

2035  
AFRICA

*"These poems are far from singular in their aesthetic ambitions and they reveal an unwavering attentiveness to everything from personal hurt to the symbolism of plants. But what may yet constitute this anthology's true value are all these magnificent signs of listening before telling"*

Tjawangwa Dema

An Anthology of  
Contemporary  
Poetry

*volume iii*

GUEST-EDITED BY:  
I.S Jones & Cheswayo Mphanza

20.35  
AFRICA

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*Contact:*

[info@2035africa.org](mailto:info@2035africa.org)

Both considered and contemporary, this is promising and exciting verse that gestures to place, language, and movement. Between these pages English is global and plural, and both literary and literal landscapes are determined from within.

These poems live, as all poems do, in language, but they are also alive too and not distanced from the everyday and the local. They leap from “the country running behind my feet,” to the “blue miracle” of water, even as they consider what speech signifies when we choose to say: “merci / thank you / ... and never / shukran.” Some of the contributing poets such as Clifton Gachagua, Hiwot Adilow and Busisiwe Mahlangu may be familiar to readers but perhaps this third anthology of African poets between the ages of 20 and 35 has achieved exactly what it ought to: offering us an engaging, insightful and imaginative introduction to continentally and globally new voices. These twenty-three poets rise to the occasion with preoccupations as disparate and connected as one would hope for from any collection featuring a perceptive and keenly intelligent coterie.

Across the collection, history is made as personal as it is national, home is both longed for and interrogated, languages are cajoled and questioned, and love shows its many faces as intimacy, as inter-generational memory and as worship. Poetry’s old friend “Grief” underwrites large swaths of this anthology. Even as they eat and archive, wait and agitate, these poets are not afraid to reflect on the place and moment they are in, proclaiming that “Geometry has put our home at the centre of the world: Grief’s Capitol. & suddenly / All the flowers are sick.”

These poems are far from singular in their aesthetic ambitions and they reveal an unwavering attentiveness to everything from personal hurt to the symbolism of plants. But what may yet constitute this anthology’s true value are all these magnificent signs of listening before telling.

– **Tjawangwa Dema**

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## Introduction

With the influx of poetry being written by Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora, it has been said before: this is an exciting time for African poetry. I (Itiola) am honoured to have a hand in curating some of the best work of our contemporaries alongside Cheswayo Mphanza. 20.35 Africa has prevailed into its third volume because it continues to trouble the pervasive narrative that there is only one way to be an African writer. Like any good anthology, this is a living collection as alive as the writers whose work comes together to create this cohesive body. Volume three of 20.35 Africa serves as a timestamp for the urgency of contemporary African Letters. Questions about God, loss, intimacy, shame, love, home are at the forefront of these poems. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the elephant in the room. Where we are in the world at the moment is surely a strange time. A global pandemic is amidst that has claimed the lives of over 100K people and countries are protesting sanctioned state violence. With so many failures in governments around the world, living for a lot of people has also become its own type of tragedy. All the ills of the world that we have known (famine, poverty, and so forth) have become greatly exacerbated by the lack of resources which are leaving people to become even more desperate. This isn't a scene from Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, I (Cheswayo) am paraphrasing, but this is the state of our current world. The more I keep reading Butler, the more I realize literature has already predicted this. More so, it has examined that the solutions we are going to need to weather this storm during and post COVID-19. In this way, literature is a window into the fragile thing we have constructed and called "humanity." Perhaps more than ever, this is why the third volume of 20.35 Africa is a necessity.

The poems we have chosen for this anthology are works of that essence. We suspect the poems written in this anthology were written well before the pandemic, but how timely they are is an eerie reminder of how these particular poets are soothsayers. That what we do as writers is



prophesize. These poets range from a vast experience of the African diaspora, but from the outset they make clear that terms like diaspora or home are not to be romanticized but critiqued for the many multitudes they contain. Such multitudes range from violence, piousness, love, apathy, rituals and traditions. What remains outstanding from what was started in the first volume of this anthology is the singularity the poets maintain. What this shows for the present condition and what we hope to be the future of African poetry is that the time is now to insist upon our voices being amplified. From poems that channel metaphysics into their dialectics to poems that speak of living in exile from one's own country, the veracity shown in these poems and poets stem from both intellect as well as craft.

I (Cheswayo) read Abdulrahim Hussani's "Poem At Twenty-Four," which is an engagement with Sonia Sanchez's "Poem at Thirty," that tethers two Black diasporas into a singularity where the speaker asserts rather than waits for permission to will themselves into a voice:

perhaps I should begin by telling you about the night  
but I'm six long, long miles away  
bewildered, traveling in a boulevard of dead bodies  
and merrying vultures –  
a quadrant, where lies the rest of me.

