

*These are indeed words “to grow a garden from the little seeds of your heart,” ... poems that will spawn more poems, will awaken more poets. Serious, strident, playful – a promising, powerful clutch from the next generation of greats.*

*-Phillippa Yaa de Villiers.*

20.35  
AFRICA

an **ANTHOLOGY** of  
CONTEMPORARY  
**POETRY**  
volume iv

GUEST-EDITED BY NADRA MABROUK & K. ELTINAÉ

20.35  
AFRICA

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Is dedicated to the victims of the

**Lekki Toll Gate Shooting.**

On October 20, 2020, during the End SARS movement, men of the Nigerian military opened fire on a crowd of Nigerian youth protesting police brutality and bad governance, killing and injuring many. Both the Nigerian government and military have denied this killing and injury, against irrefutable evidence that they happened. Until date, no one has yet been held accountable for this crime against humanity.

This dedication is so we do not forget this crime and its victims, both the dead and those who live to mourn them.

The photo below is of a section of the protesters a few hours before the shooting.



You are not a stranger.  
Your absence demands your presence.  
You are this land.

It will embrace you like your mother's womb  
The white noise of our prayers guide you adrift to your heaven.

— Logain Ali, *Wattan*

Poetry stirs us from within, awakens our senses and reminds us of what we knew before we forgot all that is important to us as a species. The cadre of poets selected by Ebenezer Agu and his team demonstrate the sensitivity and courage that marks true poetry. From Africa and its diaspora, poets spin beauty into images that rain their urgent message to humanity in the throes of a moral drought. In a range of styles, these poems explore and expand English to resonate the multiplicity of African voices. From the miniscule yet significant placement of every comma, every line break, the breath of these poems speaks to the heart, to the mind, to the soul. These are indeed words “to grow a garden from the little seeds of your heart” (Simon Ngu’ni), poems that will spawn more poems, will awaken more poets. Serious, strident, playful – a promising, powerful clutch from the next generation of greats.

- *Phillipa Yaa de Villiers*

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## INTRODUCTION

Language is the essence of poetry – what poetry is in and of itself – irrespective of where it is coming from. In the moment of a poem, what we encounter, foremost, is an excited language, without which literary art in general loses aesthetics, is rendered bare and without artistic value. In selecting the poems that appear in this anthology, the focus was on highlighting poems that best fulfil the language standard behind which we could proudly stand. And in putting out the anthology, we hope that the poems will be read in their foremost literary quality.

African poetry has not been widely read outside its thematic interaction with society, politics, economy, and cultural identity. Within this scope, it is relevant to ask at what extent the reading of “Africa” in African poetry becomes reductive. This is not to dismiss the geographic root of the poetic output from the continent, but to call into view what could be a subconscious insistence that possibly limits the appreciation of such output. The beauty of poetry is not merely in the situation it presents but also in how it turns language inside-out. The benefit of this understanding of artistic performance of language is that poetry becomes internally sustainable and externally relevant. Fortunately, the poems in this volume afford the opportunity to illustrate a reading of African poetry along language aesthetics.

In “Adinkra,” Kweku Abimbola further manifests the provincial agency of an ancient Akan pictographic speech. The poem is an iteration of weighted cultural heritage that would “tear / too easily through / papyrus” and “deplete / the world of barks, / the forest of parchment leaves.” A sustainable mode of expression is therefore necessary, adinkra takes on this role and exudes through each episode of the poem, an omniscient voice. The poem is fundamentally a language act, whose transcendent aura allows it to touch on folklore, myth, legend, just about as much definitive Akan philosophy that could be sustained in the poem. This is not a resuscitation of heritage



in quotidian speech; the Sankofa in the poem perpetually reaching behind to “fetch what is at risk of being left behind” does so with every symbolic tool within its cultural environment.

The poets in this volume achieve seriousness in their works through different – intricate and plain – structures, but each mirrors the other in the tightness of their craft. Yasmina Nuny Silva’s apostrophic piece actualizes what is consistent about the elegiac form: transience and remembrance. The lines of the poem feel very aligned with the main activity in the poem; every word and poetic element therein, like the flowers keeping warm the memory of Miss Cicely, carefully picked to serve their precise purpose. The seriousness of the activity is tersely placed in the opening lines of the poem:

I hope, Miss Cicely, that the flowers are to your liking.

We picked them fresh for you, like we have every day

since before the turn of the century [...]

The succeeding plain speech carefully follows to the end where the metaphoric closing lines ground the poem:

[...] I hope you smell that, and I hope

you got to smell all the flowers while they were

fresh at your door whenever you opened it to

enter, and when you finally opened it to go.

