

MASTER TREMOR

Here is a cloud of insects, almost imperceptible fragile
monsters creating a system in the low sky.

Now they are on my skin. One is in my eyelash.

I appreciate its struggle, but when I remove it I destroy it.
My body has dissipated the

loose machine the group has made in the sky.
I have brought harm to a place
I intended no harm.

There is nothing about the future
that thrills me. I look at my

calendar, that digital assemblage
of squares on my phone and the dates are void, are missing

meetings or parties or get-togethers at which
friends and I could talk about... what, exactly? Success
like when we were young, success

that eluded so many of us, or brought none
of the happiness we presumed would follow. Just

phone calls now, voicemails,

or a sticker of a puking cat
on a Facebook post reminding us of our complicity

in our nation's endless murders, and yes, phone calls in

which we avoid the true rot or
that black slime behind the eyes, that strange

copper taste of blood that wafts from within
and truly thrills me.

My friends say it seems like I'm doing well,

I've got it all together, poems in journals, some

books out and an author photo

that makes me look thoughtful, but I
am looking at a Sbarro beneath a

cancer ward monetized by oil money.

I don't bring up their pain, my friends' sufferings.

No artist I'd take seriously would shock me if they
killed themselves, but that's nothing

against my friends. I'd believe it if any of them killed

themselves, but I imagine I fantasize
about calling my friends up and crying
into the phone. I barely do that

to my wife and sadness is a deformity to others.

They wish to look away.

I don't blame them,

they all said they were there for me and I
got that I

understood that I blanketed myself
with work and job
letters that went nowhere. An

unviable candidate because of sadness, skin
condition, name condition, too many books,
too few books, a history of students desperate

for authority and fitting in.

I'm sorry I'm disappointing, I'm sorry I didn't blow up

the way people expected, I'm sorry I'm not in a position
of power to help my friends, my beautiful friends.

Poetry for misery, for grief, it is trying to put the vase
back together with the staple gun,

notes I've taken over a year of a deteriorating self

alone under the fluorescent lights of the academy,

trying to compass loss and give numerical grades to kids
desperate to fit in.

I must now confess some of my crimes.
I've used poetry for cheap laughs.

I'm Arab, a crime itself to many people. I've
hidden my Arabness for

comfort, for ease, and yes, safety, but mostly

because I don't want to be difficult, I hate to be
a burden. I've kept my mouth shut
when others are racist, are homophobic.

I'm sad, I'm incurable, I've let the opulence of
the West drive me to exact pain on myself.

These are old crimes, except for being Arab,

a crime I commit every day.

I try to think of a worthy adversary, me, but I'm not, really.

I can barely handle the blows I give.

When is a manuscript in completion,
when writing, when

living in this cloud of nostalgia, it was such

a simpler time when I was less aware of certain
brands of hurt, when the toychest burst with

story, little robots, friends who could meet up

and perhaps bang their plastic fists against other plastics.

An unlimited supply.

A great list of friends I ran into at the conference, I didn't

want to forget any of them, any story I may have been

briefly entwined in.

I wanted to tell every story to my wife.

Who can be so fucking happy? The person online with the
inspirational gif,

that old white guy blowup

bathed in fury because somebody wants a dollar (a poem)
when he has millions,

the white people so entrenched in their own narrative
try hard to be allies online but you know there's something

heinous between their veins.

I told two people I barely know not to live apart. not to
risk a lonely death and its bureaucracies.

Angels in formation like Stukas on the television screen.

Violent products of our time but we worship blood,

workshop blood.

Here I am wishing upon myself a blameless death,
something sudden and non-mutilating,
and now (always) a new shooting,

me checking the list of the victims,
nobody I know this time.

I talk about my friends in high school shooting

guns but I was never there, I was always scared.
We shot goofy movies with real guns,

I allowed one to be pressed to my temple though

I never saw the final product.

I thought my fake fear, my acting was decent, trembling

a little too much in the high lights.

Guns akimbo

big Money of course and yet we don't speak of them as though they are products.

The American religion is Death.

Master Coffin in the big show.

Master Legacy.

I'm devout in study.

