

20:35
AFRICA

*Visceral and aching with physicality,
this anthology holds poems about
love and its sweetness as well as the
desperation of those who have lost
their homes and lives.*

- Warsan Shire

An Anthology of
Contemporary
Poetry

volume vi

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Safia Jama and Nick Makoha

20.35
AFRICA

A Resource Institution for African Poets

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This anthology is dedicated to the people of Sudan going through the inhumanity of the violence of war and are being forcefully displaced from their homes.



The motif behind the anthology cover is inspired by the work of the Sudanese painter, Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq. In reflection of the crisis happening in Sudan, I used lobs and threads to represent people and their lives; these threads do not merge with each other – I wanted it to show the lack of connection we have as human beings; while the red colour symbolizes the bloodshed in the country, the light blue colour represents the people’s resilience and hope for an end to the war.

– *Nnenna Tochi Itanyi*

20:35 *AFRICA* is a beautifully arranged volume of poetry that explores the complexities of being African/African Diaspora/being a people of the globe, navigating our many experiences from all corners of the world. Through each poem, one sees a people cleansing themselves, a body that defies definition as a single group. The volume is filled with such powerful poems, including, “Self Portrait as Brenda Fassie,” the poem that opens the volume with such fresh lines like, “Borrow yourself to happiness/You wanna be loved. You just wanna be loved/...” or as another author in the collection says, “All our wounds begin from the same place. Sometimes, the grief we carry/ is better than the one we deserve.../” As if all of us are one people, writing the one poem about our one existence, over and over, each poet does what a poet is supposed to do, unsettling things, or finding the unsettling things around us. There in these poems are a quest for answers, as in “Mosque at Hadejia,” where the poet draws us into the presence of God by exploring the silence of that very God in the haunting lines, “What I understand of God is/ His Silence.../ or “You see, I thirst for little clarities;/ for syntax in the great chaos/.”

The volume ushers us into the presence of that longing everyone knows within their skin, sometimes, denying, but a longing we however carry forever, and uncovering that longing, that pain, the ironies that define us, we find healing. Each poem takes us on a journey we must navigate, whether it be a persona piece deconstructing the “Brenda Fassie” the poet sees or that of the lone worshiper seeking to find God. These are some of the finest poems I have ever read from the youngest among us, and how fresh, how mind-boggling, how urgent each line, each word. They belong on every shelf, in every library, in everyone’s heart.

– Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, *Praise Song for My Children: New and Selected Poems*

These are gorgeous poems, lush and haunting, full of tenderness and life: rendering the beauty of joy and nightlife, of Brenda Fassie, of loss and its sorrowful rumination. They delve into the fragility of black boyhood, the dangers, the pleasures, the joys and the tests in the periphery. Visceral and aching with physicality, this anthology holds poems about love and its sweetness as well as the desperation of those who have lost their homes and life. Hopeful poems, scanning the earth for signs of life, invoking music and the voice of God: “What music is that? I say, give me your hand. / You are already dancing.” Some poems are prayers, others a declaration of survival.

– Warsan Shire, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*

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Creating A New Tradition in African Poetry

Every era of poetry has an identifiable quality, which critics have tried to define: as romantic, modern, postcolonial, contemporary. They categorize poets based on their time of work, an acknowledgement of how impossible it is to do so based on “what they are writing about” and “how they are going about it.” History therefore shapes the lives of poets, individually and communally, which is how our present writing is always in communication with the past and perceived future. And so, the experiences of a generation define their philosophies about life, and their philosophies about life, in turn, define their writing. But none of these determine the approach a generation of poets will take in documenting their experiences.

The poets in 20.35 Africa Vol. VI are creating a new tradition in their work. They understand that history evolves with us – the pain, listlessness, and joy of it, like survival instincts, are encoded in our genes: “After years of being harmed by poaching, African elephants are evolving / without tusks. / Perhaps, that is what living is. / The loss we inflict on our being to survive a little longer” (from Precious Arinze’s “What the Body Houses”). Writing within contained history and present experience is how poetic tradition and the “quality” of a generation of poets establishes itself. Poetic traditions then are activities, and, like every activity, are susceptible to change.

One of the foci of these poets is the praise, reverence for, and interrogation of the *body*. It is written about as a literal subject, an object of correlation, used as a metaphor, or written into a myth, as in Zaynab Bobi’s “Jana”:

Reporter: her body. plays three bullets. strays
into three bullets. stays in three bullets. like the myth.
about Lulu. having nine lives.

From liberating lens, this could be a claim of ownership, defiance against forces acting outside of our existence as we know it. This is not a means to adopt a utopia in which the poets attempt to shift the body away from the “fracturing” the universe exacts on it; it is instead a claiming of the joy, the inhumanity and sorrow of it, and the inevitability of this co-existence.

The body is the one physical and direct link we have to the universe, and interrogating this link is a means to understanding that age-old question: *What is the meaning of life?* This is the logic that permeates Toju Lusan’s “Heart”:

The heart is limited in its pursuit,
valves opened and closed like doors
leading nowhere. What being
designs its own destruction, falls
short of longings it feeds the earth
like a reluctant mother, baring
nipple to teeth.