Lanaire Aderemi’s poem illustrates the poetic raw material in everyday life. At seven lines, it is the shortest poem in the volume, and its brevity could be easily interpreted

as a description of sheer playground joy. However, by the “lonely swing sets / that has lost love to broken slides,” she introduces a germ that complicates the sheer joy at the playground. This causes a brooding mood in the poem, and following that technique, she creates a possibility that is parallel to the actual poem in the closing line. The “seventh line” of the mother’s “abandoned poem” closes Lanair’s “a playground poem” but continues an independent stream of thought that could mean different senses to different readers.

One of the lessons of close reading is that no poem is essentially simple or hermeneutically singular. This is not about intricate or plain structures, nor rigid or free verses. It is a remark on poetry as a union of the purest forms of thought and language. Irrespective of structure and form, before the actual poem on the page, every poet deals with this task of bonding thought and language into an expressive, irreversible compound. Grace Adeyemi’s “This Morning A Fragrance” and Basma Osman’s “Chez Moussa” form a gastronomic medley in different scenes. Grace’s poem thrives on delicate and precise detailing, at an exact degree, so that the description is neither gaudy nor pale. Basma allows herself more expressive form in a narrative voice, but the liberty does not run off. Inasmuch as hers is a familiar scene for people who have lived in certain African towns or neighborhoods, to recreate the light tone of the poem and the excited mood of the characters in it would require a restricted handling of sentence. These are poems where every word, every sentence has to be held in its place, lest the entire poem collapses. The same thing can be said of Njoku Nonso’s “Alphabets of Memory,” which is a masterful exercise in figurative writing. The lines are imbued with weighed metaphor and sharp imagery every step of the grieving way, and when it reaches climax, the language must be dramatized to project the extent of the mourning:

Here’s the rain. Here’s a cathedral of birds

revel-dashing behind wind-eaten curtain of leaves.

This is the logic of mourning: a white horse  
taking the longest route to the slaughterhouse.  
But you are not the horse. You are the myth filling  
its bones with the burnt salt of grief. [...]

In Akosua Zimba Afiriyie-Hwedie's "Call me by my name," language is both cultural identity and ontological force. By reason of the language in which the persona has been called, they measure the extent of their belonging to a cultural background:

[...] when my mother sends for me  
in my Twi name, I measure how far I am from myself  
by what language I use to respond. [...]

This is as far as language is a characteristic of culture. In the same vein, the poem is a stand-alone definitive remark on the discourse of being and existence. In the following lines: "[...] A man is called into his name / each time it is spoken. / Or a man becomes more of himself / each time he is called by his name," the philosophic leap draws up a transition from being to existence – a point at which what *is* by apparent thought enters actuality because it has been called forth and designated. Such is the dual function of language in the poem that it closes on a corresponding declarative note:

naming is how one becomes a self.  
I know, calling makes one return.

In these poems, what is said does not take precedence over how it is said; the form is as relevant as the content; the textual coherence of the poems is as important as their external referents. The fact of thought is what we interpret as the incident in a poem, what is often the only case in the appreciation and criticism of African poetry. But if

poetry is the site of ultimate language, and language and thought are indivisible unity, poetry, thought, and language are therefore indistinguishable tripartite. Hence, we cannot say to have given a poem a wholesome interpretation without exploring these qualities together. In fact, some of the poems in this volume can hardly be read successfully without attention to the aesthetics of language in them.

Alírio Karina's "the shore a stage so lovingly set" is so self-sustained within the words that build it up. Such is the fragmented sense of the poem that one way to connect it is to follow closely the words and the linkage in the volatile images they create. Simon Ng'uni's "Like Breezes. Somewhere" is an extended observation of world realities. In the poem, "time carries on moving as always" at a consistent pace that the words become elusive if the reader's gaze is so distracted. Khadija Abdalla Bajaber creates a compacted logic of self-awareness, of hurt and various plundering of the body in "With(out)." The poem is loaded with words and requires to be read severally, and even at such effusive range, it still keeps its structure intact.

Rabha Ashry writes a practical piece in "omission"; every element that constitutes the poem – structure, form, syntax and diction together, line breaks and whitespaces – everything is intentionally placed to realize its central idea. The conflict is revealed not so much in what is present as in what is elided, the white spaces and enjambment working to prop the structure. Throughout, something is continually left unspoken: "a poem in / the spaces    between lines"; "[...] an unfamiliar word / in a language i used to speak"; "in every word there is a hunt / there is an / 'i could've told you already"; "[...] a messy recital / of everything i haven't learned to say"; "and in every admission / i omit a true confession." The confession is however not lost, at least its clue, it is only ensconced in what is well implied.

