

20·35
AFRICA

"These poems amplify a realm of postcolonial experiences in ways all physical, psychic and visceral; they rehearse a continent's logics of survival, the sense that self-discovery is a vista for harried voices."
Peter Akinlabi

An Anthology of
Contemporary
Poetry

volume ii



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20.35
AFRICA

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is dedicated to

Chukwuemeka Akachi (1999 – 2019).

*Trees and injuries and glass and roads and
sadness and ellipsis and dreams and
dreams and dreams: these are our parts.
draw them, with a sinking ship on the
background, and then paint with caution. The
sum of my parts might not make any sense
on your canvass, but paint it anyway. Call it Art.*

– “How to Paint a Boy”



The 30 poems collected in this anthology ask the reader to enter a landscape of art and imagination through a variety of carefully bounded landscapes. The originary impulses vary from poet to poet, but, collectively, the poems amplify a realm of postcolonial experiences in ways all physical, psychic and visceral. These poems rehearse a continent's logics of survival, the sense that self-discovery is a vista for harried voices. The poets count wounds and injuries, tallying the cost of growth, they break upon stones, knowing a scar is a language, watch sun relapsing orbit, index laughter, watch God's face multiply, through the rattle of the haunted, mark themselves alive in the deluge of stars and bones.

These poems are indeed dark – they have mostly turned inwards, to personal moments and spaces: desire and failure, grief and estrangement, dysfunctions and motivation, love's lost mysteries – but they are also deft and dutiful, making demands of encounters and observations, calling for meaning in meditation, probing the underbellies of a peculiar modernity, the epistemic relations between self and society, between self and others, between self and the unpredictable forces of history.

Although the governing principle of most of the poems here is the rooted "I of the Beholder," the refracted structures of personal representations also crystallize the fundamental truth of every writer's ultimate quest: the translation of the self which is also the translation of the milieu.

– Peter Akinlabi, *A Pagan Place*

20.35 *Africa* includes an array of poetic presences convinced of their aesthetics, arguments, and peculiarities. There's harmony in the selections here: memory and the dense air of forgetting, cross-Atlantic yearning, restrained dissatisfaction, and nostalgia made distinct by youthful questioning, by a melancholy some speakers are learning how to settle into. "But / Longing is not living" (Kondwa Rayne). Each poet, each speaker resists flattening in their own cadence. Nights turn over to days, there's fogginess but also clearings, moments of radical declaration. In the opening poem, Momtaza Mehri writes: "Yes. It is arrogant to think you are the problem. But it has to be one of us / and it isn't me. I don't make the rules. I am made by them." These poets take and freak tradition, every education touched by colonial failures of thought. "I adopt your ruins." Oubah Osman continues on: "We / Recede into each other in the place where stories reside." These poems encourage a vision of the books that will emerge in the next few years. I can imagine the poets who will welcome them quoting: "I threw a couple of amens / out of the window." (Sinaso Mxakaza) Here is the chorus singing back "Amen!" before their own new songs.

– Ladan Osman, *Exiles of Eden*

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Editor's Note

In producing this anthology, there were challenges we had not foreseen, mostly because the individuals involved lived in different continents and time zones. While it has been exhausting, we have also experienced that rewarding joy of pulling off a difficult task. This year, we worked with 30 contributors, Yasmin Belkhyr and Kayo Chigonyi as guest editors, Ladan Osman and Peter Akinlabi who wrote the sincere blurbs, and a handful of media platforms, all of whom the 20.35 Africa team are eternally grateful to. It is humbling to occupy a central place in this communion of efforts, to be offered the privileged position of witnessing contemporary African poetry through this raw lens.

While the poems in this anthology vary in subject-matter, they are connected by common attitudes in contemporary African poetry: they take off from the personal and consider the historical, the traditional, the national, and the communal through their relatedness to the self. Memory and longing are central in the poems by a number of diaspora poets; whether it is Nadra Mabrouk asking – “Why does the flailing figure still remember / the water that once held it safe, only to push it away?” – or Oubah Osman declaring that “Each memory is a ruin” in a poem filled with remembering, or Emmanuel Oppong-Yeboah rewinding to the lore and history of his home country Ghana, or Oyin Olalekan who asks bluntly – “In the car we argue about the state of Nigerian politics: / How come no-one ever goes back? / Why can't I go home and build?” – the presence of the word “remember” ties these poets up in one immutable experience. This remembering is done not as an ideal act but one that is compelled by necessity.

The home-based poets speak of hostilities domiciled. Hauwa Shaffi Nuhu proffers how the human body can bear the consequences of a disastrous home: “actually, it is me who's / the aftermath of war / my name is new & used – / butchered at the edges, keeping the fate / of its real owner away.” For Ianne and Maneo Refiloe Mohale, the personae face the dangers of both

macro and micro aggressions, sponsored by social hatred of difference in Ianne and of queer love in Maneo. The elegiac tone persists through Nome Emeka Patrick's work in which social and political decadence is rendered familial and personal:

in the city of wind, there are bones begging for canopies of flesh, &
this is just another metaphor for the blood & the guns & the fucked govt.

/ ... / every boy i know is walking backwards, threading
their feet back to when we first knelt in gardens to dream of dreams, when
we were running but into our father's arms, & not into walls of bullets.

For Sinaso Mxakaza, Asisipho Shaun Burwana, and Kondwa Rayne, the persistent feminine body is in multiple forms; sometimes weary, sometimes defiant, other times as fragile as china.

Other poets withdraw from this heated space into meditation, whether religious or existential. In this regard, Megan Ross does not merely deify motherhood in her poem, she engages a representation of what is central in divinity – creation, providence, and nurture – and injects it into motherhood. In one of her poems, God's essence, orthodoxy, and mystery are dissolved into a new understanding in which they begin to function as human and primarily woman. In the same meditative spectrum, Goodness Olanrewaju Ayoola resembles Saddiq Dzukogi, not only in the brevity of their poetry but in their dreamscape.