These poems are not afraid to take risks, in form and subject matter. They range from stereotypical, “exotic” subjects expected of African and black artists, to those not expected of us, whatever is important to its creator. In “back it taking,” Ernest Ohia writes in reverse from the right margin about a past love and the pain of forgetting:

?vanquished the become I did when
path righteous their on ,hopes my – detailed ,intentional
,you for devotion my .fruition seek ,universe the to
remnant the :become we’ve agree I what .sooner replace must I
phone the over held conversation a of

In “Lens Theory #1,” Abigail Mengesha writes about child soldiers, how they are forced into wars, and made to lose their innocence, joy. The poem offers a lens to look at things that are omitted in the photographs and “captions” we see on the news:

Here, a stationed tank and rock barricades. There, one boy’s smirk
flashing against the backdrop of patchy fields. Look away and they
vanish. Look again and the armed children still look back. The what-
were made motionless above the photographer’s caption: *highly
motivated young recruits* –

Cianga writes about the limitedness of language, and its inability to capture a pure feeling. In her “In Defense of French,” the persona is unable to find the right words to describe the longing for her mother and what this “absence does to her body”:

no french word for i miss you
instead *tu me manque* means
you are missing from me

[i.e, you first taste absence on a colonizer’s tongue]

no french word for longing either, nothing for
what the absence of *Zaire* does to me

Love is suffused with the liminal, music, and science in Ola Elhassans’s “Relationship Between Moon & River & Bass.” The persona finds a new way to look at their lover under the moonlight and traces how the movement of their lover’s body is synonymous with those of a bass guitar string and how this catches her heart:

tonight, I notice your skin in faint moonlight your arm moves slow to the ripple of the bass
each percussive thud a different side of skin brought to life
a new dimension now apparent at the viscosity of blue light the rhythm changes form it’s buoyant

The poems in 20.35 Africa Vol. VI reiterate a point that should already be apparent to all readers of poetry: there is no definitive framework that can be used to categorize African

poetry. Echoing Toni Morrison and Ocean Vuong's thoughts on the subject of expectation, one cannot overemphasize that African poets are not "only" their work, and that the poems they write are not just about their experience but also a means to "quest forward" from this experience. This is the legacy that the poets of this generation want to leave behind.

Precious Okpechi

Managing Editor

Introduction

Wherever we live, we are all in sore need of such sustenance that only poetry can offer. Poetry from the contemporary African diaspora, in particular, has much to offer us in this fateful crossroads in our human history, betwixt global pandemic and existential climate emergency.

In Makshya Tolbert's miniature nature poem, "Tree Walk with Frog and Toad," the speaker grapples with too-muchness of our times:

Some days I want
a vocabulary of the body
more than I want
a body

Furthermore, these poems act to resist the racist conditions wherein a Black body must always access oneself voyeuristically from the perspective of a supposed superior other – the white gaze – and the speakers inhabit the space famously described by Du Bois as double-consciousness. Yet to be visible is also to be seen. To be seen is to be understood. The white gaze seeks to make the Black body invisible. This is a diminishing stance a Black body must adopt and contort to be externally accepted while counter intuitively being internally at conflict. The white gaze does not seek to understand the Black body holistically – its concerns, its vulnerabilities, its joys and contributions. Instead, it comes preloaded with preconceived ideas, myths that subject the Black body to harm. The polite term for this is microaggression. The full definition of a microaggression is a hostile, derogatory, or negative attitude toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups. The word micro is misleading as it suggests small. The actual experience is anything but small. Think of how a hammer works on a nail. A large force on a small area. This preamble is necessary as a way of directing you to what so impressed us about these poets.

Abigail Mengesha's duet of poems, "Lens Theory #1" and "Lens Theory #2" both do this important work, juxtaposing "one boys' smirk" alongside the quoted caption, "highly motivated young recruits –" to deftly expose the white gaze so as to transcend it.

As we stand in this moment, these poems offer both a salve and a challenge to acknowledge our difficult truths. Other times, the reader is invited simply to bear witness. From Vuyelwa Maluleke's "Based on a True Story":

& what you are running from cannot catch you here

& what you sow you must hand over to the last song

Once again, from Mengesha's miniature prose poem "Lens Theory #1": "See how the sun beats the road beige. The children, squinting and mid-march." Here the children are not simply playing, they are soldiers marching: "Look away and they vanish. Look again and the armed children still look back." Indeed, these poems challenge us to look. To connect with people's humanity rather than voyeuristically view them as news artifacts. Caleb Femi integrates the divergent Black masculinities replete in luscious imagery – "a mint November night" – in "Every Party is Another Party." Ola Elhassan expands the Arabic gaze through a fusion of poetry and science that engineers an aesthetics of climate repair wherein the stanzas are centred as the earth:

clouds burning in pastel levitate over vistas of sea & unruly green

nomadic landscapes architecturally rotate to meet regenerative rain

There's a ferocity to the love poems here. Connecting with each other in meaningful and intimate ways presents challenges in this world. Many of these young poets presumably came of age IRL and digitally. There are numerous references to technology's pervasive and seemingly unavoidable reach into the private spaces of the human heart. The speakers of these poems want to reclaim that real and private space where intimacy – real intimacy – can be

delicious and flourish. Intimacy is not just what is seen but also what is revealed. It is the authentic parts we share without prejudice.

From Hibaq Osman's "Restraint":

when i ask who's loving you?
don't want no names, no
no location or proximity,
no train station meet-cute or dating app eye emoji

Listen to the way the speaker's voice not only speaks but challenges the listener into an authentic response as if to say, enough with the pretty artifice. Can we be real? In other words, can we be vulnerable about our need for love in spite of the thousand reasons not to be vulnerable?

Love is not solely romantic. There is also spiritual love and familial love, both of which present high stakes and unique risks of their own. For example, the speaker of Precious Arinze's "The hope of floating has carried us so far" makes the following disclosure:

When asked how I am, I talk
about my friends to keep from admitting anything.

Ostensibly, that disclosure of non-disclosure makes way for this vulnerable truth:

I am hurrying towards a place where
my mother and I can love each other without first
disguising who we are.

Such lines as this disarm the reader, completely. The hope that runs like a shining thread throughout these works is palpable and restorative. The vulnerability that accompanies such hope converts protective armour into a mirror that shows ourselves to ourselves.

There are simply too many verses that deserve to be quoted in this modest introduction, but we don't want this preface to be one of those trailers that ruins the actual movie. Therefore, we assure you that the rewards of reading each and every poem will pay dividends many times over.

