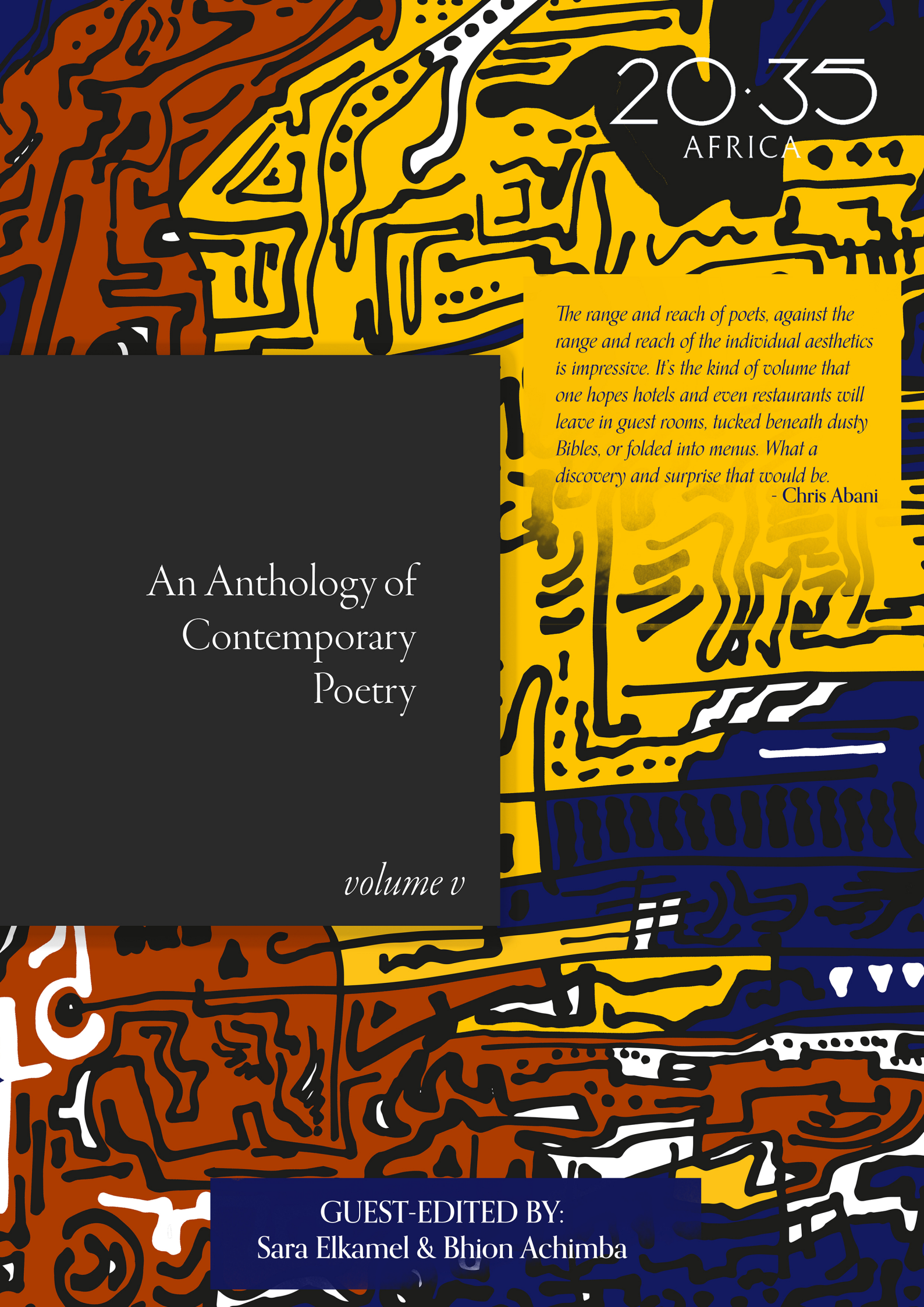
20·35
AFRICA
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- Chris Abani
An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry
volume v
GUEST-EDITED BY:
Sara Elkamel & Bhion Achimba