Never in the history of African poetry has it been as self-indulgent as it is now – which we can all agree is a productive liberty. The contemporary poet often writes from a personal place, choosing to not be demure with what is private. In her purely romantic poem, Ugochi Okafor does not care for a cause, she makes sexual desire as legitimate and significant as other topics:

I want these: / your hands on me, / your tongue searching my mouth, / your whispers fondling my ear, / your
chuckle falling into my heart / with every playful shoulder bite, / your moans escaping like fireworks / when my
fingers draw patterns on your soft spot.

These poets are also writing in the most affective language. Part of what is remarkable in these poems is that the lines that are beautiful in themselves. Goodness: “God’s / Quietness is a thousand times louder than loudest”; Jeremiah: “our love / of height, not the longing for gods, built a tower”; and Ekpenyong:

I do not wear pain like some people do

I spill it off me and wear a nice face

So my painter will learn a thing or two about mistakes

We were not seeking to publish an anthology of the best contemporary African poetry; we were seeking poems that most sincerely engage their subject-matter while holding strong artistic merit. The 30 poems we have selected here combine these principles and are in themselves multiple conversations on the sensibilities of being African in a modern, global system.

Ebenezer Agu

Editor-in-Chief

On Finally Seeing Astarte Syriaca I Am Overcome with a Longing to Text You a Meme Only You Would Laugh At – *Momtaza Mehri*

Oily sin tinged green and supple

as grace. I am keening. I end where I begin. A belly

full of the meat of my own desires.

Being the first-born daughter means I am always tired

and bored of my own silences. Or siblings. Often

I confuse the two. I am accustomed to men who can cross

continents but never the gulfs in their own living rooms. I think of distance

as I stand in front of a gilded Rossetti, studying the precise

angle of a pout. Harp of lip. A cold slab of shoulders. Eggshell wrist.

Is beauty not this auburn haired and exacting?

Like the feeling of just making the last train. The obscene shape of your panting

on window glass. A man naming you after a country he has never seen.

I don't know what it means to stand in front of a goddess

and not see my own reflection. Convincing you is half the problem.

Yes. It is arrogant to think you are the problem. But it has to be one of us

and it isn't me. I don't make the rules. I am made by them.

Let me be a slipped disc. Unmade. Let me be the foetal position you assume after.

Let me be your every assumption. Make me regret how small my palms

are.

Make me regret nothing.

Stones – Adeeko Ibukun

First, you call the map a song
and the song is as a love hidden in
stones as if to say all of human
history is about building still,
some towering halls leaning towards
me, and to this you say, history
is about movements too, but how
does a stone move in it? To the love,
what is yet a migrant bliss when
a mother looks at her child's first
leap like a transactional bill and
says, "what floats within the space
transforms me." She meant, here,
movement is defining and so a place
is a journey built of it. The stride
and the mother joined with the child
by the unbroken song of beauty. To
the map, I am defining my home,
what stone breaks me in or I break upon.

Reflections – *Asisipho Shaun Burwana*

There are men who will teach you how to swallow yourself

And how to hide dead bodies under your bed.

When they leave,

You will have forgotten how to be soft,

and how to love yourself,

and how to not find yourself on the edge of a cliff.

Midnight, trying to not dig your own grave,

When you look into the mirror,

You will find your mother staring at you.

A Page from My Diary – *Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto*

This thing I have looks like a mouth.

(No it is not a mouth, it's an opening)

A girl once walked into it and became a blackboard
where a geometrical equation of bodies was solved from behind.

My mother puts prayers inside my mouth. To be my guide.

Is she not afraid that I may keep letting out the prayers
till everyone of it is gone? And the *guide*, should it not best work as a halo?

A boy gave me a microphone one afternoon. He wanted me to be heard.

I screamed *Love* into the microphone and everyone ran away.

He said it didn't come out well, that I should try another word. I said *Live* –

No one ran away but the food that went round was served with bullets.

I left the boy, and everyone around, for the waterfront.

I needed to see my reflection.

My father, a man of a few sentences,
once gave me a bottle of beer and said

I should rinse my mouth with it.

He took me to the balcony:

now that you see clearly,

can you see how the moon is still the sun?

I looked up at the sky and folded with the night.

A Short Note on Departure Theories – *Echezonachukwu Nduka*

The only way to defeat departure is to say goodbye & stay.
Say see you soon but sit still. There'll be no apparitions in
my room, no interruptions for thoughts shaped sharp like
the tip of your nose, no break from nintendo games and coffee
so dark I scream for cream, no Pavarotti singing in praise
of Italian pastas and cheese. I forgot to ask if he ever owned a pet
that sang as well. What do two men playing sax on a nearby hill
(not) have in common? One is bald & plays staccatos. The other is
full-haired & plays legato notes. How does a song cling to the body
of its players? Does exhaling melodies count as a plus for climate change?
Harmonies may ordain human bodies. Harmonies don't end after a goodbye
& a handshake, after lips disengage from mouthpieces like an amen to a prayer.
Fighting absences with resonance is an unwritten law of sound. And I, too, will
resonate to my body in your absence.

I Swallowed Him whole – *Ekpenyong Kosisochukwu*

I am in the dark

I swallowed a river ten times the size of heaven; three times mother took me there to wash, three times now it made a beast off me

Father washed himself in it and hung so the masses would see his purity and deny their acts, some of them dared come here without clothes

I saw the eerie signs of women spitting images in God's face

Children who know nothing are allowed to carry gods weight in them

Father calls it faith

Sometime in May: I feel like a loose god

I do not wear pain like some people do

I spill it off me and wear a nice face

So my painter will learn a thing or two about mistakes

I am the fire that can make any god seem cheap and dress in my bosom

Father says, "Throw a child inside a cup and watch him drink himself to stupor"

Throw your god inside and I'll swallow him whole

Self-Portrait as Multiple Dreamscapes, Each Craning Its Neck Towards Home – *Emmanuel Oppong-Yeboah*

I run back to save myself from the arrival
the plane tucks in its wheels
and is suctioned back into the sky

the sun relapses orbit

(I have trouble remembering my dreams
like I have trouble remembering the face of the child that will one day bloom inside me)
his face like the face of the creator hovering over the deep

(I knew and yet could not be known)