As we write this from our respective cities, New York and London, the world is hurting in a thousand small ways. The day before yesterday, in Brooklyn, I, Safia, saw the sun looking like an orange penny glowing strangely. Children played, couples strolled, and there was a jarring feeling of normality. Amid the surface placidity, a baby crying. Was the baby simply crying, or was there something really wrong? The following day, yellow smoke blanketed the Manhattan skyline and city residents were told, for the second time in our lifetimes, to stay indoors, this time due to hazardous air conditions.

In London, I, Nick, notice that democracy seems to have become a parody of itself. Leaders hang the problems of the state of our national affairs on the backs of external forces: the pandemic, the war on Ukraine, the cost of oil price due to Nord Stream, and Brexit (something the current government voted for and promised they would deliver but subsequently have not) and not on their ineffective leadership. Inflation currently is through the roof and so too the mortgage rates. Yet the current leader (a child of immigrants) seems convinced in this "Cost of living crisis" that we must rid the country of the UK shores of people coming to the country in small boats and ship them off to other countries in bigger boats. This diverts the problem from the fact that the incumbent government has cut the budgets of the National Health Service (NHS), The Police force and Youth Services to name a few. In the last year alone, the Government has had three leadership changes. If this happened in any other part of the world the powers that be would insist on some form of intervention. In times like these rather than the bravado-inflected performances that our politicians show us, it would be refreshing to see honesty, aptitude and inspired leadership.

In our editorial conversations about the Black body's many appearances in the following poems, we shared stories from our respective diasporas. In New York City, a Black man was lynched on a subway train by a white man. In Spain, a Black footballer was strangled during a game by a white footballer. In both cases, the wheels of justice have been tentative and inadequate. The reality is this: to exist in a Black body – intersectionality speaking with all our diverse strands of identities and multitudinous experiences that we carry – is to live in what Claudia Rankine might refer to as “the historical self.” To live in a Black body is to reckon with feeling unsafe due to actual danger. And so, we ask: in uncertain and trying times, following collective trauma on a global scale, who suffers? Who is scapegoated? Whose climate falls apart first when countries delay vigorous action to preserve vital natural resources?

Another problem that emerges which the speakers of these poems reckon with is that of authenticity in the face of a world that requires certain stories to gain access – not just trauma, but the desired kind of trauma. It's a dicey conversation that Zibusiso Mpofu illuminates in a poem whose title is a *Telegraph* news headline – thus, the poem becomes another kind of dispatch, a confession of deception created as would-be currency for survival:

I once faked a queer hate crime
to get a police report.
I thought I could use it
to get asylum somewhere

The vagueness of the word “somewhere” tugs at our lived and inherited experiences as poets of the African diaspora and the pain of abstraction. This honesty is life-affirming. Perhaps the “faked” story is a resistance against the way in which people of colour are expected to perform their trauma – asylum applications, diversity statements – which becomes a kind of second arrow of exploitation. So yes, we are claiming the poetic license to feel neurotic, at times.

The poems in this anthology are a beacon: they illuminate realities facing us all in the year 2023 and offer guidance along a path towards productive change from an African perspective. Above all, there is a diversity of voices here. They in their varied complexity have made their worlds and selves be seen.

We welcome you, dear readers, to turn away from the overwhelm out there, and towards the life-giving blast of fresh air present in these poems, published in this latest edition of 20.35 Africa, featuring young, vital voices – aged 20 to 35 – African writers from the continent and across the diaspora, a community of poets: our community. In addition to exposing wounds, the poems in this collection offer us soul medicine by way of nature, spirituality, and joyous connection.

The poets here write their verses from South Africa, Congo, Ghana, Somalia, Zimbabwe, and beyond. They are also living, working, and pursuing degrees in such myriad places as Virginia, Alabama, New York City and the ancient city of Kano.

We bid you to wait no further: sing, speak, and breathe these verses anew.

Safia Jama

Nick Makoha

*Crossroads possess a certain dangerous potency.
Anyone born there must wrestle with their
multiheaded spirits and return to his or her people
with the boon of prophetic vision, or accept, as I have,
life's interminable mysteries.*

– Chinua Achebe

Every Party is Another Party – *Caleb Femi*

There is a sub-clause for every yout who enters

a party with a burner tucked in his waist:

under no circumstance is he allowed to dance,

he must stand on the wall & serve

as the wallpaper of the room.

He is afforded a stiff head nod like a broken action figure

but only at intervals when the vibe peaks.

This is the penance he pays for opting out

of the parity of danger that the rest of us commit to,

the acquiescence that *it is what it is*

because whether it is opps, bills, the weather, boydem,

whether in the sheath of our beds or

in the wilderness of the streets,

something wants to stop the motor of our hearts.

So let him stand there

with his infrared eyes – soothsayer milky –

that see in moon-grey vision,

us, laughing and sweating and turning our bones to silk.

Mocking ourselves for dodging arrows with blindfolds on

as Wande Coal sings,

amorawa o ta ba ri rawa

every party is proof that we are all afflicted

with Peter Pan syndrome,

that we're all in the same gene pool of joy.

Every party belongs to a lineage of parties.

Let the yout stand there and see us metamorphose
into our parents, uncles and aunties,
see our Miyakes, crop tops stretch into butter-gold
aso-okes that make our walk suede,
a mint November night,
the dance floor smokey like the jollof being served,
the Fújì band speaking only to our waists –
we are always a talking drum solo away from immortality.

sho ta leno

O fine gaan

Let him see cash money falling
on our heads like a bounty.

if we are the wanted

so be it

Cash money falling
to the ground like a carpet of autumn leaves.

come pree how we patterned

Summer so it never ends

Cash money falling
and the curse placed on the endz lifts.

we'll bask in this

for tonight at least

Let the yout stand there and see us dancing with open ribcages,
knowing death is peaking in the shadows

at our defiant hearts thumping,

thumping,

thumping.

Lens Theory #1 – *Abigail Mengesha*

See how the sun beats the road beige. The children, squinting and mid-march. Dark, lank weights clutched to narrow chests, almost rivalling their slight heights. Here, a stationed tank and rock barricades. There, one boy's smirk flashing against the backdrop of patchy fields. Look away and they vanish. Look again and the armed children still look back. The what-were made motionless above the photographer's caption: *highly motivated young recruits* – How your eyes stay wide and fixed without offering them escape.