The digitization of journals and magazines, portals, records, and archives, many of which are not restricted behind paywalls, means that contemporary African poets can access and learn from traditions of poetry from the many reaches of the world, while

being grounded in their own traditions. It is important to bear this in mind when we approach the work of these poets, to credit the diligence in how they enrich their style and craft through these diverse substances. We must recognize the beauty and complexity of this transcreation.

What we bring in this volume is a seminal thinking of poetry. Poems that are not tendered at a give-away price. We favor a projection of poetry that takes from Africa without being immovably tied to the place, as has been the case in most criticism of African poetry. A non-imposing, non-overshadowing Africa that is only a fragment of other numerous human experiences, all equally belonging to the poet.

**Ebenezer Agu**

**Founder, Editor-in-Chief**

## GUEST EDITORS' NOTE

A few lines from the poem, "Swallowing Suns," by Mahtem Shiferraw flashed through our minds as we delved into the worlds sent our way by the 20.35 Africa team for Anthology IV:

You swallow your light inward, so when others come  
they will not notice [...]

that way of masking everything  
behind a laughter that splits them in half.

Each of the poems in this anthology possesses a quiet resilience and depth in exploring the textured realities of African poets both from the continent and in the diaspora. The anthology provides ample moments where just a few lines transport you into landscapes and communities that migrate from the page to heart and back.

It is an honor to have read these poems, and we are grateful for the opportunity to share more powerful African voices in the world, voices based in our homelands, and in the diaspora. 20.35 Africa's Anthology IV boasts myriad talents: everything from the sharp wit of poets such as Rabha Ashry, to the fusion of sense and sensuality in the works of Alirio Karina, Grace Adeyemi, and Basma Osman. We found ourselves returning to the high note of Akosua Zimba Afiriye–Hwedie's piece:

When my mother calls from a distant continent,

I must travel her voice to come into myself.

She writes in “Call me by my name.”

Even far from or torn from our homes and our loved ones in the face of a pandemic and many crises, we write to reach one another and ourselves – to let the world know that we are still present, breathing, our voices soaring above our heads, sprawling in the cosmos, beyond our bodies – these delicate timepieces. Home is still above our heads, and in our hearts, no matter where we may be in the world, lingering even when we think we’ve forgotten who we are.

there are so many ways to tell a story about despair (I  
mean, joy)

Writes Alirio Karina in “the shore a stage so lovingly set.”

In volume IV, we bring you incredible stories. Stories of fathers and sons, where “boy becomes man s t r e t c h i n g / towards his son,” as Martins Deep writes; stories of grief and memories, with Njoku Nonso asking, “What does memory know / about love if not a war without mercy?” Stories of powerful observations where “the seas of earth part with their red awnings across the sky,” by Simon Ng’uni. Tender and true stories from across the continent.

It is from this lush choir of voices that we offer you, the reader, an invitation to bask in the wisdom, warmth, and gentle light that unfolds in each of these pieces. We'd like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Itiola Jones, for her endless dedication to nurturing this space for African writing. This volume would not be possible without the hard work, patience, and brilliance of Ebenezer Agu. We hope one day to own these anthologies in printed form and that this anthology will lead to the discovery of future emerging voices from other uncharted corners of the continent. Kweku Abimbola, in “Adinkra,” writes, “Love never loses its / way home.” May these poems

guide us through our most difficult days. May we find our way home, wherever it may be.

**Nadra Mabrouk**

**K. Eltinaé**





## **father, son – Martins Deep**

between father and son,

a gulf.

the grave is a gulf. it is

ampersand

between

here

&

there

shaped after the enmity

between

serpent

&

woman

the missing chord to knot

two parts of a song

somewhere, as you read this poem,

a wraith awaits

the miracle of water

in the wells of his parched eyes

as he plants a kiss

on his son's brow

one reaches for the other;

sepia for olive,

color for monochrome

two

never stretching enough

to touch

once, boy stretched to breaking point

and spilled onto a therapist's desk

as a bottle of sleeping pills

in another chapter,

boy becomes man stretching

towards his son. boy crumples man's photograph

and tosses it into the fireplace

s o e

m k

## **the shore a stage so lovingly set – Alírio Karina**

*after Carl Phillips, Storm*

your seafoam (translucent and black) takes flight – becomes ember  
and shadow (and dust, perhaps) and feather and ochre and groove

there are so many ways to tell a story about despair (i

mean, joy)

how many times,

a body between bodies, moving to an old hum,

commits to breath, to touch, to that

tilting back of the head (that

grasping the shoulders back) that pulls the heart, ever fleetingly,

away from the spine; the thrum of liquor, the pulse

of fingers, the

tongue.