The aside of death – the violence of it from the speaker's voice beckons a thought of the passiveness of this violence, but as the speaker shows throughout the poem – there is still control in the self. And this moment in the poem becomes further examined by Nwaoha Chibuzo Anthony in their poem "Ellipsis" when he writes:

We all have excuses for being born in a graveyard of living corpses  
but we cry every morning, singing melodies of ancient folktales,  
dreaming ourselves into thorny floors of stolen images.

Both these poets show the transitory nature of things. A type of impermanence where we as readers are to find beauty and longing that we know we cannot hold on to. And so, these poets push us to think further of the idea of nationhood notably in Dalia Elhassan's poem "Conversations About Home" which positions itself in the space of lineage, being written after Somali poet, Warsan Shire. A poem governed by dropped lines as well as line breaks that pulls its readers from one striking image to the next, Elhassan takes us between countries, moves us from the ethereal to the immediate. As the poem continues its journey, Elhassan's work shows us "home" is not always a place, but those we are lucky enough to call "our people":

        i wave  
a flag with their faces on it,  
  
the closest thing to home  
        looks like an immigrant,  
  
like the creases in my father's face,  
        like the sunset touching miami,  
  
like every mural of malcolm x  
        in every diasporic city.  
  
i never asked to leave, they took me.  
        feels like i'm every nation's castaway.

Hiwot Adilow's "RED" weaves an intricate narrative about her father and the artifacts that connect her to the memory of him. Stanley Princewell McDaniel's "Like Light Moving Across Oblivion" negotiates a single body containing multiple selves and surrendering to the great eventual quiet. The single binding thread of the aforementioned poems and all the works that grace this anthology is their insistence to confront the human condition in all its complicated, beautiful, nuanced glory. These poems and others here are a testimony to the strength to the growing legacy of this critical anthology. As 20.35 Africa's reach stretches on, these poems set

a precedent for what is boundless in African Letters. The future of what is possible is brighter because we are and continue to make space for our people to flourish.

Yours in Letters,

**I.S. Jones**  
**Cheswayo Mphanza**



## Conversation About Home – *Dalia Elhassan*

*after warsan*

at a gathering i laugh and say

i don't believe in nationalism.

the first time i go to sudan

i arrive on a travel document,

green like the mountains

i've never seen,

green like the second layer

of the red sea.

i'm in a boat with my family

five miles off the coast,

my cousins point to the ranges

beneath the surface

& i think myself to be a mermaid,

otherworldly, like the feeling i felt

the first time my family meets me

not in sudan,

not even at the border, but in cairo,

on a boat just like this one

my hands, skin older,

still grazing the water.

i thought myself to be a mermaid then, too,

but not like the little mermaid,

like her darker sister with the black hair

like the women on my mother's

side of the family. i wave

a flag with their faces on it,

the closest thing to home

looks like an immigrant,

like the creases in my father's face,

like the sunset touching miami,

like every mural of malcolm x

in every diasporic city.

i never asked to leave, they took me.

feels like i'm every nation's castaway.

mark of my mother's prayers.

i sing songs to myself

in a dialect of arabic

i'm constantly defending.

i liberate myself in a dialect

i'm still defending.

even though the flag has failed me

i am still raising it.

## **The Fear You Feed Us Breaks Our Wings – *Alain Hirwa Jules***

*“I praise no nation.” – Ilya Kaminski*

to the country running behind my feet  
cupping its hands to trap my butterflies  
& break their wings  
those travellers of a world  
which knows no border

the grief you left in the wingless butterfly  
was so wide it could sink a ship

I didn't know  
being born in some places is a life sentence

until my friend said  
the president is so cruel his speeches  
remind him of borders