Lens Theory #2 – *Abigail Mengesha*

Through the jaws of a window torn wide: a girl and her father sit on the dimpled cotton pad of a cot. Like the only surviving wooden pole keeping the house upright, both are leaning slightly forward: the girl's face already taking on the wrinkles of her father. Forehead worn thin by the chill diving in through the gaping tin roof. Their eyes trained on some hidden corner through which a missile forced its way through. The cracked mud wall behind them offers no relief to your eyes. You find yourself at their feet like the splinters on the floor. Wrists bound behind your back. Ankles strapped together. In the middle of the caving cottage, you are trapped in. In the middle of their one-arm embrace, the girl and her father are also captives. Unlike yours, their shackles don't break by averting the eyes.

Self Portrait as Brenda Fassie or Jesus as a Bad Girl – Vuyelwa Maluleke

I give up my ghost

to make other people's problems my problems

& I go platinum, I go statue

I go higher, to where the sky droops into heaven

& fall back into my body.

I'll be shouting & shouting & no one will want to hear me

& sometimes I'll sing at a funeral & a wedding at the same time

so you know, I've lived & died & seen it all

like to marry is a woman problem

like in both cases she is the outfit

& collecting all that darkness may make your tears into stars,

but only in photographs, when the flash is on & the night is on & you are Black

so do not give your presence away

they want you to. they will ask you to

not to the beautiful

or the body like a chandelier of mothballs

or the money thicker than expensive grass.

Borrow yourself to happiness

You wanna be loved. You just wanna be loved

& I know I made dying famous

cause I can sing any song, but it's a lot harder than it looks.

Anyway, I'm working on a come back

next year. Nothing is impossible

Turning Bones into Sonatas – *Eniolá Abdulroqeeb Arówólò*

Down the cane field of my heart, forsythias
are blooming. Petals reddening. It's the universe
saying I am only one threshold close to a ripe dawn.
I have done it before. Stepping into joy
like a pilgrim. But there's another
dimension to this where the ocean doesn't
puke the whale out of pure neglect. It is
the miracle of hands that grants the
conjurer a success of magic, not his wits.
That I do it this way & a genuine smile
guts my face like a market in a fire
is not an evidence of my defeat against
sorrow or anything close to it. I don't
have the balls for it. I barely have
the balls for anything. I happen to just be a token
of Mercy. I lean into the piano, there is a lot of music
inside me unstruck yet, but I am getting there.
The pianist is getting there – why do you think I chose
this path where loss exhausts ink before you
put the pen to paper? I am still here alive – a fancy watch
God won't take His eyes off. A meadow with
foxgloves around it like a frightened night in the
guidance of purple stars. It surprises you an elegy
doesn't burst forth, it stuns me too.
The light I bear inside me is enough Eden.

There's no more to say about how I continue to break
the hour-hand of suicide.

I fold myself, a cat, in the warm arms of my
lover. & so, we spend the night – dancing to delicate hymns.

Note: The title is from Ocean Vuong's poem "Queen Under the Hill".

On The Relationship Between Moon & River & Bass – *Ola Elhassan*

after Mohammed Bashir Ateeq's أنا وأنت والنيل والقمر as sung by Abdalaziz Daoud

tonight, I notice your skin in faint moonlight your arm moves slow to the ripple of the
bass each percussive thud a different side of skin brought to life

a new dimension now apparent at the viscosity of blue light the rhythm changes form it's
buoyant

catching my heart mid-step it falters it stumbles it regains composure so the lyric can speak

ana wa enta wal neel wal gamar

you & me & the Nile & the moon

ana wa enta wal neel wal gamar

you & me & the Nile & the moon

Based on a True Story – *Vuyelwa Maluleke*

the club tightens around the sorrow of gladsome music,

the weary load of sweat the softened teeth

the woman you borrowed tonight narrows

like a riddle when touched or looked at

& what you are running from cannot catch you here

& what you sow you must hand over to the last song

to the feet half full the face dripping mascara

dripping mother dripping until you are near yourself

a woman lit by darkness a darkness lit out of mercy

come in come in kiss me & I will win your sadness from you

come in a mouth is like a song it is a good place to wait

for something more deliberate than love

Restraint – *Hibaq Osman*

when i ask who's loving you?

don't want no names, no

no location or proximity,

no train station meet-cute or dating app eye emoji

i'm really asking "how does it feel?"

receiving a love not as eclipsing,

i'm asking how clear is the rain

on the other side?

when the tune of the hour dissolves

house parties turn into webbed limbs

i've seen you wide-armed, shifting space

between snake charmers and wilted butterflies

i wonder if you knew i could do that too?

that in theory (if only just for you)

i am capable the way a cat is

slink without reason, entering lives as we please

just enough teeth to leave a mark

on the thick of my tongue i want to ask

what animal are they?

those who loved you so quietly

that nobody knew

i am still collecting questions

headphones filled with half-

recordings, how the one time

you said my name / sweet as silence

made me vow never to wipe a device again

now, i am questioning who loves you

out loud, between mistakes and fajn

with no reply

and no damage to my spirit

Heart – *Toju Lusan*

The heart is limited in its pursuit,
valves opened and closed like doors

leading nowhere. What being
designs its own destruction, falls

short of longings it feeds the earth
like a reluctant mother, baring

nipple to teeth. Desire is a brute,
an eye open to a dream

far beyond the reach of tongues
and fingertips, where the inflated sea

is only a wish made familiar
by the sound of water

pouring into a small glass.