I look down and watch the ground grow into focus
the floor becomes lava and I dissolve
only the Atlantic can tell me of my body

waves remember me well

I wash up along the shore
& the gulls sing my coronation
sing boy, with crown full of salt

boy, coughing up ghost through salt water

I whisper the name Elmina
and the slave castle crumbles to sediment before me
wet, I dry my hands across the dust of us

lift my fingers to my face and paint my brow with mud

marvel, as my hands flicker in and out of time
(who am I but the bridge that brought me here)
drum sounds in the distance

I open my mouth and an egret raises its head to speak from the deep of me

I reach up my hands to wring the bird by the neck
(halt, fall to my knees startled by my violence)
soften into prayer

holy enough to coax the song from my throat

I fold my body around the mouth born bird
crane my neck to the sky
(bones are buried there)

a woman pounds cassava and yam

& her pestle beats against the sky
Nyame retreats (embarrassed)
my body

the pestle

I am held and pressed into that which will sustain me
(my mouth opens and is filled)
in december, I cradle a mango

peel the red green flesh till it rests a shimmer in my hand

my mouth opens and the wet drips down my face

my mouth opens and I fill and fill and fill
my mouth opens and flickers into a seed

I press the seed into the sand

a seed grows root
a seed bears fruit
before the fruit first a flower

before the flower first a bud

green and flickering
my blood blooms

Celestial Observation – *Goodness Olanrewaju Ayoola*

On uncertain nights / I stuff my mouth with aggressive meditations/

Angels process my spirit/

A bridge between regions /ascending descending /God's

Quietness is a thousand times louder than loudest /I blare so fervent

Whenever I pour into a prayer /

Until my English tongue is incapacitated/ until my mother tongue is

Finished into/

A neat silence /I break into a language holding my mouth hostage/

I stagger into a solemn doxology/ I push the notes aside/ I'm conducting

Orchestra of angelic hums/ it's God's room

Fatimatu – *Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu*

tima, your hair looks like the aftermath of war,
he tells me later,
and we laugh.
the hair, too,
strands latch round his index in laughter,
circles round in turns like possessed thing
and i am reminded by what is stark in its colour,
of my identity

actually, it is me who's
the aftermath of war

my name is new & used –
butchered at the edges, keeping the fate
of its real owner away.
she did not survive the scald of home.
because mine smelt of burning
and fleeing and cowardice,
i shed it

every breath is a fleeing child
it's what you do when home hiccups
with human lives as jagged breaths

so, my hands, too, are an aftermath of leaving

so are my feet
so are these lips that cover around his now

like a sudden idea; excited and prodding

i do not say any of this to him

Necklace¹ – *Ianne*

stroked

in most awful orange,

you will learn

boy

that man is only wood

that life disappears

like smoke

that skin

runs like butter

we

circle black

round black

watch it swim in the heat

of sun

and not

these colours that killed you

boy

did you not know

the hum of the veld

when little remains

but char

ember

and stray dog

boy

have you not seen
we are nailed together
two planks of time
swinging
in this dust
nervous and dry
waiting for the match.

at last
at last
arms curl away from bones
man opens like bark
becomes the youngest tree

and burns

¹In South Africa, 'necklacing' is the act of forcing a rubber tyre around a person's shoulders, dousing them in petrol and setting them alight to burn to their death. It emerged during Anti-Apartheid movements in the 1980's, notoriously in the murder of Maki Skhosana, as an instrument of collective violence and mob justice against those who had been perceived to betray the movement. As a particularly horrific expression of widespread xenophobic narratives, necklacing has re-emerged in the last decade against immigrants from other African countries who move to South Africa seeking a different life.

Daybreak – *Isabelle Baafi*

You are Night and yet you come at dawn – still warm
in the place where they pried your mother's fingers,
dozing in the back of a '59 Mini that coughs you onto
a cobbled road; its hungry cracks that swallow little girls.

This red-brick cul-de-sac semi, its iron wrought
with hints of penny sweets, cricket fields, dead canals – this
is the House of Day (Mr., Mrs., and their three Sunbeams).
This is where you enter – scoured, powdered – toes turned out
(refracted hope); prayed and pressed in your Sunday best
(stiff and white, so they will see themselves).

They call you Sherry:
agree you will age briefly
before being consumed;
know you come from darker soil,
will make for sweeter wine.

And yes, they drink at Night (get drunk on you).
Yes, Days shine when Sunbeams scatter darkness.

Night sleeps deep in covers
but Day bites awake.

Night is full of secrets
that Day cracks open.

Night fails to mend shadows
when Day breaks everything.

And by the time dusk comes for Day;
by the hour that sun sets,
you too will have learned to hate Night,
you too will fear the dark.

Ode to David's Ennui // Or the Land of Babel II – *Jeremiah Agbaakin*

“ẹkùn, ọkọ ọkẹ – tiger, the mountain's groom” from Yoruba

the boy with the crow skin comes from a long
line of tigers who moved mountains to please

their women – who paraphrased the serpent in
its own words – fang disguised in fur. our love

of height, not the longing for gods, built a tower.
the men stopped crying as soon as they were

born; picked up their claws & spears to fight.
Akinrere crushed the earth & founded a giant

elephant standing above it. then stole a woman
from his own camp, climbing the palace roof to

feel the mountain's breadth he hiked in youth as he
wrestled wild cats, clicking their paws as with a shearer's

knife. once, my father's half-brother drunk, tipped off
the balcony, broke his ribs & blamed his wife for the descent.

he took them all: women widowed by wars, took war
returnees. the fireplace in his bones was too much for him.

after slaughtering the cockerel, my clan commands

me to pluck all the feathers to prove allegiance

& attention to details. the slaughter smooth & neat.

i come from woodcarvers chiselling their bodies into

gods. i want to leave this land, still toothed with

enough mountains – that crave ghosts' claw marks

and their clothes hanging loose from uprighted

skeletons, like mannequins hanging, their snake skin

shedding. yet the mothers still wind open their

love like first milk. the men shed them like a skin.

If the Body Could Speak – *Jay Kophy*

a scar is another language

I always had to break
into crumbs. to be able
to fit on my tongue.

I once had a skin that life
had not written upon. it tasted
like it had never been burnt
by the sun and kissed by
the moon. because it covered
only flesh and not memories.

