



# I KNOW THE ORIGIN OF MY TREMOR

Ugochukwu Damian

**I Know  
the Origin of  
My Tremor**

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To J.  
Thanks for always giving me a safe space to run into.





# I

when grief weighs you down like your own flesh  
only more of it, an obesity of grief,  
you think, *How can a body withstand this?*  
—Ellen Bass



## Exile Leaves You at the Foot of Desire

We who are endangered will keep  
searching for a place to call home.

—Romeo Oriogun

here, loneliness cowers in your bones & shudders your body into a broken elegy. exile leaves you at the foot of desire begging to know joy again but desire sometimes makes no room for the permutation of joy. here, at night, your father's ghost hovers over you, digs its fingers into the core of your dreams to harvest the reflections of joy. your mother calls & calls & calls & you do not answer. she calls & calls & calls until tremors frolic her fingers & she counts you into her losses again—the first time was when you could not contain your hunger in the cinema & you kissed the boy & felt it was right. you did it again, this time with hugs & tears & although it was dark, still lynching found you & left the both of you at the mercies of life. your mother's call comes again & your ringing tone becomes the voice of home humming behind you to come witness joy *but it's all a façade, it's all a façade, all a façade*, you whisper to yourself to drown the voice.

## Self-Portrait as White Spaces

& amnesia fails me yet again    & memory    rocks me  
like a toddler    in its arms    with nails dug deep    into  
my skin    everything i hold onto    ruins me  
my feet    have grown weary    whacked    from  
running    joy crumbles    like paper    each time i mold it  
to call it    a minaret    here    like a child  
solitude sits on my shoulders    &    recites  
litanies of broken men    who left home to mend  
  
i will come home    & i will loan you    my sinews    then  
i will leave    to know how far    i've eclipsed exile  
but    i won't leave you empty    i will leave you  
with the last memory of me    as braille &    you as hands  
reading it

both darkness    & light    are channelled  
into    our bodies like    intravenous infusions

but     there is no light     here any longer  
we've used mine     to reawaken   yours  
& now you spend your time     in search of  
a speck     of reflection     in me     but we  
bring ruins     like     souvenirs to ourselves  
until every minute of us     inherits them & still  
we perform autopsies in the wrong bodies

## Prayer

because we were beautiful in ways that shocked;  
in ways that raised dust.  
ruffled water. drew rage from other boys.  
and stones and sticks and fire from men  
of this city.  
—Chibuihe Obi

every night i prep my bed, invite prayer & make love to her.

like a wound, i let my hands trudge on the quiver of the ocean

then ask the ocean if it relates. there's a tumor growing in my  
heart

making more room for self-hate. my eyes grieve every time

they behold my father. even though father wraps his pain in  
silence

i still see it. i know what desire looks like for i've stood at its door  
for too long.

every morning i cradle in my father's arms & i sing him an au-  
bade

because darkness knows the art of making pain more latent than  
my father.

at night, after watching father ask the stars to return his son in  
me,

still, i prep my bed, invite prayer & make love to who is already  
barren.

## Logan Theatre

1.

here you lick my sorrows clean & memory eludes my feet  
exile can no longer keep them awake  
they are wax tablets on which you inscribe *stay*

the night is cold & tragic & still you hold onto me  
like i'm the last stick of cigarette not letting go

back home the bloody night would have snatched on us  
& men would whisper gay into the night  
while our bodies warmed theirs  
i swear! i've seen this happen

2.

you kiss me & fear wrings around my neck  
you can trace this fear to the tremors in my hands

& i swear i can taste death  
for grief is the surviving tastebud left on my tongue

my lips on yours mourn our bones & delicate skins

call me paranoid  
back home      fear is the language that saves us



## In the History of Belonging

please    trace the perimeters of my body & let me know  
if this desperation for a place to call home would gag on it  
also show me where the chrysanthemums sprout in my wounds  
rejection is the language furrowed in my mother's tongue  
& in this history of belonging i lie in a stranger's arm  
all bloodied    all homo    all femme    in search of home  
it goes razz    smooth    melodious    all the things i cannot hold  
& then it fades leaving no glimpse for me to catch  
i pick myself up    then my clothes    then my desperation  
all with a heavy stench of sweat    cream    & cum & cum  
in the cab i wonder if the passengers see the filth in me  
the primordial loss within itself