In Defense of French – *Cianga*

- *there is*

no french word for i miss you

instead *tu me manque* means

you are missing from me

[*i.e. you first taste absence on a colonizer's tongue*]

no french word for longing either, nothing for

what the absence of *Zaire* does to me

french word for body is *corps*

translates back into English as corpse or cadaver

[*note: how the colonizer's tongue turned the body into its absence with the erasure of a word*]

~~i am longing for a language i've never learned but —~~

[*REMEMBER! there is no french word for longing!*]

- *someone*

is always asking when i will let this tongue go

but in defense of having a language with which to call home

i answer *ma mère me manque*

[i.e, my mother is missing from me]

no word for what her absence does to my body

[maybe show it by designing your smile after hers]

● *listening,*

carefully,

i allow myself a tiny grace

that every spoken sound can bring me home

anything can be a langue if

there is someone listening

Born With Partitions – *Wale Ayinla*

These boys were born with partitions,
though it is worthy to note that shepherds do not
determine what colour their flocks will bear at birth.

A replica of madness it is when a lamb is coughed out
without the skin of his mother.

History says that these boys are descendants of war.

Nearly all the mouth I've kissed pushed an ocean
into my belly. Its salt is reaching for my lungs,
and the waters now shake the core of me.

There is no end to a war, and remnants
of silence are being bargained for in the market of dreams.
My dreams are made from floss, and a sprinkling of kerosene

and a matchstick brings it to life.

Treat this with utmost concern: there is a ribbon at the tail
of every raindrop. It is the same for depression.

The strings shelf among its many ambitions.

As easy as it is to want to live, there are brainfolds holding you
against the wind, against the portals you inherited.

I return to fan the fire of my dreams,
so thick, now, that it licks my skin with discomfort.

The boys introduce themselves as vapour.

Listen, there are no boys in this poem,
only dissolving gravestones. To say that there are boys here
is to admit that ash can mould itself into gracious bodies

that will line the city with their winged sorrows.

Depending on what part of the grave you're standing,
the scent wilts into you.

The Hope of Floating Has Carried Us So far – *Precious Arinze*

I tell you I sometimes wonder about my dog dying
and my heart is more ache than muscle. You say,
I have *such a soft center*, and I become Jericho –

city without walls;

city with all its gates blasted open.

When I die, I want everything in the world to mourn
me. The longer I live, the more regrets I have
to be accountable for. When asked how I am, I talk
about my friends to keep from admitting anything.

Like that time in a room somewhere, in the company
of strangers and a now distant love, when we
dragged joy into our lungs. Puffing. Passing.

Until all our sorrows became smoke and everything
was possible except what had threatened to disappear
us. Until lost hands carved a ruined city from between
my legs and I wondered whose sins I was paying for
and knew the answer. All our wounds begin
from the same place. Sometimes, the grief we carry
is better than the one we deserve. *How are you?* You ask.

I worry I can't love my friends out of the worst
of themselves. I am hurrying towards a place where
my mother and I can love each other without first
disguising who we are. I want to get there faster

than time can kill us. Can kill me. You say what
you love most about the rain is the excuse to abandon
the day's plans and start again. You are making a
celebration out of making hot cocoa and preparing
for a nap. *Start again*. I am returning to what has kept
me alive so far –

your pillow-soft arms,
the smell of clothes drunk from the sun,
and my dog, barking at the slightest bang
because it might mean the return of
someone she loves.

What music is that? I say, *give me your hand*.

You are already dancing.

Tree Walk with Frog and Toad – Makshya Tolbert

We put our shirts

in our mouths

muffling ribbit

ribbit

Some days I want

a vocabulary of the body

more than I want

a body

Mosque at Hadejia – *Ridwan Badamasi*

The new carpets in the mosque at
Hadejia are lush; my hands sink
into their soft hairs. Around the back,
there are folds that will trip you, roadblocks
in the path of foot traffic. The air
is filled with the smell of perfumes and
the pine-orange fibers of the new carpets
and the muddy streets outside and the rains.
Light and dark cross fingers across the expanse,
and for a moment, as we all descend into
a sujud, I imagine the lattice crisscrossing
across our backs as daylight splintering
into shards. After, I look for God coiled
at the end of a tasbih, the thick bile
of the symptoms that ail me curling
up my throat. I try to rethread the stitches
that hold up my body, to treat my body as
a wound, to tongue through metaphors
for prayer. What I understand of God is
His silence. The Imam, who yesterday
prayed for a man who'd descended
into the wrappings of a straw mat
says the story of man is flux and fire.

You see, I thirst for little clarities;

for syntax in the great chaos

of things, and for hope

even as minuscule as a speck.

You Would Love It Here, I Promise – *Tawiah Mensah*

At 23 all the lovers have come and toured this city, tired.

There are no more holy temples to be worshipped.

Just remnants of a name I still speak, with a stutter.

I read a story once

about a girl who gathered her anger and her warmth, set herself on fire,

and never let out a cry.

I envy her strength and thirst after her freedom.

The most I have ever done for my body

is to drown her in the fury of people

who never stay long enough to learn her last name.

Cacti in a Beautiful Woman's House – *Segun Agbaje*

For N

I

This is built of a random joke

In which my name is misnamed but we love

And here I am, all things and a bit more.

A bit of spines, a bit of laughs, a bit of confused moments

And all of love.

If I were a plant that could sit still, in

Facing sunshine on your window lintel

Watch you smile and laugh as the screen blares images

Of a family far different from what we have known.

I know there are moments in which love like dew flutters

Down from the heaven, to give us that sweet memory

Of water, of hope, of spring. How even with

A body that cannot be grasped without bleeding we are loved.

As plants go, I would place myself in a vase and send me to you

Green and steady, for sunshine and loving

And if I grow, to be bigger and more endearing

Incapable of being overlooked or forgotten

I want to remind you of the hills and the butterflies

Of a garden of roses in bloom

Of your home
Of every memory of sweetness
Of every shade of love.

II

*To be a god of small things
To break every yoke canvassing for my oblivion
And to love.*

I want to be tender, always, with you
To be a cool walk on the steps of a train station,
Sun shades and mirrors reflecting new memories
And smiles; Hope is a seed for the heart,
We can take in our palms
Hold to our mouths and swallow.