Imaginations of possibilities of void and how
it's processed by the mind.

Like, what is nonexistence?

Or what about the exhaustion an afterlife could bring,

even more of this talking and evasion,
an infinite amount if some dogmas are true?

Here on the thin line of dawn cresting the street,

here in an apartment in which I have
lived minor happinesses,

enacted fantasies of death and love,

made calls to college friends to tell them

the bad news, I got practiced in it by the time
I made my way down the list.

One friend wanted to tell me about

his new projects,
his successes against this monstrous void.

Who keeps my blood inside me? Only me.

I waved at nothing, saw a face in a crowd of people

at an airport, that brief
twang of recognition a guitar
strummed open and with the fuzz pedal on,

but it wasn't him, it was a great nobody,

a lookalike whose face grew in the deformity
of unfamiliarity as I got closer.

My wave could have been for anybody.

My wife asks if I would ever hurt myself.

I imagine breaking open my wrist and letting
light flow out like a glowstick,

something swimming in me
grief or terror,

something that is comfortable in my lanes,
languishing on its back fat and
fed and didn't I do a good job raising it,
my little abomination?

I'm not pumping up, I am airing out.

Here in Michigan
(west and white Michigan)
fake Midwestern concern from the rafters,

that nasal lilt. Everybody is *so sorry*,

but of course hatred behind the eyelids,
fury and a wish for injury.

Who are these people? *True Americans*
from the heartland,

that ragged shirt,

white motherfuckers who've never left
Grand Rapids

and of course they own guns,

those pink dick accessories,

inflectionless expression of repeated sorry,
everyone a terrible actor in their
own lives, Midwesterners awash in their ice
floes of misery.

Me, Arab amidst the grain.

Pandering to my lineage as my body tries to
destroy itself,

some strands of DNA drolled over history,

in the misery of capitalism's bishop, the superstore, we just
want to go home, the presence of each other

we do love yet we suffer uncertainties

(financial mostly),

death not an uncertainty, but its appointment always the arrow
at the bottom of the calendar.

Me, I'm the most usual person I know.

The pop star died and I am sad

because I too feel dead.

Is it the wave of digital grief,
the clips of sadness,

the bubbling up of my own?

Prince, dead, Van Jones crying on the news,
his trying to keep it together only making it worse,

and I am reminded of myself,
an adult in an easy chair

crying but trying to be quiet about it,
trying not to let my sorrow interrupt

my neighbors' day,
my wife's.

Apartment living makes me retreat into

the center of

the room,

turn the volume down,

wish to be small and sapped of noise.

Is that the life of a poet?

I see my friends and I see them dead,
suicides in the woods

wandering out to succumb to the elements.

Not a friend that time,

a rope tied around his feet used to hang
an intricate knot, himself by leaning forward,

but a kid I used to
know and tolerate,

a kid who understood a bit of
the language of landscape

and how we both were translated by it.

I knew pain ruled his world

he called me the n-word and bullied
me amidst the snow

of the Annapolis Valley,
and I was sorry to hear he died.

What are you?
Are you something?
I am something.
A bad something.

Music I could have liked,
music if I
wasn't a conduit,
a mass of sand tilted at
a precarious angle.

I wish I was a different person when I was younger,
if it could change the person I am now.

This may be our last winter.

This may be our last summer.

This may be our last winter

together.

The muffled sounds of a car
radio turned up too
high through the windows,
I was excited my friend was
showing up.

Not anymore,

a small comma sized blemish on the
window and I tilt my head around

it, angle my vision so I can imagine at
the right distance it is my friend standing
at the edge of forest
or on the distant sidewalk,

still as people shuffle around him,
a faucet's stream around a stone.

What's at risk?
Only everything.

The afterlife a façade nobody truly
believes in, grown adults
imagining a children's pageant and

permanent pain bestowed upon the majority
of the dead and this is somehow a good thing,

a celebration from these monsters who are our neighbors.

Excuse me,
I'm going to go put another bad
movie into my body, let it
change me forever,

deep inside the VCR a fire
as there is a fire in all
machines,
little sparks along the grid of circuitboard,

a fire of a kind in us, too, that
we choose to douse or fuel,
or it is chosen for us.