your palm flutters into my skin – how many powers to how many glories? – like

the difference between joy and ache, between a chest bared and shrouded,

like the devotion that

walks us into the grave

## **omission – Rabha Ashry**

this is a lie

only i gave up

for a win

i can't fathom

i sit here

pen in hand

like i'm

a poem in

the spaces between lines

my hair atop my head

like an unfamiliar word

in a language i used to speak

and i come back to tongues

circle back to

my aching eyes

and burning shoulders

and in every word there is a hunt

there is an

“i could’ve told you already”

we rest easy

on the couch

in hazy evenings

our fingers gripping glass

smoking everything but green

if i wrote a poem

about your yellow hair

you would know

in my dreams you understand

here’s a messy recital

of everything i haven’t learned to say

in everything i am afraid

in the colors

of every dress

i've worn for you

and in every admission

i omit a true confession



**With(out) – Khadija Abdalla Bajaber**

Outgrow// uproot// pare down// not ache of yearning// but the blunt peel and severed joint, too itchy to scab// too raw for the leaving-alone-ing// never pink healing// red sore// thought I was some sort of animal to reconcile myself// but an animal wouldn't tell itself stories// wouldn't know sin from a wrong thing// digest or nurture its deficits// it would just be// I shouldn't// can't// don't find body// in another body// uncover self in the discovery of other-flesh// people becoming wretched, becoming whole// halved by the collision, making treacherous matter// desire dripping glassy gasoline, bloodhounding to the mouth of some explosion// how does anyone sane try that?// so is it absence?// yearning?// does one have the faculties for love? First flesh?// is one capable// but abandoned?// or incapable & only absent?// is it hollow?// or the corkscrewed fatty chunk ripped off by a cookie cutter shark?// or only a depression like the eye of a tree// something grown// around?// it's like giving up power// blame// the confession of a wound that you// didn't have strength or will enough to defend against// or in cowardice allowed inflicted// & an animal doesn't tell itself stories so it can forgive itself// pointing out the ways it let itself be hurt// the same exact ways like//slipping into pattern// if there's a crime then there's a body mutilated somewhere// & how could anyone ever give someone their grace like that// there's little grace already// can't understand it// or maybe I can &// I'm missing// out// or I never could & thus should stop carving myself out?// monastic// chaste as dead doe// something killed or something already dead from twelve winters back, born blue, not amputated or stolen from// just grown around like the eye of a tree// I've grown sick to a love-saturated world, a sex-saturated world, a need-saturated world, a want-saturated world// ever desire, ever aflame// love an upstart birthing itself into the material world// like the old god that makes itself// putting its foot through the mirror// the poets// running electric// leaping shadows around a burning pit// tuned in// & me// listening to

grand language in tongues I can't know// all its vanity in its obscurity// you gotta be seeking the other, you know// you have to pursue or be pursued// Dug in my heels, I still in the smoke// run me over first before I go letting some body make my flesh with theirs// I've run from all other vague terrors, nightmares, adult in their fogginess, philosophies, ideals, certain thinkings// but a faceless nobody asking me to put my heart in their mouth?// can't move me// when I run its only that I'm being chased by my own shadow// only my own, only me// so on the butchery & beauty// & the transcendent surgery// of that moon-slunk god// poisonous as mercury// do not you dare challenge me with loving me// they took whole handfuls, fingers gory with the clay// & I didn't know any better// don't know if I was ever a child// or an animal// or a tree-eye// or shark-meat// or even a woman// so much as what is carved down to the promise of being the beloved first// & the bride eternal// & I had to think about the body// the body// the body// they pretended it was a matter of the heart// playing music & making off with everything// my folding body// abundant// bread// origami'd platter// glistening like fat floats on the broth// yet wanting me lean as a waif// & isn't it just *romantic*?// what they did to me is what they're still trying to do to me// Love be no god// Love be the devil stretching his legs in the room torn out of girlhood, promised his due// you cannot challenge me with loving me// lets differentiate, let's reiterate, we are speaking different languages. Love?// Me?// You ought to let go, or get dragged.

## **Call me by my name – Akosua Zimba Afiriye-Hwedie**

When God called the animals,

two by two. Each came

foreign unto itself. Only knowing its name once

told. A man is called into his name

each time it is spoken.