I want a condition to bloom out of me,
That I witness the sunset and my mind
Finds peace in you, in my dreams, in
The toil of my hands. I want salvation
Like your laughter, like water pouring
Over me, like your eyes, brown seas
That pull me too deep, your patience
The anchor keeping me afloat.

The most tender part of my soul
Dwells on simple actions, makes memories
Of things that reek of déjà vu;
I know I haven't met this moment,
And still all the same I know you, when
You hand me the ice-cream.

When I drive in silence and you recline
The seat, I am thinking of nothing,
Demanding no more from life
Than this moment with you.

Idiosyncrasy – *Toju Lusan*

You are insistent rain,
headstrong against the roof.
I hide from your gaze like the sky
hides behind the tree, wearing it
like an emerald hood.
I missed you when you were looking
at the sun's other side. I slipped
my foot into a shoe that once belonged
to you. I dusted your shelf
with a shirt I no longer wear.

We have failed at love—

I still wear your shadow
and hold the poison
in my fist, tightly, like a key.
In my dream, I wander naked
into the past where the rain
is dark and hot and no wonder
we are so blemished. I know
the taste of regret. I know how it tickles
& burns the throat. I know the heat of your palm
flat on my cheek. How quickly the rain turns
from drizzle to storm.

“How Nurses Recruited from Zimbabwe Are Being Caught in UK ‘Bonded Labor’ Schemes” – Zibusiso Mpofo

– *The Telegraph*, 28 August 2022

The new class for the care worker course

I am taking

is packed wall to wall

with dying bodies.

Their hollow eyes are searching

for a path to flee

this whirlpool of a country,

to seek resurrection on other mountains.

You can almost touch the panic

the need is raw like the wet inside of an ear,

intimate.

I once faked a queer hate crime

to get a police report.

I thought I could use it

to get asylum somewhere

but the cracked ocean of borders

is a maze of stringent laws,

passport colours

and the missing limbs

of those who've tried to
cross it.

There are stories of my father mutating into a serpent,
his two-forked tongue a charm packed with lies
he had to tell the immigration police.

My sister tried out a fraud scheme
in South Africa once,
her green hands
cupping desperation.

She could have come back home
but home is an aching sinkhole

nothing ever survives here
the barren life will crowd you out,

so we part the air
to leave no matter the circumstance.

We break the sky
with chants and concoctions
from medicine men
who promise us guaranteed visas,
a goat sacrifice,
the soil eating

the blood of a cock's neck.

Prayers wrapped in tight plastic balls.

Wishes [In Reverse] – *Michael Emmanuel*

...in five years you'll have everything you want now.

but you could be dead. or spiraling through a heartbreak,
clutching therapy, pitching the forty-fourth funding plan.
watching your neighbor's cat prance around your living
room. babysitting a stranger's pet. measuring the wingspan
of a promise before it melts. or the earth could be kinder.
plant you between the sea and the ship. strapped to floating
wood. inheriting flotsam. or in a foreign country reading
a map in a foreign language, picking clues towards an eatery
where the food tastes like a flunked test. learning the metarule
for trimming the distance to your mother's voice. or in a class
taught by an accent too fast for decoding. or in a city coloured
by protests. trading banter for bullets. or behind a computer,
ordering heavy-carat rings, supplicating:

come fingers, come woman.

lord, lend me the boldness of a parachute, defying gravity,
defining gravity. everything returns to him who waits. even
absence, knitting the lonely into the lonely into the lonely,
dress rehearsals for a timeline of longing.

What The Body Houses – *Precious Arinze*

After years of being harmed by poaching, African elephants are evolving
without tusks.

Perhaps, that is what living is.

The loss we inflict on our being to survive a little longer.

If I alter my body to fit in the world, does that make me more or less
deserving of it?

My ambiguous desires, panicked ambitions, unassuming joy.

How much life are we allowed to make for ourselves in the face of what's
been given?

The truth is none of us is anything without who we think we are.

So what if I made more of myself – erected a home out of both suit and
suitcase.

What is more real: the body or what it houses?

Is the elephant the tusks or the belief that it is who we say it is?

The act of naming can be a way of saying something is made up

Knowing this, I am not asking you to make room for me here.

If I say *I am*, and they scream *You are not*, I become more I than I ever was.

Maybe who we are is not nearly as important as the task of remaining.

Of bearing witness to our own history.

Maybe gender is just the same story retold differently.

Maybe the lesson is to let nature off the hook.

I want to insist that we can survive anything, even biology, even language.

That someday, it would be impossible to believe we were anything else.

Like the elephants welcoming each tuskless newborn with a rumbled prayer.

Someone asks, ~~what~~ who are you and our future rises to meet them, unharmed
by the syntax of the past.

عشق – Ola Elhassan

zephyr meets the shock of bougainvilleas simplicity where walls are smoothed
etched interventions to connect delicate like the stringent of geometry of galaxy
symmetry inside windows of quietly opposite patterns
on patterns lining assymmetric curves for interleaved ceilings
passion walks by the azan humming through alleways at the speed of dawn
the recurrence of a memory forms new thoughts so we read ancient wisdom
travelling time we ask the poets from long ago to name our realisations & El Bikri marvels
back