20·35

AFRICA

A Resource Institution for African Poets

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Poetic interventions that involve the solicitation, editing, curating, and even publishing of poets are rare in any culture. On the African continent, where it is cost prohibitive, it is even rarer. This makes this volume even that much more spectacular and necessary, and one could even say miraculous. The editors here have worked tirelessly and with little support to achieve this. What also brings a certain joy to me is that there are so many poets working still, even within that uneven and uncertain field of reward, enough to fill a volume like this. And not just as a matter of quantity, but also with enough quality and the reflexive work ethic that is needed to meet the rigors of the process and emerge on the list of the included here. A conspiracy of a lot of hard work and larger graces. The short volume, just twenty-three pages, spans the entire continent. The range and reach of poets, against the range and reach of the individual aesthetics is impressive. It's the kind of volume that one hopes hotels and even restaurants will leave in guest rooms, tucked beneath dusty Bibles, or folded into menus. What a discovery and surprise that would be. Speaking of surprises, lines like "nothing / touches the floor for fear of being buried," from Ethiopian poet, Aam – Fahad Al-Amoudi; "All the blood is a black road through the sea," by Ghanaian poet, Sarpong Osei; "it grows pain into a field of wildflowers," by Praise Osawaru are striking and jump out of strong poems that introduce, at least to me, poets I had no previous encounter with. I admired the attempts Ajibola Tolase's pidgin poem poem made to push the limits of language. All in all, this installment of this project is strong, and a must read. I look forward to seeing these poets flourish in single stand-alone books.

-Chris Abani, *Smoking the Bible and Sanctificum*

Contents

Introduction

Adoption of Language to Contain Violence

All writing is storytelling. Poetry, with its heightened and condensed use of language, is not exempt from this truth. In my experience of reading and writing, poetry's solid foundation is its way of portraying the world for what it really is and what it is not, and what better way is there to write about an experience than through the eye of its observers?

The poems selected in this anthology hold this truth in the narrative arc they all tread. Their plaintive songs are in conversation with both the inner selves and the surroundings of their personae, conversations that are as absurd as they are beautiful, as life itself. This is what literature does: bare life's absurdity and beauty.

The poems, regardless of the themes they touch and linger on, are daring and fierce in their approach, a verisimilitude of life's offering. In "Open," Sarpong Osei Asamoah writes:

> *I open with joy and they say watch your mouth. / I learn to make something out of emptiness like bells do… / there's a long silence—long as Onyankopon's bleached cock; / as yellow as gun sputum. old as obliteration. / hungry like an empty pill*

In this deliberation, silence is made the nature of grief, in the way it cautions and makes us feel guilty after every slice of joy; in the way it creeps on us, "quiet like a virus," creates some sort of craving in our being that is almost insatiable, as its needs are every atom of joy we can muster. This silence is a parasite, a host to grief. What we know of the chaos that ensues is that it is as "stoned as God, as deaf as war," and it's demanding still. v

These are poems asking – no, stating how they should be read. A controlled element is visible, in the diction favoured by the poets, in the set tones, in the pacing, not minding their subjects and the history of the depiction of such subjects. The poems are their own world.

They invite readers to come with their own related world of experience. Come and leave with another life infused into yours. A new understanding. In "Listening to my father read his autobiography," Asmaa Jama writes:

he first tells, me i ask him to recount again,
the night sky, because i am not looking
laterally, at this memory, we do not discuss,
how he slept on tarpaulin, instead i draw
new, star signs, unseeing of the ground

sometimes we watch scenes of a refugee
camp turning ember, sometimes we watch a
man look to the camera and say i wouldn't
have left if i knew this is when our house
is filled with more absences

This is how displacement looks from afar. Often, we are drawn to writings about displacement through sympathy, but the poem asks us to ignore "how he slept on tarpaulin" and dwell on the regrets, the loss, the cost of being supplanted. It is a life that "did not live long enough to be transformed." It is an absence so full we live with it for the rest of our lives. What we witness – we, spectators of a violence we cannot truly understand, without the experience of – is a daughter listening to the history of a people, of her life, and being unable to "inhabit those memories."

Fahad Al-Amoudi in "Aam" compounds the importance of language in creation. While the poem is set in a house, he uses every detail spanning from within the house to the vegetable garden outside and the "searchlight tearing through the house" to portray a gloominess that one can only assume is transferred from the persona's uncle who mourns the "echoes of his siblings stealing away in the night." His imageries are alive and charged and he does not shy away from using even science to achieve this:

The stray cats, who used to brush their fur
/ against the counter, charging each follicle
/ with enough voltage to cause a power cut
/ are gone

The story of our lives, when recounted, would seem less cruel yesterday than it is today. These stories and their cruelty do not differ by continents in its intensity. The covid pandemic hit the world and the lives lost were felt by friends, siblings, parents, and lovers alike. In Nigeria, the youths protested police brutality which cost the lives of more youths and even now, no one has been held accountable. In Ukraine, lives are lost to the ongoing war and families displaced. In Texas, elementary school children died by gunfire and instead of a decisive legislation on gun control, those who

survived are being taught self-defence and active-shooter survival tactics. There is a lot to grief. The poets in this volume are aware of this, and do not try to make sense of this deterioration. What we see is an adoption of language to contain this violence, a retelling without mincing – creating beauty out of chaos. In "Blessed is the Past, Most Eternal, Most Merciful," Ọbáfẹ́mi Thanni writes:

A man confesses, my country is killing me,
and it is forever.
The greatness of horror is in tense. Beauty
and terror preening before hourmirrors.
A man confesses, I loved. I loved this land,
and his broken heart leaps off the edge
breaking hearts inch towards. A country,
then, is a matter of time

Violence as a two-sided coin is evident in this anthology as a whole and in the individual poems. Ọbáfẹ́mi shows how there is tenderness and bruteness to it:

In the dream of my country
I am a child plucking violets, into a bouquet
of trails, for my pilgrimage to the past.