Within the VCR a videocassette of
a movie never released on DVD, or streaming,
a horror film, of course, there has to be something
that will pick at the sutures.

Tell me fear is an engine and I'll
believe it,
I'll let it bring me somewhere new.

I don't drink, I don't get fucked up anymore,
not like I used to.

This could be our last backdrop.

Times we've spent snared in regret
but I can barely remember conversations from
an hour ago, an email,
did I forget a name, misspell it?

Here in the reunion of old chums
my friend's death became a writing prompt.

Everybody sent me poems
to help me deal with an impossible grief.

My sadness became a burden to them, something
they did not want to talk about.

Me, I wished to cry, I wished to somehow propel myself
to a place of fewer sharp edges along the inside flesh,

The way the scrape of a blanket becomes
repulsive in the midst of a fever.

People wish for well-honed art
but why build a real boy from the enchanted wood when
you can build a real monster?

Life a moving walkway at an airport,
a hallway illuminated in gradients of

blues and reds,
stuck imagining the twenty (if I'm lucky) more
times I'll get to see
my parents,
and how many is it for my friends?

Sheafs of paper spilled from a bridge onto the river below.

Why do animals cry out in pain if it isn't
begging for a predator

to end their misery,
what help within the forest,

the trees swallowing light?

No such thing as the end of the world, except for
the one that comes for each of us alone.

Southern matrons wishing for Hell and suffering,
but what kind of people are they,

desire amplifying into eternal pain

or that quick spasm of fury or wrath when
wronged, and I wish for some pain for the people
who have hurt me and my friends most.

But infinite?

What can that even mean, or do we even want it to mean?

Adults who in all earnestness talk about their friends
in heaven,
a children's game, a fantasy, a disaster of unethical proportions,
skidmarks on the drive in to work evidence of
an accident,
serpentine on the backroad.

Put me in grief, put me in a crowd,
put me living in a permanent funeral.

I'm commiserating with the dead, is there any

other way to live?

What are we but catalogs of witness completely
voided when we die?

An alligator rotting in the park, children poking
into its decaying flesh,
maggots on the condom in the trash.

My eyes, those unreliable jellies, drying out. I'm not
doing anything, nobody will let me.

Cramped in a trophy house with taxidermy
animals and undergraduates thrilled
to read poems about blow jobs in the open mic.

Little fleeting scenes I can't even put in order.

I turn on invincibility mode and let my character stand
in a pit of fire,

instant death normally, but here I am.

How much I trembled derobed in
front of a new person, and it's nerves, schizo,

mania, hara-kiri,

but love and its branches, its twigs,

real worth it,
I'm serious.

Sadness for the lone glove slowly
being eaten

by the snow.

Am I being clear? God,
I hope not.

My tongue a fat starship listing against the keys of my teeth.

None of us really make it, we only make it
for a little while.

In my office wanting to go
home, the sorrow between here
and there insurmountable almost.

Everybody wanting home, or home a place
in those vaporous moments at the
end of life, we just want to go
home, an idea, a comfortable brain nook,

I picture my wife my family my friends,
home,
my cat being euthanized thought she was about
to return home to her pain and familiarity,

the comfort of faces we know
against the walls we know,
the walls we love.

Would I hurt myself? I am hurting myself now.

I imagine one
laying on the street,
dead or dying,
the pain of the asphalt against the skin.
I just want to go home on a good day and

I'm sure he did.

If I even feel like I've lost something then I've
lost something.

Memories, sure, every day,
sometimes a picture rekindling, or am I
remembering the picture?

Hanging from a cliff, letting my fingers tire
out rather than even trying to save
myself, to swing myself up,

my eyes drying out and nothing I can do.

My friends need help and I can't help them.

A position of supreme supplication.

Imagining all the things I need and
don't have
the ability to get or even ask for,

help for one.

All the intricate and deserving shittalk we've
done in life erased from

the lips of our closest friends in death.

Around me buildings built to the specifications
of a late

19th Century American college's architecture,
and I want to open the door
hear the wave of familiar
yet un-syntaxed voices
waft down a hall.