و لو دخل الداخل قرطاج أيام عمره و تدبر فيها لرأى فيها كل يوم مستأنف أعجوبة لم يرها في السالف

wind carries up waves from the shore to shroud the birds prayer
it shawls the knocking lullaby of bricklayers
unveils the story tellers on every ancient shop front searching for a beaming ear that trusts
along a paved pedestrian path through ruins of ancient destruction or building
holding space for erasure we learned to savour what survived
crescent moon sunrises that insist on lengthening evening waves
lulling eyes to greet the day away by folding themselves into sleep
returning the low tide's nightfall it recalls a memory's remnant meditation

jasmines creep through balcony slats to get comfortable & settle
cats trotting through chiselled grills scare strangers & pull a laugh from seated grandads
with water jugs by their soles the mundane doesn't find a word to wear so it forgets itself
clouds burning in pastel levitate over vistas of sea & unruly green

nomadic landscapes architecturally rotate to meet regenerative rain
become containers for salutations in polysynthetic soundscapes
enticing a need to listen before the heart switches itself into a laugh
let the ma'louf singer grin from the wink she lined in yellow & blue calligraphy

silver amulets cover the trailing henna inside your silked wrist
arriving courtyards breathe life into you through arched doorways opening into the next
second
millenia of fragrant poems have lined the eucalyptus leaf & every traveller wrote another
syllable
imagine what the forrest would say when their rhythms greet each other once
again into another hour of awe so alight in your irises they progress gratitude
glancing past the luminous horizoned mountain to taste what the new night will sing you
hear it & let your body sway watch the air dance the tree branches this is your melody
wishing

Till You Call Us by Name – *Tawiah Mensah*

I was born with a colour that sits with the sun,

And tells stories about cracked clay pots and fighting women. I was born with arrows drawn on my face,

showing men with claws where to dig in and feast.

My people live with freedom nailed in their feet. When the night comes, the moon calls us by name. And we rise, carve our hearts on boards,

and leave fear behind closed doors.

Even when the only way to stay alive

is to swallow our teeth.

Still, we fight. Still, we chant.

Holding hands with our feet taped to the ground. And with all the weapons we carry.

A hashtag, a Twitter thread, a flag, a voice.

The mist may sting our eyes and burn our nostrils,

metal may rip through our flesh, and our skin may scald.

We do not back down.

We do not stay back.

Our fight is all we have. This fire is who we are.

Our freedom is all we know.

Jana – Zaynab Iiyasu Bobi

Israeli military admits shooting a 16-year-old
Palestinian girl, calls it “**unintentional.**”
– CNN, 12 December, 2022.

God said: *let there be light* and there was light

[] said: *let there be f(l)ight* and there was fire.

Twitter: a daughter. a girl, named. loved.

was shot. nine times.

skull. shattered. haemorrhaged. in a pool.

Reporter: her body. plays three bullets. strays

into three bullets. stays in three bullets. like the myth.

about Lulu. having nine lives.

[]: Jana. a casualty. ticks. backwards.

into her name. *to reap.* as the bullets. are thrown.

with no fingerprints. attached – unintentional.

Lulu: *Jana's cat that she went to save on the roof of their house.*

Back It Taking – *Ernest Ohia*

is mind the
freely thought every where ,sanctuary a
,take to meant were they form the into matures
– balladist good ,God of full previously – mine for except
myself find I .room for fights yet ,you harbors which
,edge its at napping you find I ,time of truth the in spent
perhaps .thrive to year this want I .obsession miserable a
up crept you when like .surprises two or one us give will it
,aftershave mint in yourself drowned having ,me behind
daffodils homegrown ,neck my on breath your
stop not did skin my & hands your in
easy wasn't it .week a for swelling
me strangled have would face your ;headspace my reclaiming
try I .back it taking in delayed I if
name my with mouth your ,eagerness your hold to
word the of idea your ,it of inside expanding
types what me asking you ,*together*
times many how – want never I'll kisses of
?have we thing this name to afraid you were
?vanquished the become I did when
path righteous their on ,hopes my – detailed , intentional
,you for devotion my .fruition seek ,universe the to
remnant the :become we've agree I what .sooner replace must I

aloud quiet the ,phone the over held conversation a of
hangs someone forgetting of pain the .ears our in
.own their carries everyone ,bag a like

Note: *The Dore* (which in Urdu, means line, cord, rope, or thread) is a poetic form created by Sanam Sheriff. Following its parameters, the first and last lines split a quote by someone the poet considers to be a part of their lineage.

Contributors' Bios

Abigail Mengesha is a writer and editor from Addis Ababa and a recipient of the George Harmon Coxe Award for Poetry and Frontier Poetry's Global Poetry Prize. She is a recent graduate from New York University, where she was a Jan Gabriel fellow. Her work has appeared in *The Common*, *Mizna*, *The Margins* and other publications.

Caleb Femi is a writer, director, and photographer, and was featured in the Dazed 100 list of the next generation shaping youth culture. Femi's award-winning debut poetry collection, *Poor*, was published in 2020 by Penguin Random House, and won the Forward Prize for best first collection in 2021. It was added to AQA's English Literature GCSE syllabus in the UK in 2022. He has directed TV episodes for HBO, the BBC, and Netflix, as well as commercials, high-fashion films, and runway shows for brands such as Louis Vuitton, TikTok, Bottega Veneta, Dior, Mulberry and NCS. From 2016 to 2018 he was the Young People's Laureate for London, working with young people on a city, national and global level.

Cianga (they/she) is a Congolese interdisciplinary artist based in California, by way of South Africa. A winner of the inaugural Evaristo Prize for African Poetry, they have received numerous fellowships including ones from Brooklyn Poets, UC Berkeley's Poetry and Cave Canem's Starshine and Clay. Their upcoming chapbook debut was the winner of Foglifter Press' Start a Riot! contest. They were also a semi-finalist for the Cave Canem Poetry Prize and NFSPS Board Award. As a refugee based in America, Gracia's work seeks to decolonize language and knowledge. They are currently an MFA candidate and work as a teaching artist.

Eniolá Abdulroqeeb Arówólò is a writer from Nigeria and a member of the Frontiers Collective. A Pushcart nominee, his works have appeared or are forthcoming in *4faced Liar*, *ANMLY*, *Fourth River Review*, *Consequence Forum*, *Rulerless*, *Perhappened*, *Lumiere Review*, *Temz Review*, *Ake Review*, *Sunlight Press*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Brittle Paper*, *Tint Journal*, *Rough Cut Press*, *Lammergeier*, and elsewhere. He was shortlisted for Chukwuemeka Akachi Prize, and currently serves as a Poetry Contributing Editor for *Barren Magazine*. He tweets at @eniola_abdulroq

Ernest Ohia is a Nigerian queer writer currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. A few publications where his works have appeared include *Lolwe*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *The Muse*, *Arts Lounge*, *Agbowo*, *Nantygreens*, etc.