The persona is taking a pilgrimage to the past to avoid the grief that is their country. How much damage could a country inflict on itself and its citizen that they would rather relive the horrors of its pasts than inhabit its future? The tragedy is potent.

But what we should not let go of, in reading these poems, is how each of these sides are as dangerous. In a poem, beginning as a lore, simple in its execution, Edil Hassan traces the displacement of women through millennia

and while some say / the first displacement
/ was from the Garden / it was actually
this: / a woman looked / into water, into
shimmering / light, into a wet / mirror, and
mistook her face / for the face of a stranger.

This story is worth grieving. It holds a history and myth that have shaped the livelihood of generations of women.

There is a performative act to living and to grieving. This is not placing the two at opposite ends as they are each of the other, an ultimatum to each other. One must live to grieve and grieve to live fully. The poems in this volume thread the line between writing about this performance and becoming a theatre for it. Even in their storytelling, they resist theatrics. It is a testamvent to portraying the existence of a people without drowning the truth in inconsistencies and self-righteous charade. What better way is there to do this than to have the people write it themselves?

Precious Okpechi
Managing Editor

Guest Editor's Note

"The poems in this collection thread together the fluid zing of oral poetry...with the compact architectural strength of written poetry."

A striking number of poems in 20.35 Africa: Volume V manifest as elegies, giving us personal, heartfelt meditations on the realities and echoes of death, displacement, and absence. And if elegy is relentless in the way it insists on coaxing back old ghosts and painful memories, the body – its primary wind tunnel and vehicle – is often forced to confront the loss of its own agency in the service of the elegiac mode's mandate: the consuming invocation of that which has been taken away. Or at least grapple with the risk of that double loss. The tensile current running through this anthology, however, stems partly from the body's need to mourn, in addition to the body's resistance to surrender wholesale to the caprices of unalloyed elegy, preferring instead to expand its limits and complicate its terms.

As they commemorate and mourn lost loved ones, the elegies here often invoke the figurative, and even the surreal. In his poem *"Ikpoba Hill,"* where the speaker visits his grandfather's grave on what would have been his birthday, Praise Osawaru writes:

> *let's agree that loss is a chained rock pulling the body to the riverbed.*
>
> *& it grows pain into a field of wildflowers. & the tongue becomes a sponge of saltwater.*

Even in their hesitancy to plunge into or perform despair for its own sake, there is no questioning the speaker's intentions to revisit the past, to rouse history and make it speak.

For the grief that courses through these poems is not strictly over the departed; in many cases, the

loss expressed is a living one, associated with losing one's land through immigration or political injustice. The suspicious shadow of history is at once erased and menacingly present. In "Blessed Is the Past, Most Eternal, Most Merciful," Ọbáfẹ́mi Thanni writes:

In the dream of my country
I am a child plucking violets, into a bouquet
of trails, for my pilgrimage to the past

The poets here embark on pilgrimages, they perform rituals, and they stow away objects as both talismans and comfort toys. Yet a safe passage to the end of any narrative is never guaranteed, in the same way that memory – a recurring motif among these poems – does not aid in its own orderly retrieval or redemption. Instead, memory often disguises itself "in the slush and the rushing winds of grief" ("Rot" – Belinda Munyeza). Munyeza's poem shape-shifts and litters its own landscape with graves that are at first mistaken for stones, and a grandmother at once sure-footed as a mountain and evanescent, like the wind itself. It does not bring lasting comfort either, or any comfort all for that matter, that the mother, who stands as a sort of tour guide, a reliable intermediary with the ghosts of an old world, suddenly becomes an apparition herself, an extra slab of rock on the mountain of graves, when called upon to participate in the complex heart-work of affirming a daughter's sexuality. Thus, the journey stalls halfway; as unresolved as a dream.