Or a man becomes more of himself

each time he is called by his name.

When my mother calls from a distant continent,

I must travel her voice to come into myself.

I measure how far I am from myself

by the length it takes to walk along my mother's voice

into my name. When my mother sends for me

in my Twi name, I measure how far I am from myself

by what language I use to respond. I learn

naming is how one becomes a self.

I know calling makes one return.

## **Chez Moussa – Basma Osman**

Next to the cathédrale in Bamako,  
when summer thunder and isha prayers  
have imparted two warnings upon the night,  
Moussa sets up his pots.

They are four,  
ascending in body like collapsed Russian dolls,  
and steaming.

Night dwellers anticipate and gather,  
and the third warning is the rain that drums down as mbalax.

Moussa!

The boys call his name, not to hasten or to hustle him;  
moving as he does in swiftness and commandment,  
they know that Moussa may not be encroached upon.

Again, Moussa!

Always he remembers the meek and their place in the congregation.

The lamb ablaze is divided in justice and here the bones do not spell longing.

Moussa!

No, I believe they say his name because they love to boom it into the night  
the way a man does when he declares salaam onto a room or a bus.

## **Terra-cotta and Weavers – Somto Ihezue**

I am flung outside myself – of a breath drawn – of all that etched me.

My hands are cities besieged – they touched gods. Into the vastness – the stolen  
places, the flames I have burned in – they reach.

This is the making of shadows,  
it is the clawing – the flailing – the reaching into emptiness.

We have morphed into whispers.  
On this voice – a song lives – on this voice – it will wither.

Be prayers unheard – stories untold  
This is a story – we have died in.

Beneath my tongue – an engine crumbles.

To arrows – to floodlights – to wings.  
Eyes searching for the tombs they are laid in  
See fire and hail – boys in babbling rivers – terra-cotta and weavers,  
the fall of rain – portals and brass – through skin.

We see a hundred men – dance,  
we see them – fall.

This body found a storm  
It rages – thrashes – pours  
thawing – a mirror – the red of a battle fought.  
The strength that knew this body is on – a bedroom floor.  
From it – my father says,  
*“Run ten thousand times, I will be there.”*  
A maze – a cotton field – a people – one million strong  
Valleys and feathers – the Kilimanjaro in flight.  
These truths – live in our hair  
A sparrow that found the wind - wind that learnt to bellow,  
the clay – the potter,  
these are the bones that bind us.

## Alphabets of Memory – Njoku Nonso

Every day the city dwellers build tall  
bridges to keep the sea from sinking  
their housetops, their tongues unmasking  
a Calvary of prayer songs:

*Let everything we love find a way to live a little longer.*

*Let the sea grow its hair backwards.*

Nobody survives the sea's happy dances,  
the speeding horses of time, even the old man  
cradling his daughter's small body like  
a gold meat. Baba, how I wept all night  
for the dead you cannot bury, stars turning  
into ash, ash pouring over the clean mirror  
of your happiness.

*What does memory know about love if not a war without mercy?*

Here's the rain. Here's a cathedral of birds  
revel-dashing behind wind-eaten curtain of leaves.

This is the logic of mourning: a white horse  
taking the longest route to the slaughterhouse.

But you are not the horse. You are the myth filling



its bones with the burnt salt of grief. Tonight

I gift you a kiss below your left ear, soft

and clean like a baby's slow suckle. There's

a sky growing empty enough to mask another sky.

## Wasting Away – Phodiso Modirwa

On the day of our mock exam

Everything is a mockery

After sliding between my teeth the fat 50t coin with the fish eagle holding a fish

I mean, holding me; where its feet end your hands begin

Myself, daughter-prey to a father who takes what he can from

the water without letting it touch him

I wait with bated breaths to touch your voice from Gaborone

So heavy and safe if the call lasts

My classmates speak of your old age, say –

*Rraago ke monnamogolo akere?*

In that I recognize the little time we have left

Through the years I try to love a man my mother couldn't reach

I'm holding an eagle rapturously escaping my embrace

In the end,

A couple of feathers in my hands and enough cuts to warrant a kind of leaving,

I pack my love back into heart

I let myself quiver between strangers in the back of a taxi on my way home

Telling a sister *it hurts, man it hurts so bad*

To love a man who won't love you back

To kiss a man who will wipe you off his mouth

like a vice he isn't too proud of

It is a decade and more years later

We don't have much more time than we did back then

And the man still won't let me in

Still won't take my love

But loves to see me wait outside his barricaded heart


Loves to see me pine and ache

Loves to see this love waste away like our days


## Adinkra – Kweku Abimbola

Our stories tear  
too easily through  
papyrus.