I once had a skin that was not
heavy. it spoke in silence
like an image in a mirror does.
and smelled like the voice of a man
dying of thirst.

I once had a skin. a cloth. a land
that was bare. until I took it for a walk
to drink the sky in the day
and breathe in the stars at night.

*to anyone fighting their body
because of its scars:*

*a scar is another language
written on your body. that you*

*should never feel ashamed
of speaking.*

My Legacy Will Be Different – *Kondwa Rayne*

I pinch my arm

As if just by pressing I could shrink my flesh

Step on the scale

As if I were stepping off the gangplank

Every Monday morning, into the deep.

Every week the same cycle

I wish I was smaller

I wish I was happier

I long for the day I finally get to live

In the body I was supposed to have

But

Longing is not living

My body is here

Now

She has carried me

Through love and loss

Through triumph and heartbreak

This body bears the tracks of my tears

Knit into my skin, carved into my bones

By my mother

And her mother before her

This generational millstone

This wicked inheritance

It's time to lay this burden down.

At Swim, Two Boys – *Kopano Maroga*

More than to be memorable

I just want to remember:

The first baptism of drizzle

The first smell of wet earth

The first embrace, and your skin

like the rain-slickened road after

the softest precipitous caress

after so many days of drought

The way the rolling hills would look in the morning

with the dew lying like a blanket of sighs

running with the reach of an avalanche

Not because I have forgotten

Never that

But I would like to remember as if

for the first time

To be humbled by the unspeakable joy

of knowing there is more beauty yet for me in this world

if no other

I would very much like to hold you as I did that night

where I couldn't fix any of it

but you let me hold you anyway

I would like to kneel at your feet again M_____

And take your calloused hands in mine

and listen to the meteors of silence

hurtling between us

Bringing us closer to oblivion

I saw the end of days there

in the abyss of your irises

Please

I want to go back

Sandton Skye – *Maneo Refiloe Mohale*

for Karabo Mokoena

Privileged to be able to do this, a bought safety.

We're running out of bubbles and sushi, still

tender from an afternoon of taste and wet

and moan and reach. I'm used to love

on the edge of a cliff, unsurprised to find

myself in the tempest heart of another

triangle. Both brown and gasping and drunk –

the food's arrived. I find a fig-leaf

and head downstairs. Unknown to me

uBaba has been watching us both. Glint

of a silver star on green felt, I feel my steps

quicken despite myself. *Sisi* –

is that a girl with you? The one upstairs?

What is it? Do you sleep together?

Are you alone here? Do you need anything?

I get off at six, if you girls need me

to come up. I can teach you. Unbuckling

his belt, so that I'm sure of his meaning.

Back inside the room, I smell smoke.

God Is a Mother and She Is Everywhere, Everywhere – *Megan Ross*

For Fidelina

I

I quit Church and see God in a thousand
different ways as if She's split
open like a fruit and all her seeds are glistening
gold and yellow. Well almost a thousand,
I mean, I see Her now like I should have
then, when I first learned that Jonah
was swallowed by a whale, not now, when I
am reading that story to my child &
wondering how exactly he survived all that
stomach acid and how come he never
had a whale named after him or at least a tuna,
something reasonable? Did you see that
man in Port Elizabeth? It was all over social
media. He was swallowed by a whale,
well, almost. He survived. Obviously. That's
why the story's told: and right after
he jumped back into the water. Crazy shit.

II

My grandmother, a secret priest, kept a private
Pantheon of gods next to her kettle: salt &
pepper shakers that looked like little blob
people, hugging. Six teaspoons
that shone like bells. Jars of spices for

secret embalming rituals. And
handwritten recipes for every kind of hunger
the heart could know, all bound in
string and a cutout from the YOU.

III

God's faces multiply, at the coffee
shop She works two jobs for her meals
and sharpens her fists on
Tuesdays at boxing
and counsels every customer who cries, all
prophetic and promising new love, while
her eldest, only seven, sleeps in the kitchen,
eating grated cheese from an ice cream
container when he wakes.

IV

For this new God my tongue now learns new prayers. When I worship, it is not the sincere
ramble of my son's first As I Lay Me Down to Sleep, or the gentle collapse of my mother's
kneestofloor Hail Mary, throated and pure, or the jade forever of underwater in summer's last
swim, or the slow kiss of winter swell's first petticoatwaves mouthing the shore, or even that
first worshipful sip of morning coffee, sunrise haloed. If I pray tonight it is in my own unholy
way, an amen in text, a hallelujah on Instagram, an undulating beseeching in tongues of
flower emojis and a field of ???? like open palms, asking, calling

and God's Word Made Flesh, Her Daughter, being
the youngest, is happy to answer
over text. I WhatsApp her at 3 a.m., saying: Our
Loving Mother in Heaven: how do I get
my sick son to sleep if his nose is blocked and he's

overtired and fighting sleep like it's plague
<heart emoji> and all I need is a couple hours please
so I don't lose my shit <pleading hands emoji>
and I swear on my dead grandmother's life <double heart>
that I've tried every remedy under your golden
sun but I'm tired of crying and not even to sleep.

My private saint, my channel to God, is no other than
the Star Queen of *La Sticky Garlic Rice* and the Colour
Orange, hitching babies to her hip like a virgin's
dream, and in my hoarse psalm I tell her how I have
tried every pagan rite: a wish of Vix on my son's
chest, a votive dab in the balls of his feet; tiger balm's
promise under his nostrils; holy of holies, a humidifier
turned to maximum and I have laid my front to his
small pneumonic lungs, that hollow rasp emptying me,
the air catching in his throat like a harp being plucked
by devilish fingers and with each irregular note, he
throws his left arm over to me, searching for mom.

VII

Cut an onion in half, God replies, my God who has
fed my anemia with black beans and eased my pms with
Colombian chocolate and taught me to close my soul
to stop babies coming; whose own prayers are hot
and fast as if She is still in Honduras, as if Her
Spanish is blood and Her words are a loaded gun.
Cut an onion in half, She says, he'll breathe
better. So I do and I pierce it with four cloves

and sit it beside his pillow like a sourbitter heart, a
 sticky icon, a breathy Cross, and in this sweet
unorthodoxy, I hear my answered prayer: we sleep all the
 night, waking to a new sun, the whole room smelling

like a mouth.