In "listening to my father read his autobiography," Asmaa Jama bemoans the wall of silence often encountered in the journey to retrieve narratives from a parent's past, especially when they relate to topics collectively deemed taboo or shelved away in private boxes, labelled trauma.

for what they won't explain, who they
folded into cotton and their names

But in pursuing the winding trail of the unspeakable, the speaker also comes upon their own inability to remain stable receptacles for the violent and lacerating memories of the past.

my father held open a telegram line, long
enough for words to be sent to the people
that
needed them, there is more, except i can't
inhabit
those memories, the ones

where his voice disappears and his hands
turn air

Here we witness a heartbreaking lyrical shift as the speaker's iron resolve gives way to vulnerability, equal parts tender and cathartic,

without tapering off or betraying the integrity of the narrative journey. It reveals to the reader, therefore, the gnarly and emotionally charged flipside of grief work. It rarely arrives at a neat resolution. There is no exit in sight, and no destination; the narrative has its tail in mouth, beginning where it ends. Echoing what the African American poet Phillip B. Williams noted in his introduction to a folio he curated for The Yale Review on Black hauntology, the haunted poems in this anthology emerge as cyclical, and trade in both intense focus and dizzying defamiliarization. The ride towards apprehension is a loop, and the pulse of the resulting elegies is varied and endless.

Even the poet who seeks moral absolution in investigating the past is sooner implicated in the mess than afforded any lasting or meaningful redemption. Obáfémi Thanni's poem "The Festival" unrolls like a diviner's scroll:

> *I sit in the hours before lullabies shut my eyes, taking census of my sorrows—the tenderness lost, the boisterous children who turn my mind on itself, the silence after a good joke, the period swollen with distance in a lover's postscript, the fickle warmth of touch, the October earth offering water before a corpse fills its mouth. I take census in the dark. I speak softly to the sorrows whose lineage serpent my spine*

The poems in this collection thread together the fluid zing of oral poetry (once the dominant poetic mode of griots on the continent) with the compact architectural strength of written poetry. The narrative poems are meaty yet woven through with exuberant lyrical verve and lucent imagery that even what in dim light approaches the prosaic mesmerizes the reader like latticework.

These poets reveal an urgency to name, to storytell, and revisit known and unknown pasts – and they do so while experimenting with form, inventing novel and mesmerising ways of wresting control from the blank page. In "10 Years After My Arrival, I Take An Immigration Satisfaction Survey," for instance, Honora Ankong mimics the language of a government survey, but in a radical act of self-reclamation, she upends this banal document that is designed to flatten personal stories into pre-designed response boxes, instead fleshing out a sprawling narrative thrumming with resilience and irony. By deconstructing this mechanical form, Ankong has not only elevated the story of her working-class family as they leave their former lives in Cameroon and plant new roots in America. She has also

insisted on cultivating a robust and living language where previously, only flat political stereotypes and clichés were demanded.

Traditional poetry forms seem to be making a comeback recently, and, with it, the well-worn conversations around their capacity to contain the wild and temperamental moods of our contemporary politics and digitally-mediated lives. But with concerns more pragmatic than oppositional, the measured and gilded range of the sonnet form, for instance, or say the popular hegemony of free verse must contort themselves, if not fall apart, in the hands of contemporary poets no longer working as mere wordsmiths but as excavators of history and translators of the archives. New poets emerging from the continent are without doubt at the forefront of the charge to salvage the wreckage of traditional poetic forms, and use their best parts to construct urgent works. One after the other, the poems in this volume take wild leaps beyond and outside the safe zones, leaning freely into hybrid and constructivist forms.

Sara Elkamel
Bhion Achimba

Rot – Belinda Munyeza

In the dream, my mother and I stand together—on solid ground—in the kitchen of the country I call home. She tells me she visited my grandmother while I was gone. Says she found Gogo planted in the mountains wearing a dhuku on her head. She asked why; she's never known her to wear one. Gogo says she doesn't, but “pane matombo andafunga”. There are stones she is thinking about. Then I see her out the window where she stands in the slush and the rushing winds of grief shroud her. No, not stones; there are graves she is thinking about. And the story continues while I watch her. My mother says gogo told her “this body is holding shame.” Whose body? Whose body holds shame? The narration ends. I look out the window and outside is flat pavement and grass again. Gogo is gone. And my mother asks (me this time) if I am a good girl, a good child. As she walks out of the kitchen to throw away the trash, I say “mom, we have to discuss something serious”. I try to tell her who I love, how I love. Where *I* am holding the shame. But now *she* is gone. I call out to her and she does not answer. The conversation turns ghost in my mountain heart, next to all the others I buried from the women I love. Then there are graves I am left to think about.

Ikpoba Hill – Praise Osawaru

"What do we do with grief? Lug it; lug it." – Ada Limón

everything looks dead under the dense sky
& the light rain is a chill spray on our grief.

it's grandpa's birthday. mom's eyes & mine are fastened
to his gravestone, fresh daisies before it.

it's been twenty years since death swiped his breath,
still mom breaks like dawn every time.

let's agree that loss is a chained rock pulling
    the body to the riverbed.

& it grows pain into a field of wildflowers.
& the tongue becomes a sponge of saltwater.