*Aya*

To document even  
the deeds of the Ohene  
would deplete   
the world of bark,  
the forest of parchment leaves.

*Adinkrahene*

So, we learn to speak  
in symbol, to whisper in drum,  
to dialogue with body   
like chameleons.

Bring sinew, bring  
bone, bring skin,  
let us make more  
than language.

*Nea Mnnim No Sua A, Ohu*

I speak for skin.  
I am the rivulet,



*Aya*: fern, endurance  
respect of nature,  
resourcefulness.



*Adinkrahene*: chief  
of the Adinkra  
symbols, greatness,  
charisma,  
leadership.



*Nea Mnnim No Sua  
A, Ohu*: he who does  
not know can know  
from learning.



*Nyame Dua*: tree of  
God; God's  
protection and  
presence.

nurturing webs of rivers  
from the lips of mountains.

I knew you before  
you could count rains.

I am *Nyame Dua* ✨  
for when you see trees bearing men  
instead of baobab fruit.

I am *Odo Nnyew Fie Kwan*, 🕉️  
when the sweat in your eyes  
sullies the glow of northern stars.

I am *Duafe* for the night of your wedding,  
and for when your hair is first broken, 🕉️  
and for when you fight to feel  
its gamey root again,  
like *Kwatakye Atiko*.

I am.

I am the egg  
nestled on your feathery back:



*Odo Nnyew Fie Kwan:*

Love never loses its  
way home.



*Duafe:* wooden  
comb, beauty,  
hygiene, love, self-  
care.



*Kwatakye Atiko:*

bravery and valor,  
hairstyle of  
Kwatakye, a war  
hero.



turn back

fear no flames,

fear no salt,

I am.

I am *Sankofa*,



turn back



*Sankofa*: It is not taboo  
to fetch what is at risk  
of being left behind.  
Mythical bird with its  
feet firmly planted  
forward & its head  
turned backwards,  
reaching forever for a  
treasured egg.

## **LIKE BREEZES. SOMEWHERE – Simon Ng’uni**

somewhere. somewhere.

on the other side/ making its way to you

making its way across the night’s thickening plot

somewhere/ somewhere/ on this same spot, someone is looking up.

to someone, somewhere right this moment,

the distance means nothing, means everything if you mind it,

means nothing. somewhere, somewhere

darkness looms, assailing the night

a face is smiling and someone is laughing.

someone is dying. someone is being born

somewhere, somewhere a light leads out of a tunnel

the earth is spinning, the moon contends a greed

which flatters to stars

all that the sun would claim

somewhere/ somewhere a quake pulls off the root

to grow a garden from the little seeds of your heart

somewhere

somewhere.

winds are glazing over/ discovering the intent of each sprout

and somewhere, time carries on moving as always

somewhere/ somewhere. a tree takes to anchor,

roots push through death and stretch towards heaven,

with a call to life somewhere. somewhere.

despite itself, a grain knows that the light calls to it

that somewhere, a stone is rolled away

the seas of earth part with their red awnings across the sky

/somewhere. somewhere a tree stands by the water

& time opens to the fruit of said labor – only somewhere

draught breathes like wind

juggernaut. silent. calm. tousling the breast

for something tried and tested



- a breeze. coos in the shade beneath a strap of eucalyptus.

this quiet strength,

it will not wither - nor will its leaf

## **This Morning A Fragrance – Grace Adeyemi**

reminiscent of celebrations

I open my eyes

get out of bed paisley blue

pick my silk scarf off the floor

put on my floral beaded slippers

follow the fragrance to mother's

star anise skin

dressed in a technicolor kaftan

hair in a butterfly headwrap

washing a mountain of basmati by the sink window

Outside sunflowers and bus 67 are rumbling

I take in the air thick with color

white onion bulbs garlic cloves plum tomatoes

red bell peppers scotch bonnets

blended together leaping in oil

ginger sea salt curry Maggi chicken cubes

thyme bay leaves

gather together of one accord

to sing one of their favorite songs

## No city to dwell in – Iyanuoluwa Adenle

I do not know who left the doors open // the world

ushers itself

as the night

into my palms                      camps in my memories

the eve of my twelfth birthday

I wanted to know

if my hands

would be enough to hold me

someone left this door open and

another has invited the rudeness of their fingers      left them grazing at my thighs/

your fist lost in my throat /

        my tongue walls [what comes hand in hand with being black and woman?]

in my jaws

let the eyes witness no evil      let the body      be the antidote

let the antidote be

as i claw at the nightmares in my sleep      my bitten

fingernails burrowing into this body trapped within itself

the eyes bear witness

as I claw to get the world out. I wake and another black

body has been put apart  
become

how long do i have to watch as black women

witnesses to the scars scattered in their bodies

## **a playground poem – Lanair Aderemi**

there are children playing in this park

and there is sand for when they land

in their mother's arms

there is a lonely swing set

that has lost love to broken slides

and children singing "you cannot catch me!"

while a mother, watching their play, writes the seventh line of her abandoned poem.