**“Let’s Go Get Sammak in Queens and Have an Egyptian Day,”
He Says – *Nadra Mabrouk***

I’d forgotten the urgency of fish bones –
how the cage of cartilage splinters

between my teeth, hands picking the exhausted
meat apart into limp shreds of tulle, organza.

This won’t save us. Neither will the weight
of mercury stored in each filament like gold,

the scales charred, silvering off my nails
pirouetting in front of him in grey delirium.

Why does the flailing figure still remember
the water that once held it safe, only to push it away?

Tell me, closer, the Arabic word for the sunken
gasp when a needle lodges itself between lungs,

the word for air
when you can’t reach land.

Tansheer – *Nermeen Hegazi*

There's no exact English equivalent for the word *tansheer*.

Hanging-the-laundry-out-to-dry

or

Hanging-the-laundry-on-the-clothesline

is an awkward mouthful

that doesn't quite spin like "dryer"

tansheer

is a woman in a floral galabiya

with a round tub of wet laundry next to her feet

checking to see if the neighbors downstairs

cleared their clotheslines

tansheer

is mama reminding you

to hold out the shirts at arm's length and snap out the wrinkles

tansheer

is groaning that you're late for work

can't I do it when I get home?

tansheer

is panties on the nearest line

behind the towels and bed sheets

tansheer

is the gunshot of thunder

that signals a hurtling stampede towards the balcony
to rescue dry clothes from the gray sky

tansheer
is a pair of furtive eyes
in his undershirt and slippers
clumsily hanging clothes in the belly of the night

tansheer
is a middle-aged engineer
wringing his mother's nightgowns
in the golden sunlight

tansheer
is the flap in the evening breeze
your wardrobe on display
colors, colors, colors

tansheer
is the stars overhead
and prayer on your breath
water stinging your palms
like redemption

tansheer
is when water droplets
tap out your name
and I smile.

Poem for the Nearly Damned – *Nome Emeka Patrick*

let's say the poem begins with a song: *in the city of wind, there are bones.*
 thus, my father sleeps under wet stars to make a dream that'd last us
 till he is home again – a sailor, a man who's made the sea a map of survival.
 in the city of wind, there are bones begging for canopies of flesh, &
 this is just another metaphor for the blood & the guns & the fucked govt.
 in my room i sleep on the floor with the ghosts of dead friends strolling
 into my dreams. i sleep with the doors open, the wind chiselling through the
 last song of the hours. every boy i know is walking backwards, threading
 their feet back to when we first knelt in gardens to dream of dreams, when
 we were running but into our father's arms, & not into walls of bullets.
 see what wounded destriers our nation has made us into?
 see what wounded destriers our nation has made us into?
 in my nation's mouth, withered feathers & splintered bones
 in my mouth, dead birds & half-sung threnodies –
 i am running, a paper plane lost in the city's body, into
 every dream i once had – dead & begging for the last grain of me.
 on the street, boys pick the bones of their fathers & write poems
 in a room brimming with their mothers' mannequins
 tell me you still doubt this, *this falling* stars & bones –
 here is my tongue, red with caked blood & crusts of old prayers,
 don't ask me why i am still here, my father needs to meet his son whole
 when he walks into this house again, his only dream of a silent God

I inhabit you – *Oubah Osman*

I inhabit you, the tempered stage that is a body.

I inhabit you – the gaze is silken, a nod to the ways we share memory; history a transmission of

our eyes on us.

I pretend you

and you become

the real-life image of me. I adopt your ruins,

one aged and new story of an elder carved out by a train

an elder forgotten in the smallest town known to man.

Each memory is a ruin,

a gift from our shared iris

inside.

I remember

One father unlearning himself, identity becoming a steepening slope.

My own mouth knowing, and so saying:

My daddy remembered only my name, even after he'd lost his own,

lost everything.

I remember us.

I remember

One mother's hands pouring dough on the flat pan, laxoox perforated and tight

One mother's hands pouring dough on a flat pan, laxoox perforated and tight

An affection drawing circles over our heart

The fingerprints flattened against the tempered plate,

The memory drawing pathways in the dark.

We

Recede into each other in the place where stories reside.

I give thanks to your ruins

I am becoming your –

I eat up your ruins

I am becoming you.

All the men in my family are ghosts – *Oyin Olalekan*

the kind that you know are there
but don't believe in.

When my father was young, he climbed to the top of his family house and jumped.

He tells me this story now – slim legs crossed,
a wry smile glimmers behind his glasses.

In this life, he has not gone off into the night
he does not appear to me in a dream,
gaunt begging
draped over the mustard chair of my adult apartment.

Here I am alive and breathing and
my love is bright because of him.

Once, I came in from the cold, plunged my feet into hot water
until my blood turned sharp, until he came banging on the door.

I am my father's daughter until he forgets.

I tear myself from the mouth of memory forgetting forgetting
toward
forgiveness

I wonder if we were too cruel.

I watch him drift from room to room,

whistling to fill the silence. I remember the day he came close
only to say, *Please, I don't want to be alone in my own home.*

I did not want to be kind, I wanted a father.

In the car we argue about the state of Nigerian politics:

How come no-one ever goes back?

Why can't I go home and build?

The tin-voice of his brother calls to wake us

Someone has seen him walking the streets of Lagos, red dirt pouring from his pockets

They blame us. *He was never like this*

My brother has stopped crying. Tells me

You'll know who I am when you see it.

I lie for years, still feel the thrill

of a sweetened story

grow sick with borrowed nostalgia

for countries I want to claim. Give up

my seat for old folks. It's the right thing to do,

especially for Black men, with red eyes who grip tight

to the swinging belly of the train—

Would you like to sit? I ask

Have you seen my father?

A man shuffles past me and I know
the curl of his shoulders, the heavy

blink of his eyes that ask to know tenderness.

His arms lift in prayer and I cannot stop my arms
from reaching to hold a man who is not my father,

Would you like to sit?

You break seven years of silence to ask if I am nice.