I catch a dove looking at us from a light pole
& I think of it as an angel in disguise.

or perhaps grandpa's spirit in the form of a bird
watching us flower his grave this decade.

I have nothing to say other than mom misses you.
    he knows I don't remember him—

I was too young to feel the blade of his passing.

our gaze touch for a second & then he shoots

for the sky & fades into gray heavens.
mom's cold hand grips mine & I interpret

that as let's go. we can say that even if the wind
sweeps the photographs off the wall,

it can't wipe them off its memory.
    we walk home, it drizzles on.

Cairo Station – Hazem Fahmy

Once a year, revisiting
the possibility of my absence being permanent,

my mother recounts the story of how I almost became
a cautionary tale. About seven, I wandered off,

becoming anonymous in the cacophony
of the Cairo train station. This emblem of modernity, site

of iconic cinematography, almost became my undoing
had it not been for a man I do not remember. My mother found

me besides him, the story goes, and did not stop
to ask where exactly he'd found me, opting to snatch

me in her arms for days on end instead. He could
have been a good Samaritan, or a phantom

to haunt her dreams for the next forty years. I am here,
so it does not matter.

10 Years After My Arrival, I Take an Immigration Satisfaction Survey – Honora Ankong

How do you define *immigrant*?

The Diversity Visa Lottery fondly known as the DV lottery is a congressionally mandated Visa lottery program sponsored by the United States that allows up to 55,000 persons from nations that are historically underrepresented in terms of migration to the United States of America to qualify each year for immigrant visas which are also known as Green Cards. It is called a lottery because 10-12 million people apply each year and winners are selected through a *random drawing*.

*

When I was a toddler, my aunt, my mother's sister-in-law lived with us in the 2-bedroom apartment we were renting in Buea. She was a college graduate with no job prospects or suitors. She lived with us until she left for America on a B-2 tourist visa, to accompany her elderly mother, as a traveling caregiver for a relative's graduation. Though they both got visas, she traveled alone. Her mother decided not to go.

My aunt was fond of my mother, who let her stay at her house rent-free, not even requiring her to do chores or cook. At a time when even her family was fed-up with her *young-girl* habits, which my mother allowed: tending to her appearance, lounging around the house, and spending evenings through the night at the *off-license* drinking *top* and chatting up the university lecturers.

Playing the DV lottery on my mom's behalf, accruing all the cost, and sending in her application from the states was my aunt's way of thanking my mother.

*

When I found out we won the lottery, I was away

at boarding school. Our Lady of Mount Carmel,

an all girls' catholic boarding school at the outskirts of Buea.

My classmates were affluent meanwhile I barely made school fees.

Most of their post-graduation plans were for university abroad.

I imagined an entire life in Cameroon:

I would attend the University of Buea,

study something like journalism or law,

spend my evenings like my aunt at *off-licenses*

eating suya and drinking malta,

Weekends at Limbe beach sucking

the flesh off roasted mackerel fish,

long holidays in the village with my grandparents,

pulling groundnut out of the earth, raking my hands

through bunches, feeling the slight pressure of the soil

caked under my fingernails.

listening to my father read his autobiography – Asmaa Jama

this is where i find him as a child, the first time he cried, when his brothers dawn slick foot held the bones stuck of his chick/ now my father starts segmenting the years of his

life, as he reads, i see his oil slick body, how he floated here, as in he arrived somehow, passed through what he had to

the soundless spaces between gunshots, what looked like echoless fireworks

he first tells me i ask him to recount again, the night sky, because i am not looking laterally, at this memory, we do not discuss, how he slept on tarpaulin, instead i draw new, star signs, unseeing of the ground

sometimes we watch scenes of a refugee camp turning ember, sometimes we watch a man look to the camera and say i wouldn't have left if i knew this is when our house is filled with more absences

that i don't ask my parents to name, the gone, the now-lost, when i was born they were the newly-gone, still had names, torn by grief, that became syllables, that were repurposed into our own

my brother's live caught name, patched into his body whole from a brother now-gone, or the one who did not live long enough to be transformed, made new uncle to someone

how my brother is forgiven, even after turning glass into dust, how my mother, couldn't sleep before he did, how he was born with

a mark others would read as soul reentering the body, or

how we are all carrying the spirits, that our mother held,

how this is a hundred small gilt blasphemies, i swallow, for what they won't explain, who they folded into cotton and their names,

now i know the sea, was drawn still that day, that the earth was beaten from the sun that year, that it happened,

and my father held open a telegram line, long enough for words to be sent to the people that needed them, there is more, except i can't inhabit those memories, the ones

where his voice disappears and his hands turn air,

i try to listen again this time with my ears attuned to the dark,

and find myself retelling his story as he speaks, this time my father is majnoon and my mother layla, this time every mark, they receive turns gilt and they wake up to pearls instead of children

Aam – Fahad Al-Amoudi

Woldiya, Ethiopia circa. 1974

Uncle leaves the door ajar outside,
dawn ricochets off the mountain faces
into the shop, kicking up everything left behind.