Hibaq Osman is a UK based Somali artist whose main work has been in poetry. Hibaq was first published in 2015 by Out-Spoken Press with her debut pamphlet *A Silence You Can Carry*. In 2017 and 2019 she released two online pamphlets, *the heart is a smashed bulb* and *CARVINGS*. Her first full poetry collection *where the memory was* was published by Jacaranda Books as a part of their #Twentyin2020 initiative. She is a proud member of OCTAVIA POETRY COLLECTIVE.

Makshya Tolbert (she/they) is a poet and potter who just found their way back to Virginia. Makshya serves on the Charlottesville Tree Commission, is a 2022-23 Lead to Life Curatorial Fellow, and is New City Arts' 2023 Spring Artist-in-Residence. In their free time, they are elsewhere – where Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. calls “that physical or metaphorical place that affords the space to breathe.” Their poems are for putting shade on the ground.

Michael Emmanuel is a creative writer from Nigeria. His works have appeared in *Jalada Mag*, *Ake Review*, *Twelve Mile Review*, *The Poetry Shore*, *Afritondo*, and *Trampset*. He was a finalist for the 2022 Awele Creative Trust Award and the 2022 Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Contest. He lives in Lagos.

Ola Elhassan is a Sudanese poet, curator, and electrical engineer in London. Sometimes her poetry experiments with and about music, mathematics, physics, and dancing. She is a resident poet and member of the Common Sound collective, and has featured on the Common Sound Spring “Compilation 22” and Raelle’s debut EP “Bloodlines.” She has performed at the Roundhouse, the Serpentine Gallery and Ake Arts Book Festival and more. You can find her poems in various international anthologies including *PANK Magazine*, *Inkwell Journal* and most recently, *Before Them, We*.

Precious Arinze is a Nigerian poet, essayist, and author of the chapbook, *The Hope of Floating Has Carried Us So Far*, selected by Chris Abani and Kwame Dawes for the New-Generation African Poets Series (African Poetry Book Fund, 2021) and the Spanish Language Anthology of Poetry, *Tres Preguntas: Poetas Jóvenes De Nigeria*, published by the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Their works have appeared in *Brittle Paper*, *Lolwe*, *Agbowo*, *ANMLY*,

The Republic Journal, Boston Review, Electric Literature, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Exposition Review, and Berlin Quarterly, among others.

Ridwan Badamasi writes from the ancient city of Kano in northern Nigeria. He is a Biochemistry undergrad in Bayero University. His works have appeared in *Salamander Ink Mag., Praxis Magazine, Konya Shamsrumi, Roadrunner Review*, and elsewhere. You can find him on Instagram: @pluetarch

Segun Agbaje is a half-Igbo, half-Yoruba writer, photographer and economist. He was born and raised in Lagos, where he currently lives. He still believes in Nigeria, and the existence of the good man, and the dignified toil.

Tawiah Mensah, hailing from Ekumfi Narkwa in Ghana's Central Region, is a graduate of the University of Ghana, where she studied French and Political Science. She is a content strategist and creative writer. Her writing centers on the complex relationship between family, friends, and the myriad challenges that women face in contemporary society. Through her poetry, she explores the intricacies of being a young African woman, grappling with acceptance and the journey of self-discovery. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Litany on Loss* (African Poetry Book Fund, 2023). Her works have also been featured in prestigious publications, including *Tampered Press, WildPine, CanonPodcast, CGWS* and others. Empowered by her own journey, Tawiah Mensah stands as a compelling voice, uplifting women, advocating for their growth, self-acceptance, and self-love.

Toju Lusan is a Nigerian writer and photographer whose work primarily explores intimacy, connection, and faith.

Vuyelwa Maluleke is a writer, theatre practitioner and performance poet who holds an MA in Creative Writing from Rhodes University as well as a BA in Dramatic Arts from the University of Witwatersrand. Maluleke describes her works as post-colonial transcriptions of race, gender and black social life in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Author of the poetry chapbook *Things We Lost in the fire*, her Manuscript *The Blue Album* was shortlisted in 2021 for The Sillerman First Book Prize. Maluleke is widely published in publications such as *The Boston Annual Review, The Rialto, New Coin South African Poetry Journal* and *Guernica Magazine*.

Wale Ayinla is a Nigerian poet, essayist, and editor. He is the author of *To Cast a Dream* (Jai-Alai Books, 2021), selected by Mahogany Browne for the 2020 Toi Derricotte and Cornelius

Eady Chapbook Prize. His works recently appeared on *Guernica*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Strange Horizon*, *North Dakota Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Rhino Poetry*, *Poet Lore*, and elsewhere.

Zaynab Iiyasu Bobi Frontier I, is a Nigerian-Hausa poet, digital artist, and photographer from Bobi. She is an undergraduate student of Medical Laboratory Science at Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, winner of the inaugural Akachi Chukwuemeka Prize for Literature, winner of the Gimba Suleiman Hassan Gimba ESQ Poetry Prize 2022, a Pushcart and Best of The Net Nominee with works in *Strange Horizons*, *Fiyah Literary Magazine*, *CutBank Literary Journal*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Native Skin*, *The Drift*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *The Deadlands*, *Agbowó*, *Omenana Magazine*, and elsewhere. She tweets @ZainabBobi.

Zibusiso Mpofo (he/they) is queer writer from Zimbabwe. His work has been published/is forthcoming on *The Hong Kong Review*, *Brittle Paper*, *A Long House*, *Intwasa Anthology*, *Water Damaged Anthology* and *Work In Progress Hong Kong*. He is the winner of the 2022 *Brunel African Poetry Prize*. Zibusiso's work centers around healing and the intentional building of better future worlds among other themes. Their writing is an act of weaving the dark effects of trauma and memory into light and healing.