Don't you know,

from you I inherited this strange power
to remain unknown. Imagine,

a final death in place of this slow, intentional killing.

One final eviction to muzzle the rattle of the haunted.

theories about longings – *Precious Okpechi*

there are moments held with clarity – a boy whose
branches fall off before leaves begin to sprout – they say
the brain forgets what longing is – a boy with the dreams of
a father begging for alms under the rain – & the heart does
the tedious work of beating them into being – shapes them as
trees with deep roots somewhere – this is why the heart beats:

 why the earth has a night sky with open wounds
 why eyes lock with things the heart beats for
 why rivers are the colour of beds underneath
 & why there are no sins named by the heart.

Vieja – *Rotimi Robert*

I see you hurting, shrivel-bone and tired. It's in your hair, it's in your walk, your voice. I'm here, my marathon in a few hours, and I can't leave fast enough. I tell myself we all run in different ways – humour me. I carry your sores on my ears – half-asleep – as you cry into the phone, another brother dead. Two sisters gone in the past three years. Your heart keeps churning, pumping, pumping, pumping, and the matriarch of four generations remains.

Alone in a way we're yet to understand.
into.

Alone in a way only time breathes life

Figment – *Saddiq Dzukogi*

My fear so vast, on it, I can erect a country.

I often wondered: is a dead body too silent

to have a shadow? In my nightmare

there is no breathable air. My father wanted

a woman who would be silent as a corpse.

My son cannot wait for his milk teeth to fall

from his mouth. He wants to pick them up,

save them below his pillow like bits of a puzzle –

perhaps a map to something valuable.

On a wall that has since become a pilgrim's site,

a dead man's face appears.

Men visit, hungry to believe a mirage.

Drone Fiction – *Sara Elkamel*

It is possible for funerals
to happen outside windows, possible
for you to watch one proceed
without really going anywhere. Possible for skies
to turn pink and heads
to hide behind depths of dust or under
black umbrellas the size of clouds.
Possible to go back to the past
and stand by the window with you
shout things at the heads that crown
the tarmac, all of us confusing
one dead man for another.
Down, down with _____
_____ did not die,
_____ did not die,
_____ did not die,
to give _____ my life
would be too little. Possible?
I am lonely. Lonely like a drone
with bones that draw rust. Stand by me,
and watch the dead turn to gold.

date night – *Sibulelo Manamatela*

we eat pineapples until our vaginas are sugar for all our lovers
have a sweet tooth on date night the knives on the table are pointing
at him you're holding a gun with no bullets it is just a trigger
he thinks it is nice to be eaten by a vagina sweet tooth
turned decay and cavity you too hot sometimes too cold
your vagina is the trigger always too much no. you frustrate everyone who
comes after him with your needles and threads trying to stitch your legs together
always no always raped always trying to become unraped
stitchingyourlegstogether finding triggers counting legsneedlesteethknivesvagina statistics
trig
gered.

Raw Sugar – *Sihle Ntuli*

plantations of KwaZulu,
sugar in the natural state
a source of sucrose.

the hands, rip cane from soil
teeth, sink under
succulent summer delicacy

the unrefined blood of cane
mouth, drips,
the senses, sensual self-indulgence,

a taste of raw sugar

weakens, subsides, fades
the pleasure begins to die
from the tongue.

Keeping it together – *Sinaso Mxakaza*

I threw a couple of amens
out of the window
when the house was warm
And my heart was alright
I couldn't keep any man
My mother's house
A sanctuary of women
who abandoned themselves
at the feet of their lovers
They looked like their struggles
And blessings in empty churches
Were beautiful so we looked at them
With our hearts hoping to keep them
At times everything falls apart
And nobody wants to break any further
Place me in a sacred way like your best china
I am a wounded mess collecting myself for Sunday lunch
when I shall be displayed for guests to marvel
at my gold trimmings and how I haven't broken
mother says her grandmother's china
travelled countries over
was passed on from generation to generation
to a woman when she married
It sits in her hands like the virtue of women
I wash it with care as I cradle my own body at times

Like Shooting Stars on a Solstice I – *Ugochi Okafor*

I like the feeling:

your body, my body – together,
wedded by the purple duvet
that followed you home last April
before we threw our first punches.

I want these:

your hands on me,
your tongue searching my mouth,
your whispers fondling my ear,
your chuckle falling into my heart
with every playful shoulder bite,
your moans escaping like fireworks
when my fingers draw patterns on your soft spot.

Your fragrance lingers in my room
and I bow in worship to every smell of it.

Like cologne clutched to you
so your fragrance,
years later,
still lingers.

I think of you in the shower,
when the water massages the skin underneath
that begs for relief from waiting impatiently
for you,
your touch.

I'd arch my back as I let my imaginations
paint a picture of you,
the water and my anxious fingers
jerking me from my reverie.
I'd imagine your lips in a smile
saying how the most erotic thing is me afloat in thoughts of you.
You would take me,
right here,
in your mouth,
bringing heaven to my knees.

Contributors' Bio

Adeeko Ibukun is an award-winning Nigerian poet. He was awarded the 2nd Prize in the Sentinel All-Africa Poetry Competition in 2012 and his poem, “A Room with a Drowning Book,” won the 2015 Babishai Niwe African Poetry Prize in Uganda. Ibukun was also a guest at the Lagos International Poetry Festival and Ake Arts and Book Festival in 2015. He lives and writes in Abeokuta, Nigeria.

Asisipho Shaun Burwana is a 20-year-old South African male poet and storyteller. He is passionate about storytelling through poetry. He uses poetry as a healing mechanism, to address issues and to give birth to the burning words of Queer and Black people who are constantly silenced through patriarchy, homophobia, sexism, racism, and misogyny. His writing explores growing up Queer and Black, and non-conformist, in modern-day South Africa. In his writing, he is guided by the words of Nina Simone’s definition of an artist’s duty, which is to reflect the times. He reflects our times through poetry.

Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto (@ChinuaEzenwa), 26, is from Owerri-Nkworji in Nkwerre, Imo state, Nigeria. He grew up between Germany and Nigeria. He has won the Association of Nigerian Author’s Literary Award for Mazariyya Ana Teen Poetry Prize, 2009; Speak to the Heart Inc. Poetry Competition, 2016. He became a runner-up in the Etisalat Prize for Literature, Flash fiction, 2014. He won the Castello di Duino Poesia Prize for an unpublished poem in 2018, which took him to Italy. He was the recipient of New Hampshire Institute of Art’s 2018 Writing Award, and also the recipient of New Hampshire Institute of Art’s 2018 scholarship to MFA Program. Some of his works have appeared in *Lunaris Review*, *AFREADA*, *Rush Magazine*, *Kalahari Review*, *Palette*, *Knicknackery*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *One*, *Ake Review*, *Crannòg Magazine* and elsewhere.

Echezonachukwu Nduka (b. 1989), Nigerian poet, classical pianist, and musicologist, is the author of *Chrysanthemums for Wide-eyed Ghosts* (Griots Lounge, 2018). Recipient of the 2016 Korea-Nigeria Poetry Feast Prize, his works have appeared in *Transition*, *Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *Saraba*, *Jalada Africa*, *Brittle Paper*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *River River*, *Expound*, *A Thousand Voices Rising: An Anthology of Contemporary African Poetry*, *Bombay Review*, among others. A member of South Jersey Poets Collective, he lives in New Jersey where he writes, teaches, and performs regularly as a solo and collaborative pianist. He can be found online at www.artnduka.com.

Ekpenyong Kosisochukwu Collins, male, is from Nigeria. He grew up in Nsukka where he is currently studying English and Literature at the University of Nigeria. His works have appeared in the *Nigerian Students Poetry Prize* anthology and *Differed Dreams*. He is 20 years old.

Emmanuel Oppong-Yeboah is a Ghanaian American poet, editor, and educator living out the diaspora in Boston, Massachusetts. He is both Black & alive. Born in 1993, Emmanuel currently teaches 11th grade English at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, and in the past has served as a teaching artist at organizations such as the Massachusetts Literary Education and Performance Collective, the Cambridge Arts Council, Northeastern University, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. When not kicking it with juniors, Emmanuel works as an instructor at the Boston-based nonprofit Grubstreet, and as an associate editor for Pizza Pi Press. Emmanuel's poem, "kra-din" (*Kweli Journal*), is a recent recipient of the Pushcart Prize (XLIII), and in 2019 he was shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. In his free time, Emmanuel enjoys hot carbs, brightly colored chapbooks, and the long sigh at the end of a good book.

Goodness Olanrewaju Ayoola (b.1989) is an award-winning Nigerian poet and teacher of English and Literature. He reaches out to poetry as escapism from the contentions within and around him. He was one of the judges for the 2016 Green Authors Prize (GAP) sponsored by Words Rhymes and Rhythms. Some of his poems have appeared in *Mojave Heart*, *Burning House Press*, *Isacoustics*, *Brittle Paper*, *WRR* and elsewhere. He is the author of *Meditations* (WRR, 2016), a collection of poems.

Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu is a poet and essayist from Nigeria, whose work has appeared online and in print on platforms such as *Popula*, *Ake Review*, *After the Pause* journal, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Brittle Paper*, *Eunoia Review*, *Selves* anthology, *Afridiastora* and elsewhere. She's currently rounding up a law degree.

Ianne is a genderqueer South African writer. They resist power (and its many masks) from a position of whiteness. They have an M.A. in African Literature and are undertaking an MFA in Creative Writing in the near future. Ianne is 26 years old and resides in rural South Africa, with a giant dog named Fitzgerald, where they run a reading and literacy program at an Education Intervention Centre. Ianne stands for a continent that contains a radically different future in its queer presents. Their spells against sadness include black coffee, dancing badly to hip-hop and burning agarbathi.

Isabelle Baafi is a 27-year-old female writer of Jamaican and South African descent. Her works have been published in *Allegro*, *Moko Magazine*, *Litro*, *Kalahari Review* and elsewhere. She has performed at the Battersea Arts Centre. She was recently admitted to the London Library's Emerging Writers Programme. She is currently working on her debut poetry collection.

Jay Kophy is a 23-year-old Ghanaian poet and writer. His poems have featured in literary magazines such as *kpodola*, *Kalahari Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Tampered Press* and many others. His debut pamphlet *By the Fireside* was published by Libros Agency in 2018. His most recent project is curating *to grow in two bodies*, a collection of poems and short stories from 35 poets and writers. You can follow his works on Twitter @jay_kophy.

Kondwa Rayne (née Thawethe), born in Zambia, separated from Zambia's colonial rule by one generation, grew up on the shores of Dar Es Salaam and the bustling metropolis of London. As an adult, she has settled in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom. As a young girl, she found solace in words, an avid reader and writer. Now 25 and having completed her formal postgraduate education, she is continuing her informal education in earnest, seeking to see the world as it was, as it is and as it could be, and ever attempting to capture it in poetry. Her work can be found on instagram @krwriting

Kopano Maroga is a performance artist, writer, and cultural worker. They are the co-founder of the dance, movement and embodied politics publication and performance platform *ANY BODY ZINE* (anybodyzine.org.za). They are currently pursuing their masters in Live Art, Interdisciplinary and Public Art through the Institute for Creative Arts at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. They very much believe in the power of love as a weapon of mass construction.

Maneo Refiloe Mohale is a South African editor, feminist writer and poet. Her work has appeared in various local and international publications, including *Jalada*, *Prufrock*, *The Beautiful Project*, *The Mail & Guardian*, *spectrum.za*, and others. She is a 2016 Bitch Media Global Feminism Fellow, and has been longlisted twice for the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology Award. Her debut anthology of poetry, *Everything is a Deathly Flower* will be published with uHlanga Press in September 2019.

Megan Ross was born in Johannesburg in 1989. She is the author of *Milk Fever*, a collection of poetry published by uHlanga in 2018, as well as several short stories and works of nonfiction. Megan is the 2017 winner of the Brittle Paper Award for Fiction, an Iceland Writers Retreat Alumnus. She is a runner-up of the Short Story Day Africa and Short Sharp Award prizes. Her

works have been featured in *Catapult*, *GQ*, *Glamour*, *Mail and Guardian*, and *Prufrock*. Megan works as a graphic designer, art director, and journalist. In her free time, she travels, plays football with her four-year-old son, and swims in the sea. She lives on the Wild Coast with her partner and child.