All the clothes hang by their nape on the racks;
dust sweeps up the shoes; nothing
touches the floor for fear of being buried.

The stray cats, who used to brush their fur
against the counter, charging each follicle
with enough voltage to cause a power cut

are gone. The shelves are staggered like terraces
sliced into the hillside, stacked with upturned
skull-caps, a row of empty tortoise shells.

Smoke climbs from a crack in the back window,
rings around the tops of the precipice
and rolls back into town as a nursery rhyme.

Beyond his elastic limit, uncle is prostrate
in the vegetable garden trying to find the right
frequency. The radio dial clicks like a clock

face; uncle looks back at the search light

tearing through the house;

echoes of his siblings stealing away in the night.

Blessed is the Past, Most Eternal, Most Merciful – Ọbáfẹ́mi Thanni

In the dream of my country, I am a child at the heart of a playground
watching blooming violets sway in the neigh of a rotting unicorn.

Bees busy themselves with nectar and I fan away the afterimage of a man
mouthing the bloodchorus of anthems. Is the horror greater in the gleam

of maggots revelling in gut ballrooms? Or, the stream of mucus honeying
the root of violets? A man confesses, *my country is killing me*, and it is forever.

The greatness of horror is in tense. Beauty and terror preening before hourmirrors.
A man confesses, *I loved. I loved this land*, and his broken heart leaps off the edge

breaking hearts inch towards. A country, then, is a matter of time. *One sentence*
at a time the dictator declared, and my syntax keels over. Years after the war, women run

across their compounds remembering sunlight as shrapnel. In the dream of my country
I am a child plucking violets, into a bouquet of trails, for my pilgrimage to the past.

The Festival – Ọbáfẹ́mi Thanni

I sit in the hours before lullabies shut my eyes, taking census of my sorrows—the tenderness lost, the boisterous children who turn my mind on itself, the silence after a good joke, the period swollen with distance in a lover's postscript, the fickle warmth of touch, the October earth offering water before a corpse fills its mouth. I take census in the dark. I speak softly to the sorrows whose lineage serpent my spine. Sorrows inherited. Heirloom of kings who chose men to accompany them through rot's lull. My aches are children of the soil. Children who know the desperation of the Abobaku's prayer. *Iku Baba ye ye. Iku Baba ye ye. Iku*—Prayers against the democracy of maggots. Maggots shining through bodies curled around crowns. I mean to say, when I claimed loneliness, my sorrows and aches and illnesses and losses and ghosts murmured at my delusion. I mean to say, the sadness snuck past my lips in the suckle of colostrum. Lover, forgive me, I abandoned the fruit of your thighs—fruit doused in ripeness with the turn of my tongue—for the glint eager to divulge my veins' secret. Lover, forgive me, I cannot be yours. My sorrows drown me in the name Maami prays for me in and I answer, always, with the awe of a pilgrim. Lover, forgive me, I cannot tell my sorrows apart from my self. I cannot spit half an heirloom. I scalpeled my self to garden with you and nearly left my body behind. I make a festival of the census and we queue before a narrow museum with walls weighed in portraits and taxidermies of alternate selves. At an auction for a sculpted heart, my hands are rejected with their offering of a ruined animal. Animal ornate in blood. Animal soiling my dark suit. I want to believe the artist when she says the sculpture is worth more because it will not repair itself. Because hands will hesitate to ruin it, will keep their promise of caress as *caress* not *crush* not *crack* not *cut*. I want to believe the heart breaks once and no more, yet, the pebble I kept from [ ]'s funeral rattles in the animal as it crawls to its crimson cave. I eavesdrop on a couple whispering before a painting. The man's mouth curves into an amphitheatre against his husband's ear, before telling him of the widowed king who asked every suitor to cut the tip of their tongues and the one whose tongue grew by morning could have his daughter's hand. Before telling him the king cut his own tongue every night and the yearning to call his wife remembered his tongue. Outside, the village shears my tongue with moonshine. I fall to the lullaby's syrup with a tongue limping towards my teeth and by morning, my longing whispers your name into dawn.

