. Which means you who reads this — well, you're not alone, either. Not anymore.

Ocean Vuong writes, in his debut novel, "We sidestep ourselves in order to move forward." I think that that means we must move out of our own way, however we can, so that we may allow ourselves to be truly free.

Consider these poems my first attempt at a sidestep. From here, I am moving forward.

## **I MADE THIS FOR YOU, BUT**

This is a map with no directions. This is  
the road to everything I've ever tried to say  
  
and failed. Sometimes I put a trap door  
on my sadness and whisk it away to my basement.

I wish I could lead you there but that means  
you would have to hold my sadness too.

And it is a river; or a rainstorm; or it is the  
unmade bed I have stared at for months

that I cannot bear to do. It is not your fault  
that I refuse to translate my own language,

but if I gave you the key that means  
I would finally allow you to love me.

And I, a failure of a girl, with a galaxy chest  
and planetary heart (too big for even me  
  
to comprehend), will not let anyone follow

the map long enough to reach me.

This is the closest I've gotten. Sorry that  
this poem is only a metaphor and not

a better apology. If it were one, I would  
do the dishes and let my hands prune

in the water. If I could bear it, I would.

But these things are too immense.

And I can't unbury myself from where  
I keep all of my hurt locked away,

and I can't do anything other  
than swallow my own rainstorm.

Well, not can't. Won't.

Next time I'll do better. Promise.

## COLD SNAP

In this one you're a woman

I can reach, not the shadow

but the person.

Not the woman who quilted

an intangible past, but

the woman who lived it.

Here are your childhood woods

I enter to find you. Here is the creek

I walk through to trail you.

Somewhere the snowbank

tells me to retreat. I am not

a body made of New York winters

and I will never be, but you are

the footsteps that snap tree branches

and windswept snowflakes that

blanket the ground, wild and hungry.

Listen. I am trying to learn you,

Ma. I am trying to take

the things I know and

puzzle them together.

You who grasp for dotted snowfall  
in a body weathered by winters  
I'll never see  
but still have lived  
through the ache.  
Teach me how to survive it.

Your cold. My hurt. Tell me how  
those winters became both  
the ravine & the tether  
between us.  
Build a shelter. Please don't let me  
stand in these woods all alone.



## **HANDS ON THE SINK**

Wipe the tears off of your face. Remind yourself that you aren't a child anymore. Breathe in and breathe out the way your therapist taught you. Ignore the mess on the bathroom floor. Close your eyes and ignore your storm. Forget the cleave of lightning and the way it carves your bones. Remember that the sink's porcelain under your palms means that you are alive. Unlearn the words I'm sorry. Don't let your teeth split lip. Don't let the blood run. Open your chest and put the darkness away. At least try. Let your fingertips trace your arm. Tell yourself it feels real again and again. Don't pick at your words like a wound. Don't leave the sink on too long. Look in the mirror and say it's okay. Even if it's not. Even if it's not. Even if it's not. Whisper these fragments over and over. Pretend they're a poem instead of your grief.

## A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE PLACES I'VE CRIED

On the floor of  
my boss's office.

On the floor of my bathroom.

On the floor of the honors  
college bathroom, where  
the yellow tiles mock me  
with their brightness.

In my thesis prep class,  
where my professor  
watches me with sad eyes  
and tells me not to worry,  
as if there is a beginning  
and an end to it all.

My boss's office. My boss's office.

My boss's office.

In the arms of my father,  
even though he wisps beneath me  
like sand. Against  
my best friend's chest,  
listening for their heartbeat  
to try and fathom the thought  
of another living thing.

In my bed. In *Aristotle and Dante*.

In the rain shower,

where I am always standing.

With my face in my cat's fur.

With my face in my hands.

With my hands, palms sky up,

waiting for the sunlight

to come.

## PAINTBRUSH

When I try to remember you, you are bright faced and young at the end of the kitchen table, and I am small and covered in paint. On that table we painted a wooden mock up of a shotgun that you'd had Mom cut out because I was doing a project on Annie Oakley and I wanted to do well. The brown smudges still live on the table which now sits against the wall in my apartment, and every time I look at it I am seven and in New Jersey where we'd start the chimney and run outside to watch the smoke curl outwards to make sure it was working. The closest I've been to you in the past three years was when we sat in the beginning of January and finished the Super Mega Crossword puzzle out of the New York Times. It took us four hours, and they're the most time we've spent guiltless. I took your pencil, the one that Mom and I always joke looks like a paintbrush, and I left it in the cupholder of my car because it was a reminder that I love you even if you've spent most of my life being the one thing I don't know how to. When we talk it just goes static and I don't know how people can have so little to say to each other. I wish you'd been around. But I can't weave good memories out of absence or heartbreak or the white space between us. And I know that once you rolled over on me in your sleep when I was small and fragile, and I know that when you found out Mom was pregnant you told the whole workplace that you were going to be a father, and I know that when you took me to see The Lion King we were going to be late so we climbed out of the taxi and ran there, but these are moments that are scattered across my memory like ashes, and I can't even pinpoint half of them anyway. If I were to write about you now, with my childhood sloughed off, it would be to number the portrait of a man whose details remain blurred enough that I can't reach him. You are covered in mist and anger, Dad, and I am too tired

to cut through it. So I will send you texts like a good daughter and pretend the wound doesn't fester. I will come home for the holidays and try again and again to find you even if you are splintered. And one day I will take your pencil and I will give it back and I will not be angry anymore.

## AS I KNOW HER

I meet my sadness at the door

like a lover.

On Fridays

we go dancing.

On Saturdays

we stay in and read.

On Sundays

I buy her roses.

Sometimes she lies

with me on the couch

and braids my hair,

and sometimes she lays

on my chest until

I can't breathe.

When I am with my friends,

she fades into the patch of sunlight

by the front window

and watches me with

river eyes.

She is always with me.

It is a small comfort, perhaps,  
to know that I am  
never alone. Like a dog  
clipped to a leash,  
or a ghost over my shoulder.

If she gets too tired  
when we are out,  
I carry her home in my arms  
like a doll, or a wife,  
head lolling and  
even breathing. It hurts  
my arms.

She is not a pretty woman  
to look at (even like this),  
with mousy brown hair  
and mouth open  
as if she were to swallow  
the rain.

She seems smaller here,  
or maybe I am bigger —  
maybe now that I know her  
in every corner of myself,

I have swelled with her river.

When this happens

I always tuck her into bed

beneath the blue and white fan quilt

and she curls around the stuffed elephant

I got when I was fifteen.

I comb her hair from her eyes

even though my arms shake

with the effort.

While she sleeps, I turn the TV on

with the volume low

(as not to wake her)

to defeat the static in the room

while I make a grilled cheese.

I must be gentle with her, I know.

I practice this.

I must be gentle

with all the parts of myself

I do not yet know

how to love.



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