I KNOW THE ORIGIN OF MY TREMOR

Ugochukwu Damian
I Know the Origin of My Tremor
I Know the Origin of My Tremor

Ugochukwu Damian
## Contents

### I

- Exile Leaves You At The Foot of Desire 11
- Self-Portrait as White Spaces 12
- Prayer 14
- Logan Theatre 15
- In the History of Belonging 16

### II

- Suicide Warning Signs 19
- Leaving Sad Things Behind 21
- Survival 23
- If I Die, What Would My Family Write As My Biography 25
- That Night 27
- To the Manual Parts of My Upper Limbs Distal to My Wrists 28
- What Grief Made of Our Mothers 29

### III

- A Ruined Candle Wax Still Breathes Itself into Shape 33
- I Know the Origin of My Tremor 35
- Isn’t This the Closest Thing to Salvation 36
- I Practice to Get Hold of Myself 37
- Joy for Yet Another Night 38
- Ode to an Effeminate Child 39

Acknowledgements 41
About the Author 42
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
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 snitched 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
“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

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

meaning
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 presence // 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
Acknowledgements

Much gratitude to the editors of these publications where some of these poems were first published:

“Self-Portrait as White Spaces,” *The Penn Review*

“Prayer,” *Barren Magazine*

“Survival,” *Cyber Smut*

“Suicide Warning Signs,” NSPP 2019 Anthology

“If I Die, What Would My Family Write As My Biography,” *20.35 Africa*

“A Ruined Candle Wax Still Breathes Itself into Shape;” *Kreative Diadem*

“I Know the Origin of My Tremor,” *The Rising Phoenix Press*

“Ode to an Effeminate Child,” *African Writer*

Also to:

The SprinNG Fellowship Team for guiding me into poetry.

Anna Black and the people at Sundress Publications, for the care and attention given to the poems.

Nnamdi Vin-Anuonye, for listening to me rant about this book.

Logan February, for poetry and for being a sweet soul.

Jake Sheff and Lannie Stabile, for believing in this book.
Ugochukwu Damian Okpara, Nigerian writer & poet, is an alum-nus 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*. 
Other E-Chap Titles from Sundress

The Ache and the Wing
Sunni Brown Wilkinson

wash between your toes
Teni Ayo-Ariyo

I Have No Ocean
Nicole Arocho Hernández

To the Bone
Angela Narciso Torres

[re]construction of the necromancer
Hannah V Warren

Other E-Chap titles can be found at
www.sundresspublications.com/echaps.htm