Morning in Sango-Ota – Pamilerin Jacob

Before that final slam of God's hammer
upon the marble-back of night, unleashing dawn
like a shrill to do its work of disruption,

before Adhan & its tenor expanding
the world's capacity for holiness, before
houseflies beating new routes into the air

on their way to the butcher's slab,
a mother stands outside her house
sweeping dreams off the yard,

the cries of children rising like smoke from windows.
How her broom combs the sand into strips,
the swish of her strokes, the crescent

of her back, the integrity of her wrists.
Footsteps so light, they rebut gravity.
The taillight of her husband's okada

disappears in the distance. Soon, the zigzag
of traffic, the confrontation with trucks,
that lotto of life itself. May calamity not claim

your head, she mutters in prayer,
the way it did your brother's.

Rhapsody for Slumber – Pamilerin Jacob

—Two Movements after Abdullah Ibrahim's Once Upon a Midnight

I

The angel who swept dusk off the sky suffers
from forgetfulness. Did not remember to pin stars,

& licked the moon into a lean arc. Give me the orange
splash of noon against walls, branches of banana trees

interlocked like elbows, swaying to the bumble
of sparrows. Not this. Not this loneliness swelling

like a boil, the shiv of insomnia drilling into the scalp.
The neighbors think they are quiet, but love

exposes everything the way light does. On
the other side of the wall, I am pulling through

the night like a thread through a wound.
On the other side of my life, the sun

has begun its sermon to the leaves,
promising an endless green.

II

When the dream entered the room, its hands
were red from adventure, from knocking on skulls

street to street to street, the child's, the woman's,
the dog's — knocking, knuckles wet, knocking,

room to room to room. To think the unseen
are lonelier than we are. To think the eye's soft

is a door that only swings inwards, exacting its own
violence, othering everything, even dreams.

I admit culpability. I,

myself, am sealed all over,
skin taut over skull like a condom.

To the dream:
Your bruise will persist into daylight.

The yam-slice of dawn will tumble into your mouth.
I am sorry for increasing your loneliness, I said.

But I was dreaming
my stubbornness. Asleep the way palm oil does
at the bottom of a keg.

Brotherman, – Ajibola Tolase

this life no balance. Person wey chop
say na god. Hungryman say him time to chop
don near. Pikin wey no suffer think say him wise.
Abeg who teach am? If life do am, him go surprise.

Na the story for we county. Dem kill man
put for road. Police say na robber. Na we sabi
who he be, wetin he carry. He no thief pass woman
heart with him dada hair. Na person daddy

lie down for street so. The pain pass my power.
I try hol' am. I no fit. Water wey pour for my eye
reach to baf. Police say make we no waka for late hour.
Say dem go kill us finish. Remember say all die

na die. Make we arrange for street to talk as the matter
be for we body; before everything turn yam, pepper, scatter, scatter.

Harmattan Season – Animashaun Ameen

After Ernest Ogunyemi

I wake up and the first thing I do is
check how much the universe has taken
away from me. My feet are cold. I brush
my teeth and spit out blood. I kiss my cat.
Nothing is fitting in my hands again. I pray.
I go higher, but the universe went lower than
I could possibly go. I start all over. My best friend
punched me on the jaw and I tell myself it never happened.
I start all over. I am finding it harder to breathe. Tachycardia.
Google says it's love but I think what I'm doing is dying.
I start all over, again. I feed my cat. I rub myself
with more lotion than normal. If I am dying inside,
I want to, at least, be shiny on the outside.
An unkindness of raven perched on the barren tree—
I do not understand the language of their songs.
There is so much light here. There is so much light
and I don't think I can absorb it all.
I fall through the ledge. I start all over again.

Anti-Hubris – Muiz Ajayi

in lagos, my sisters
& i, still shorter than the chest-
freezer on the balcony, set out for an anglican
school at dawn. &, we, as mother would have it
also report to arabic classes at the call
of dusk. both buildings at parallel
opposites on okesuna

street. now a young lady
whom i think well-meaning shoves the scripture
in my face while i promenade. & i do not get
vexed. ọlọ́ládé says i bury my tongue
alive each time i evoke its nativity. & i do
not get vexed. in a zoom meeting, white ghost-
writing patron insists my english is beautiful
teeth broken into crumbs. & i do not get vexed.
once as a child, at ilé-kéú, i keep missing the theta
in ث and my arabic teacher plucks a tooth out
my gums. & i do not get vexed. & i do
not get vexed. i smile and say thank you.

Leading Woman – Edil Hassan

The lore goes
that Hawa dared Adam
to eat of the fruit
because Shaitan told her
Adam was unfaithful. Skeptical,
Hawa demanded evidence
and Shaitan said, Look! Look!
into the abundant river
and look she did,

and while some say
the first displacement
was from the Garden
it was actually this:
a woman looked
into water, into shimmering
light, into a wet
mirror, and mistook her face
for the face of a stranger.

Open – Sarpong Osei Asamoah

I open with joy and they say watch your mouth.

I learn to make something out of emptiness like bells do.

I watch a bullet make poetry out of holes;

the heaviest things to carry are the holes inside ourselves.