## II

“Run, run, Lost Boy,”  
They say to me  
Away from all of reality  
—Ruth B



## Suicide Warning Signs

### *self-harm like cutting behaviors:*

my body is a shame inflicted on me  
when i say me, i mean the girl in me  
i cut myself open to set her free  
i swear! this is far from suicide  
i am only a cartographer  
with knives i make maps on my thigh  
every wound is a road leading to death

### *frequently talking about death:*

my childhood folklores teach  
that death wears a black cloak  
i do not know but i do know that death is void  
i do not think of death like you think  
i am not void; a girl lives in me  
& i often find my body on the peak of a mountain  
i want to jump off; i hear her calling down  
i only want to be her saviour  
& i'm also terrible at hallucination

### *making funeral arrangements:*

i love cotton wools  
soft like my mother's voice  
when she calls me *nna* & i love to play games  
to call the duvet a shroud  
i do not like funerals like the kids in my hometown  
i prefer the smell of formalin to rice

*negative views of self:*

i do not like this body

i like the one after this body

the one that flutters my hands

& swings my hips like the tongue of a bell

## Leaving Sad Things Behind

*for c*

after you held my hands & dazzled my face with a kiss  
in search of a song where a broken boy lives again & again  
i now trade myself for joy my thighs no longer fit  
in the mouth of a poem they no longer serve as metaphors  
for all the things drowning me i am learning to be gentle  
on them to stay still like freshly dug out grief  
& let the night soothe my wounds i named a burning wound  
after you i do not claim the origin of it because  
the darkness in me can shield a country & still long for more  
last night i woke to find a smile perching on it  
i recoiled like a boy knowing fear with my knees reaching  
to comfort my jaw i called you & you said  
one can find joy anywhere  
in a room in a bathing tub under the rain behind the door  
with my back propped up on it i imagine you saying  
*see joy lies everywhere*  
i tried swimming again & God there are so many metaphors  
in the pool about dying and holding peace like a marble  
i love how the water soothes my body even though a friend  
let me float on his hands later he'd say something about having  
drowning in my twitter bio & how he was afraid to lose me  
i changed my twitter bio to poet writer  
and everything colourful  
see how i tilt toward light *do you notice*  
i also stopped reading sad poems like you suggested  
fuck i've been so blind to birds & cats  
do you know how much happy poems they hold  
a cat is in my trashcan ransacking for food  
i do not move from my spot i imagine you saying  
*see joy lies everywhere even a cat knows that*  
i'm learning to leave sad things behind like poems  
about gender dysphoria & me  
i held my phone today to take a mirror selfie

God    there's so much heaven in my smile    *can you see*  
it melted like ice when i saw the picture was blurry  
i wish you were there to witness my tremor  
i held my hands afterward    to calm the tremor  
i did not curse or hate myself    unlike before  
i read the love poems you wrote me about us revisiting the moments  
in a large hotel room    that made our bodies cramp into each other  
where you asked if i was suicidal  
& i felt seen for the very first time  
then you held my hands  
& dazzled my face with a kiss  
in search of a song where a broken boy lives again & again & again

## Survival

in the club, you danced like fire, spilled your grief like gin,  
while i, in a room, knotted my body into all rigid things to  
becloud my thirst for men.

•

*fear knows how best to sit in a room, knows how to shrink until  
it ripples into your body.*

•

you danced & flickered like candlelight, tried so hard not to  
lean into a boy's arms & mourn all the things eating queer  
boys up.

•

you tried hard, because you could be another chijioke, whose  
bones now serve as maps to dead queer boys whose last  
prayers were ashes falling on burning tongues. or another  
ifediuto, gulped whole by disease, whose bones outlived his  
flesh on his dying bed, devoid of the smell of antiseptics. *how  
could he tell where drowning began?* or me, who misread a  
blackmailer's lips for a lover's.

•

see, i am still shrinking while my nudes spread like pox on my  
Facebook timeline.

•

you did not cuddle my sadness with me.

•

instead, you left to live in a club, because each time we see  
the morning sun sneak into our rooms like riflers, we bless the  
universe, for we now are a miracle, a survived lynch.



•

but there you were dancing like it was your last night.

•

still, i know you were yearning to live, the way your eyes failed to gaze at the waist of boys twisting into a hunger you wanted to fill with your mouth.