## Level the Playing Field – Onyedikachi Chinedu

the rumors were indescribable, too large to fit the mouth.

we drove out of town to be husbands, naming an ostrich

of filthy talons from the balcony of our shared hotel room.

we honeymooned the playground at dusk,

to mend the potholes and dig out lustrous

treasures. what sang in the chest of his voice?

the air clotted in a solid sandstorm;

bandannas wrapped the nose, sealed in what

is common but misplaced. it must have been

hard to level the playing field, Promise: lunging

in the gluey mud, for pufferfish, hands around the prize,

but drops when it jerks and puffs.

## **Some fresh flowers for your home, Miss Cicely – Yasmina Nuny Silva**

I hope, Miss Cicely, that the flowers are to your liking.

We picked them fresh for you, like we have every day

since before the turn of the century. I know sometimes  
the world lets living things wither first before admitting

how it invigorated them. And, well, these flowers too are  
ephemeral... but I think the myrtles are a nice touch.

They will remain green across the winter and once  
they pass, your home will be ever sacredly embalmed

in a green love. I hope you smell that, and I hope  
you got to smell all the flowers while they were

fresh at your door whenever you opened it to  
enter, and when you finally opened it to go.



## Contributors' Bios

**Akosua Zimba Afiriye-Hwedie** is a Zambian-Ghanaian poet who grew up in Botswana. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Born in a Second Language* (July, 2021), winner of *Button Poetry's 2019 Chapbook Contest*. She placed 3rd in *Palette Poetry's 2020 Emerging Poet Prize* and is a winner of a 2019 *Hopwood Award* and a 2018 *Meader Family Award*. She is a finalist of a 2020 *WAN Poetry Prize*, the 2020 *Narrative 12th Annual Poetry Contest*, the 2020 *Brunel International African Poetry Prize*, the 2020 *Palette Poetry Spotlight Award*, the 2020 *Furious Flower Poetry Prize*, the 2019 *Wick Poetry Center's Peace Poem contest* and received a 2020 Best of the Net Nomination. Akosua has received fellowships from *Tin House*, *the Helen Zell Writers' Program*, *Callaloo*, and *the Watering Hole*. Her works appear or are forthcoming in *Narrative*, *PANK*, *Kweli*, *Obsidian*, *Birdcoat Quarterly*, *Wildness*, *The Felt*, and elsewhere. Reach her on [AkosuaZah.com](http://AkosuaZah.com).

**Alírio Karina** is a Mozambican poet, whose work examines queer life and colonial remains. Their poems have been published in *Jalada Africa*, *Kenyon Review*, *Jornal RelevO*, *Blind Field Journal*, and *Crab Fat Magazine*.

**Basma Osman** is a 27-year-old lawyer of Nubian Sudanese descent based in London. A poetry and music enthusiast, she is half of the record label and radio show *Hear, Sense and Feel* and host of *Khartoum Arrivals* on *NTS Radio*, where she likes to explore themes of movement and memory through poetry, storytelling, and music.

**Grace Adeyemi** is a 28-year-old British-Nigerian female poet. She was born and raised in Hackney, London. She was longlisted for the 2020 *Poetry London Mentoring Scheme*. Her work is published in *SAND Journal* and *Rewrite Reads* literary magazine. She is currently working on her debut pamphlet.

**Iyanuoluwa Adenle** is a 24-year-old poet and essayist from Nigeria. She makes a conscious attempt to explore the human conditions based on grief, loss, and love in her writing. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Kalahari Review*, *Africanwriter*, *Empty Mirror*, *The Hellebore*, *Onejacar*, *Lolwe*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Olongo*, and elsewhere.

**Khadija Abdalla Bajaber** is a Mombasarian writer of Hadrami descent and the 2018 winner of the *inaugural Graywolf Press Africa Prize* for a first novel manuscript. You can find her work on *Enkare Review*, *A Long House*, *Lolwe*, and *Down River Road*, among others.