Momtaza Mehri is a poet and essayist. She is the co-winner of the 2018 Brunel International African Poetry Prize. Her work has been widely anthologized and has appeared in *Granta*, *Artforum*, *Poetry International*, BBC Radio 4, *Vogue* and *Real Life Mag*. She is the former Young People's Laureate for London and columnist-in-residence at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's *Open Space*. Her chapbook *sugah lump prayer* was published in 2017.

Nadra Mabrouk, born in Cairo, Egypt, is a poet living in New York. She is the recipient of the 2019 Brunel International African Poetry Prize. She holds a Master of Fine Arts from the New York University Creative Writing Program, where she was a Goldwater Fellow. Her work has appeared in *POETRY*, *RHINO*, *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 3: Halal If You Hear Me* (Haymarket Books, 2019), among other publications. She is the author of the chapbook, *How Things Tasted When We Were Young* (Finishing Line Press, 2016). Currently, she is a content intern for The Academy of American Poets.

Nermeen Hegazi is a twenty-nine-year-old Egyptian. She enjoys writing, food, taking pictures, cuddling with cats, discussing critical theory, and reading novels and non-fiction. While she doesn't write as often as she would like, some of her poetry and prose pieces have been published in the Egyptian literary journal *Rowayat*, *Mada Masr* – an Egyptian news site, and a collective online writing blog called *The Clairvoyance Collective*. She recently obtained an M.A. in postcolonial literature from Alexandria University, Egypt.

Nome Emeka Patrick (b. 1996) is a blxck bxy and student in the University of Benin, Nigeria, where he studies English language and literature. A recipient of the Festus Iyayi Award for Excellence for Poetry in 2018, his works have been published or forthcoming in *POETRY*, *Poet Lore*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The McNeese review*, and elsewhere. His manuscript "We Need New Moses. Or New Luther King" was a finalist for the 2018 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets. Alongside, Itiola Jones, he is currently guest-editing Nigerian Young Poets Anthology. He lives in a small room close to banana trees and bird songs in Benin city, where he writes and studies for his final exams in the University.

Oubah Osman is a Somali poet from Djibouti and Ethiopia. She has been published or is forthcoming in *CV2*, *Room*, *The Puritan and Unpublished City Volume 2*. She is an MFA candidate at the University of Guelph and is currently living and working in Toronto, Canada.

Oyin Olalekan is a Nigerian-born, 25-year-old poet, screenwriter, and filmmaker. Her solo exhibition *Speaking (in Tongues)* was followed by an appearance of her work in the Sawubona Project in Toronto. She is a Winter Tangerine Fellow and was selected as an Emerging Director by the Doc Institute's New Visions Program. Her forthcoming documentary short film, *Kitchen Talks*, will be her directorial debut. She holds an M.A. in Media Production from Ryerson University and is always reaching for the next story to tell: @okay.oyin.

Precious Okpechi is a 20-year-old Nigerian. He studies Biochemistry at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Brittle Paper*, *Nthanda Review*, *Praxis Magazine*. He is currently the Custodian of The Writers Community, UNN – a small community of writers in Nsukka.

Rotimi Robert is a Nigerian poet and prose writer. He's male and 22 years old. His works have appeared in his head, little books he keeps dismissing then looking for, and the note app on his phone. He has a soft spot for subtexts, and contemporary Chinese and Indian poetry. His chapbook *Bipolar Sunshine* was selected for the Praxis 2019-2020 Poetry Chapbook Series. His ambition is handicapped by laziness, regardless, when the mood hits, he writes about people, identity, family, loss, friendship, oppression, Yeye...

Saddiq Dzukogi is the author of *Inside the Flower Room*, selected by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani for the APBF New Generation African Poets Chapbook Series. His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *Oxford Review of Books*, *Poetry Society of America*, *Gulf Coast*, *African American Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Verse Daily*. He has won fellowships from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Ebedi International Writers Residency.

Sara Elkamel, born in Cairo, Egypt in 1990, is a female journalist and poet. She holds an M.A. in arts and culture journalism from Columbia University and is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in poetry at New York University. Her poems have appeared in *The Common*, *The Rumpus*, *American Chordata*, *Winter Tangerine*, *Nimrod International Journal*, as part of the anthology "Halal If You Here Me," (Haymarket Books, 2019), and elsewhere.

Sibulelo Manamatela, 23, is a poet from South Africa. Her poems can be found in *Best 'New' African Poets 2018*, *Sol Plaatjie European Union Poetry Anthology Vol. VIII, Type/Cast Issue 5*, *Poetry Potion 013*, and elsewhere. She is currently pursuing a degree in Creative Writing.

Sihle Ntuli is a 29-year-old South African writer, born in Kwa-Mashu. Ntuli has had poetry published in *Agbowo*, *New Coin* and *Saraba Magazine* amongst others. He holds a masters degree in Classical Civilizations from Rhodes University in Makhanda. As a former lecturer at the University of the Free State, Ntuli is the current holder of the 2019 Innovation Award for Curriculum Design and Delivery.

Sinaso Mxakaza is 28-year-old South African writer. She started writing in 2008 inspired by her love for books. Her poems are about healing, change, and finding one's voice in the world. Her works have been published in *Poetry Potion*, *Ja Mag SA*, *Agbowo*, *Nthanda Review*, *Writers Space Africa*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Next Generation Speaks Global Youth Anthology*, *Africa, UK, and Ireland: Writing Politics and Knowledge Production Vol.1*, and *Best 'New' African Poets 2018*. She was longlisted for the Sol Plaatjie European Award and the first runner up in the Creative Freelance Writerz competition 2018.

Ugochi Okafor is a 20-year-old female who writes from Delta State, Nigeria. She likes to engage in discussions with herself – she thinks she understands better. Her works have appeared in *The Kalahari Review*, *African Writer* and in two anthologies on *Brittle Paper*, namely *Enter Naija: A Book of Places* and *VLS "Valentine's Day" Anthology*. She enjoys travelling.