## If I Die, What Would My Family Write As My Biography

1.

i am not buoyant enough to hold joy spilling from a lover's mouth. also, i eulogize my fears a lot & sometimes i am everything at the edge of my fingers. my lover holds my hands & whispers *safe* into the labyrinth of my right ear to calm the tremor dancing on my hands, but still, this revival crumbles at the foot of my demons.

2.

sometimes the fraenulum underneath my tongue shrinks & fear grips my larynx until it shuts like a banged door. i want to say *see, this is where it hurts*, but i say *see*, & break down into tears as though i love to bask in consolation.

3.

outside my window, the wind blows dust & sand into my window-pane, & here, i am also a synonym for paralysis. i lie in bed all day, whirling my fears away. but last night, an effeminate boy was bullied. the mob turned the street into a runway for him & filled their bellies with laughter. i sometimes imagine me as him, God knows, i would bare myself open until death finds me.

4.

if i die, what would my family write as my biography? aside from educated, maybe. so calm & gentle, cute & cried a lot. he held his anger tight; even when his face turned red, he still wouldn't let go.

5.

point to a wound & watch me stutter. sometimes amnesia got nothing on me. i once forgot a razor stuck on my thigh. i once forgot

myself in a chapel, found myself hours later, kneeling with hands  
rested on the pew wondering what i was doing there.

6.

if my fear succeeds, & maybe you find me in a pool or in the hands  
of men burning with rage & bliss, set me on fire & please, gather  
my ashes between pages of my favorite book. & in my next world,  
i promise, i will come as a happy poem.

## That Night

the night you witnessed my tears and i on the kitchen floor,  
you poked my ribs to understand why a child nurtures grief  
in the mother's palms. i do not tell you that i am fading away  
from home, from everything that is meant to pull me close.  
i do not say how my body is a cliché. nothing new, just old  
scars revisiting memories, that night is a route to a journey  
long started. & it's exhausting keeping histories on thighs,  
mapping death & waiting on it.

## To the Manual Parts of My Upper Limbs Distal to My Wrists

i say *manual* & rebellion rocks like a storm in my mother's mouth  
// she traces history back to the fetus kicking in her belly //  
even mother knows not the origin // how a body // can be both  
fear & resistance

i toss my prayers like a bouquet into the night // i'm afraid i  
might die as the wind // feeble & without a memory to hold onto

but scars are memories our traumas leave behind // & my traumas  
are alive // pulsing // & bleeding // which is to say // there  
are no scars on my body // meaning // i flip & flip & flip 'til i  
arrive at my palmar fascia // where dead boys with songs buried  
underneath their tongues // live

truth // this is an ode to my fears // they can quake a country //  
& still have more to go round // generosity got nothing on them

fear gargles in me like coffee in a coffee maker // still there's no  
pocket to fold the fear away

meaning

the distal part of my wrists // hold secrets that are  
too heavy for my mind // & i learn from this //  
to unravel answers from them // like the way i  
see arthritis eat & regurgitate a body into a grave  
// or old age scaling around them // breaking free  
from within // or the fear trudging through me

i toss my hopes like bouquets into mother // *dear momma* // *see  
me before this elegy fills me up*

## What Grief Made of Our Mothers

remember the stutter that once held us  
as death ate into our memories  
her tongue basking in ecstasy  
in search of a sadness to unknot

remember our first attempt at gambling  
pills over pills  
& this too is how addiction is birthed

forget our seventh attempt  
the ninth one  
forgive me but was there a twelfth attempt

we gambled while grief made our mothers  
held them down 'til our pains were carried  
by each one of them

elegy rocked at their feet  
& left no room for denial

& when our mothers could not afford therapy  
with what lay tucked in the edges of their wrappers  
they broke free like rain  
returned us into their aprons  
& planted their tongues in us  
in search of a stutter to unravel



# III

Life is one long  
journey into tenderness, into rekindling.  
— Pamilerin Jacob





## A Ruined Candle Wax Still Breathes Itself into Shape

i've lost count of the queer bodies burnt in this way  
i've also lost count of how many queer bodies  
it will take the river Niger  
to quench the thirst of Onitsha men & women

like water      we take shape  
douse our light  
& we will brew colors  
for our bodies hold a spectrum