**Kweku Abimbola** is a 23-year-old Zell Fellow at the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. He is of Gambian, Ghanaian, and Sierra Leonean descent. He is a finalist for the 2021 *Brunel International African Poetry Prize*, the second-place winner of *Furious Flower's* 2020 poetry contest, and has work published and forthcoming in *Shade Literary Arts*, *The Common*, *Obsidian*, *Sunu Journal*, and elsewhere. Kweku is presently working on his first poetry manuscript entitled *Saltwater Demands a Psalm*, where he investigates colonization, black mourning, black boyhood, gender politics, and especially, the spiritual consequences of climate change in West Africa. His chapbook, *Birth Elegies*, is forthcoming in May 2022 with *Finishing Line Press*. You can find him on twitter: @kwxkuu.

**Lanaire Aderemi** is a Nigerian poet, playwright, and producer committed to amplifying and archiving untold stories. Her play *an evening with verse writer* won the 2019 *Shoot Festival Artist Development Award* and was commissioned by *Warwick Arts Centre*; the play was adapted into a film and screened at *Story Story Festival*. Her work on memory and Black feminist history has appeared in the *BBC*, *Tate Modern*, *Birmingham Rep Theatre*, and *Africa Writes*.

**Martins Deep** (he/him) is a 27-year-old Nigerian poet, photographer, digital artist, and currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He is a recipient of the

*Brigitte Poirson Poetry Prize* (August/September, 2020), *Ayamba Lit Cast Poetry Contest*, 2020. His works appear, or are forthcoming, in *Lolwe*, *FIYAH*, *Cutbank Literary Journal*, *Brittle Paper*, *Barren Magazine*, *Agbowó Magazine*, & elsewhere. He tweets @martinsdeep1

**Njoku Nonso** is a Nigerian Igbo-born poet and editor. His work has been featured in *Palette*, *Bodega Magazine*, *Memento: An Anthology of Contemporary Nigeria*, *Rising Phoenix Press*, *The Shore*, *Brittle Paper*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and elsewhere. He is a Pushcart nominee, two-time Best of Net nominee, and most recently a finalist for both *Open Drawer Poetry Contest* and inaugural *Lumiere Review Writing Contest*. He is currently working on his first poetry chapbook, and still loves stray dogs.

**Onyedikachi Chinedu** is a Nigerian poet.

**Phodiso Modirwa** is a 29-year-old Motswana woman. She is a writer and poet with work published on *The Kalahari Review*, *Jalada Africa*, *The Weight Of Years: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction*, *Praxis Online Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of the Botswana President's Award-Contemporary Poetry in 2016 and recently completed her poetry residency at the Art Residency Centre in Gaborone, Botswana, where she originates and writes from.

**Rabha Ashry** is an Egyptian, from Abu Dhabi, and based in Chicago. She has a Bachelor of Arts from New York University, Abu Dhabi graduate, and she has recently completed an MFA in Writing at School of the Arts Institute of Chicago. She spends a lot of time doing yoga and reading poems. Hearing her name pronounced right makes her happy in a way she can't quite describe, and she speaks to her dog in Arabic because she knows she can speak Arabic too. She is the recipient of *the Brunel International Poetry Prize 2020*. She writes about exile, the diaspora, and living between languages. She has been a fellow at *Ox-Bow School of Art*. She has done residencies with *Holly and the Neighbors* and *Black Widow Books*. She has a chapbook

coming out with *Black Sunflowers* in 2021. Her work has been published in the *Oyez review*, *Collected 2018*, *Airport Road*, *Electra Street*, and *Strange Horizons*.

**Simon Ng'uni** is a 27-year-old Zambian writer. He studies Computer Science at Copperbelt University. Simon's writing has appeared in the *Writer's Space Africa Magazine* and *Poetic Africa Quarterly Magazine*.

**Somto Ihezue** is a 23-year-old Nigerian writer. Dabbling between poetry and speculative fiction. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Omenana*, *The Massive Company*, *The Year's Best Anthology of African Speculative Fiction*, *Libretto Magazine*, *The League of Poets*, *SageCigarettes*, and others. His poems were shortlisted for the *Akuko Magazine* inaugural issue and are currently long-listed for the *Ibua Journal Continental Call*. He recently won the African Youth Network Movement contest for fiction. The winner of the 2020 *SynCityNG* annual poetry contest, Somto has also been long-listed and shortlisted for the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize.

**Yasmina Nuny Silva** is a writer and poet from Guinea-Bissau with a background in Political Economy and African Studies. Some of her work is published in *EuroNews Green* and *World Politics Review*, and she has performed at events like *Sofar Sounds* and *TEDx University of Birmingham*.