I said my name the way blood loses its rainbow.

there's a long silence—long as Onyankopon's bleached cock;

as yellow as gun sputum. old as obliteration.

hungry like an empty pill. red as hibiscus tea.

handsome as gravity.

fucked as funk. lit as a lie.

as fully automated as an angel. sharp as emptiness.

empty as heaven & hell. quiet as a virus.

temperamental as a rainbow. dark as the roof of God's mouth, blackened

by all carbon smoke rising from earth. Earth's distinct musk: shit & smoke.

as Omnipresent as darkness. as stoned as God. as deaf as war.

and it's knocking, knocking, knocking on a doorless man. Open!

All the Saints of Elmina Castle are wet – Sarpong Osei Asamoah

&

All the blood is a black road through the sea

All the saints are fishes folded in a wave.

All the gods must be sweet cows slaughtered with silence.

All the boats are a sour sword slice of history.

All the galleons are red lipstick on the ocean floor.

All the caged bird songs are in an unmarked graveyard.

All the death is clear wave tiptoe,

All its heads are blonde &

All the gunpowder in my prayer is wet with saltwater.

Drought – Alshaad Kara

Baked beans fried as a doughnut,

We soak into our thousand miseries.

The savannah cleanses itself with its own tears,

Tethers our wraths to those regional ears.

Log and ease the pain in my muscles,

Mornings and dusk with their rich peculiarities.

Warfare and welfare ring bell-shaped circuses,

Freehold boundaries wherever enchantment is required.

Pre-Elegiac Love – Kei Vough

You sit on the connubial bed, staring at a
huge canvas painting on the wall.

Because loss makes the body aware, we listen to
the croaks of toads in suspended hours.

I've stumbled upon grief at the expanse of your gaze.
You, my bald queen who lost her hair to a failed chemotherapy.

The night's silent with premonition.
The stars are sunken.

How heart wrenching is love that precedes death, or the
nigh inevitability of it?

I'd promise you life if I could take mine to
restore yours (because what encounters you asphyxiates
my crave for tomorrow's),

but I've sauced the turkey in the skillet's hysteria,
would offer my winsome pantomimes: O, Grief enters

where the skin is tenderest!

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS

Ajibola Tolase is a Nigerian poet and essayist. His works have appeared in *Prairie Schooner, New England Review*, and elsewhere.

Alshaad Kara is a Mauritian poet who writes from his heart. His poems have been published in *PS: It's Still Poetry - An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from Around the World*, *The Suburban Review*, *borrowed solace journal* and *Deep Overstock*.

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Asmaa Jama is a Somali artist + poet and co-founder of art collective Dhaqan Collective, based in England. This year, Asmaa was shortlisted for Brunel African Poetry Prize, shortlisted for the Wasafiri Writing Prize + longlisted in the National Poetry Competition. Asmaa's a Cave Canem 2021 Fellow. Asmaa has been published in places like *Poetry Review, The Good Journal, Ambit, Ballast* and *Magma*. And have been translated into French, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili, German and Somali. Asmaa's writing has been commissioned by Arnolfini, Hayward Gallery and Ifa gallery.

Belinda Munyeza is a queer, Zimbabwean poet whose work has appeared on *VS*, *Pidgeonholes*, *Hooligan Magazine*, *Twin Pies Literary*, and elsewhere. Belinda is a co-facilitator of the Luminaries Poetry workshop. They are also an Editor at *Kissing Dynamite*. Belinda currently lives and studies in Navarra, Spain. They tweet @MdnightIsAplace

Edil Hassan is a Somali-American poet. A finalist for the 2022 Brunel International African Poetry Prize, her work has appeared in *POETRY, Academy of American Poets*, and is anthologized in *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 3 Halal If You Hear Me* (Haymarket Books, 2019). She has received support from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center and the Stadler Center for Poetry. Hassan is the author of *Dugsi Girl* (Akashic Press, 2021) which was selected by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani for the New Generation African Poets series by the African Poetry Book Fund. A graduate of the WashU MFA program, she is currently revising her debut poetry collection.

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Sarpong Osei Asamoah is a bilingual Ghanaian poet who lives in Accra, Ghana. His work has featured in *Tampered Press Magazine, Protean, Agbowo Magazine, Lolwe, Olongo Africa Magazine, Bacopa Literary Review, IceFloe Press Magazine, Journal of the Writers Project of Ghana, (Twi poems) at WriteGhana.com*, and elsewhere. He is a founding member of and has served as poetry editor at the Contemporary Ghanaian Writers Series (CGWS). He has been an intern at the *Library of Africa and The African Diaspora* (LOATAD) and is an editorial intern at *Tampered Press*. Sarpong is also a Chemical Analyst by formal training.