Ozomena      my lover  
says *nothing would happen here*  
*let's puff our pride like cigarettes*  
*& then wear it like a halo*

we hold hands  
& tremor becomes the impulse  
trudging through our bodies

although      we are in south Africa  
but a bird remembers its way home  
what happens when the owner destroys its nest

i want to hold onto him  
like a figurine holding onto dust in Kaduna  
inhaling the harmattan air

i know      a rainbow is an anagram  
for any color it wants to be  
we will make Nigeria out of it

in my dreams  
my feet no longer spell fear

nor jail  
nor death  
everyday i wake to Ozomena  
molding Nigeria into shapes of tolerance  
he is hopeful like a mother  
awaiting her only son after a war

## I Know the Origin of My Tremor

*to my neighbour who says he is “not homophobic but. . .”*

i know why the tremor lies in my body  
but if this body was on fire what would you save  
i know where the swing lies in my hips  
but if this body was bashed with stones  
would you stop to pick a stone  
what would you save  
i know where to kiss love into  
but if you find me behind the closet  
tracing his lips what would you do  
i know all these  
but i don't know how to love anymore  
i don't know which stays in the right nor the left  
but i know how two harmless boys  
trace the arches on their bodies  
no better way to sing praises to God for His creation  
than to admire one's body with a tongue  
again  
if their bodies were on fire what would you save

## Isn't This the Closest Thing to Salvation

the depth of the night: my lips quiver  
to the lyrics of your body.  
darkness caves blindly into us  
reaching for boys long lost  
to life.

your arms hold solace like  
grief.

your eyes are proof that  
there's so much peace in the world  
enough to fill us both, enough to keep the song  
pulsing through us.

see how calm my tremor is.

lover, we'll drown to the gentle rhythm  
of the night.

& come tomorrow, i'll carve more spaces  
in my bone made hollow by fear.

## I Practice to Get Hold of Myself

to carry // my body like a child // away from ruins // but  
paranoia chews me up // 'til it regurgitates me // into the  
chrysalis of wreckage // where i sometimes trace // the  
genealogy of pain // sometimes a poem is a truth // a witness  
// that we've tried to hold onto life // even though it scalds  
our hands // as hot tea onto a tongue // i want to melt away  
// into the cold hands of oblivion // to tremble at the sight  
of light // behind my throat // where father is a gardener //  
are all the things // that i cannot name // my therapist must  
think of me as a sulking child // he dips his hand / into the  
core of my throat // in search of answers // you know //  
sometimes healing can be invasive // to see // how much  
you've stomached

tonight // i cling to smaller things // like tears // & tonight  
// is also a witness // that i survived

## Joy for Yet Another Night

tragedy hovers over home // with my name stuck between its  
fingers // i scream to reach salvation // but my voice echoes over  
the grave // chaperoned by my people // forgive me // my story  
seems faux like moonlight tales

*isn't home meant to bring us close  
to sing lullabies to sooth our racing hearts  
kiss our ugly pains to sleep*

there's a lineage of men running // to lick their griefs clean like  
the moon // i've traced survival to their arched feet // their toes  
are fragile from eulogizing forgotten memories // in their pres-  
ence // joy falls like freshwater // & we unfold & fold into our  
bodies // more buoyant to hold joy for yet another night

## Ode to an Effeminate Child

i wish to write joy on the muscles of my tongue  
& sing your body into a bird

i've cradled you twice  
before & after your memories were birthed

i've watched your body dance to the music  
that draws stones to you now

but i've never had to imagine  
that your tongue would burn songs into elegies

elegies cradle you now  
& i am lost like your masculinity

darling    come let me kiss your wounds into healings  
come let me teach you how to arch your brows if it makes you  
happy

you've suckled long onto me  
come suckle on joy

the closet is getting rusty  
come dance in the field with me

come to your mother's embrace  
& dance to oblivion





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## About the Author



Ugochukwu Damian Okpara, Nigerian writer & poet, is an alumnus of the SprinNG Fellowship and Purple Hibiscus Trust Creative Writing Workshop held annually by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. His works appear or are forthcoming in *African Writer Magazine*, *The Masters Review*, *Ruminate*, *Barren Magazine*, *The Penn Review*, *20.35 Africa*, and elsewhere. In 2019, Ugochukwu was the 1st Runner Up in the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize. He was also a Contributing Interviewer for Poetry in *Africa in Dialogue*.

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