Does the structure itself conjure
my friends

inside, in a conference room, all still
eating snacks as we were years ago?

Who is moving through the rooms
we once spoke in of trash

or love and failure? Some
of those rooms have been destroyed,
as some
of those occupying the rooms have been destroyed.

I'm not hip I'm not old
I'm not a dinosaur

I'm the bush the insects consume.

(but it's nice to have a purpose, you know?)

To toy with language,
fuck up the world

on the page...

Here, the roil of a distant
drumline over the buildings

practicing the mechanism of celebration,
the whole celebrating individuals
the drumming individuals probably hate.

The horror we build.

A poem works best if you say something
your audience will agree with,
make yourself look like an infallible hero.

The amplification of a curved room.

What are you doing, here,
here you are, reading a book of poetry in the
midst of such Western opulence,

even if you're poor in

America, as I am, you're rich
on Earth, your living contributes to
death, mayhem,

those punks we nor our friends ever invited to the party

but we do nothing about,

a fear within us of personal harm,
harm from years of being punched or
threatened as children in
a variety of manners,

here, imagining an instant transition to
wealth and power
as we have been promised as Americans.

Instead it's broken fingers, a house made of broken fingers,
the new sharp ridges of the bone cutting up against the inside flesh.

Me and my shifting flesh,
a chameleon on the wooden slats of a shed.

My friends need me to be Arab until it gets
complicated, and then I look white to them.
Oh you're Arab?

I never even knew!

Ahem, that's not nice.

It's not nice to say "You don't look *ethnic*"

as though all those people fucking with
me were imaginary.

I feel like a liar,
I don't even speak
the language
except the language of skin and structure
so translatable to the acute sense of
the American ra.cist

I once lost a friend because I believed
in Palestine.
He felt murder, oppression were the answers,
but this is a liberal dude
a guy who will probably vote for the
people I vote for.

Me, I'm Scottish too, but nobody
ever beat me up because of that.

Instead my ankles are torn
into by my Arab
part the part with the most barbs.

I have to be a man of parts,
not quite Arab, definitely not
European although my mother told
me after 9/11 to tell people
my name was Irish, like Sheehan,

easy enough and I wish I
did it. Could I maintain a lie for so long?
A swarthy white guy who is *definitely*

European is worth more as a poet than
a dozen Arabs.

(go ahead, name five Arab poets –
if you're white I know you can't)

I'm sorry to bring this up again,
the thing that hurts me most and most
makes my friends uncomfortable.

Making my friends uncomfortable is
my nom de guerre.

And yes there's death too,
mourning inexplicably long,

anger at those cold reliefs burning deep
in my gut as time passes,
but I didn't ask for them,

I wanted to be always sad,
always a thick blanket thrown

over the bright colors of the world,

but that's not true and that
makes everything

harder,

harder when I enjoy a meal, harder
when I am with friends and feel love

and forget the void stitched to me.

Where do we end up? My friend, I have a

dozen videotapes of raw footage of bad movies
we made.

I have a hundred pages of his poetry.

I want to cry, I am steeped in fury for
the small things I enjoy,

the bad movies I put in myself,
the poetry of course.

Imagine yourself crying,
the last time you cried,
coming across yourself,
your face twisted in a way with which
you are unfamiliar.
What was the reason?
Can it compel tears again?

For me, it can if I will it enough
I can will any thought, any biological
function,

urine in a drug test.

This, the last expected moment of joy I see.

I know there will be others.

Where will I end up after I'm gone?
In people's memories for a while.
On some paper for a while.

And where do I find meaning?

Between the sheets.

Between the scratches of a mosquito bite, the scald
of the oil's spatter. The writhing of the roach in agony.

Let every American writhe. Let every American writhe
too in agony. The comfort

amplifying the pain. Writhe amidst the carefully curated
garden, writhe on

the airplane as it salts the air, writhe in the coffee
shop as our name is mispronounced in the midst of

Western Symphony. Writhe

as I have writhed. I too am American. Let America

suffer. Let the writhing be a dance, let the writhing
be the only thing we share.