I had a dream  
I was a citizen of the sky  
until a man died in police custody  
and his country denied the international community  
from carrying out its own investigations

this is how  
a thousand old men  
opening their rotting mouths  
tiptoed back into the prisons they built out of silence



now they hide their conversations under the roof of the night

a cloak of invisibility which

the city puts on

to survive the chopping of wings

which my country is set to do to all flying beings

## On Miracles – *Ernest Ogunyemi*

I tender my palms to the wind, waiting the drop of a bird,  
& I lay my ears down for music.    meanwhile, a boy sits by  
his mother's grave, clutching a Bible & a pen. flipping through  
the pages, he turns to the verse where Christ asked Lazarus  
to come forth. here, he takes the pen & carves out the name  
of Lazarus. he writes his mother's name on a slip of paper,  
takes the paper to his mouth, paints it with his spittle & glues it  
to the place where Lazarus' name once was, so that the verse  
reads: *[insert his mother's name] come forth* – & the boy waits, for  
a miracle. but the earth is heartless, it won't spit out its dead,  
& faith, like God, fails us sometimes.    for a moment, I wonder  
who invented grief. then I think grief is not the problem, really,  
the problem is that the maker forgot to make a cure. or maybe  
grief is not an arrow meant to carve a hole in the chest, maybe  
it is a kind of cleansing – the boy is still on his knees, waiting  
by the Bible, placed next to his mother's grave, waiting a miracle.  
but nothing is happening. the world won't amend its laws because  
of one little boy's heart's desire, & I don't think it will because  
of two's or a hundred's. however, the sky must know what grief can  
grow on the chest, & it must share a heart with the boy,  
it loosens just as the body of water the boy's body has carried this long  
breaks, just as saltwater spills everywhere like rain, the sky's loosening.  
the boy is sticking his small hands in his mother's grave, scooping  
sand, scooping, scooping. I wonder why, perhaps to harvest his mother's bones.  
the rain keeps filling every hole he has emptied.    & here, my hands,  
they are still waiting a bird for the hunger, & my ears still crave the bloom  
of a piano ballad. but the birds, fearing the rain, have fled the sky, & no one

but the grief-possessed boy is in sight. what if god's answers to our prayers  
come in undreamed packages, what if miracles aren't always how we spend nights  
painting them – my palms, still tendered, now filled with rainwater, I bury  
my face in them & drink, & the strings of rain hitting the pavement, is this not  
music enough? *dance with me*, I say to the boy mourning what he cannot save.

## **Impossible – *Ernest Ogunyemi***

desire is a delicate thing. & sometimes  
a dangerous thing. it could heal wounds, but also

open fresh eyes in the body. a man once offered  
his palms to the sky to kill thirst, & was buried by

the sea. another man, finding food for his belly,  
walked into a forest to hunt game. crouched atop

a tree, he sighted an antelope in an okra farm –  
he fired, only to find the bullet burning in the body

of his woman. every time I have dreamed myself in-  
side a shawl-soft boy, it has ended with beauty bruised:

my body translates to a smoking house, his  
body: a mug filled with cold water & ash

## God's Easiest Wrath is Absence – *Adedayo Agarau*

I know this because I live in a body that is drowning  
I spend eternity learning where birds sleep, sky or nests,  
the road to peace is where a bullet splits open  
the cerebellum of my friend, my mother throws herself  
at the train, they say it is madness, I say it is knowing  
when to jump into a fire, and when to jump out  
a cigarette burns out and the flames go home  
a man sings to his children, I imagine my father  
distant like cities buried inside a throat  
we still would be drowning if the earth was turned upside down  
I take the first pill today, the doctor says my dreams  
will come like a stranger, I scream out of a dream again,  
my body a bead of sweat, my body a bead of sweat  
in the last poem I wrote, I killed a bird, in this one,  
an owl tells me my name, says the street where I grew  
a bean, my first crush turned a coin into a cowry  
I breathe into this room, my bed warm enough to bless an egg  
I dream of my mother throwing herself at a train, her head  
a blend of chronic depression, my overwhelmed sister shouts, *oh my God,*  
*oh my God, oh my God, oh my God*  
again, a drunk father didn't make it home early

## Portrait Titled After My Father's Absence – *Dalia Elhassan*

when i was 13, i asked my father to tell me the story of his life & he did not look up from the bone he was polishing with his teeth when he named a year: 1989. he was a young man in amreeka for the first time, first of his name to uproot the soil that raised him & 1989 was nyc, meeting winter for the first time, sleeping on an attic floor, & i take down the details furiously: the ice that gathered on & flattened his afro, eyes that slowly lost their warmth, button down short sleeve & corduroy pants, my father not yet my father unhappy & alone in this country that did not forgive him or his father or his father or his father for their existence pride his only faith, years of watching sun become moon then sun again, of snow that revealed what it meant to be white and the english he picked up is not the english of a colonial school back home but a dialect easily mistaken as improper, dialect that turns and twists until tongue cannot tell native from foreign & i take this all in, note the details he does not mention - the failed marriage to my mother & four kids he did not mind loss of vision & ability feeling in his right knee diabetes & the medication loss of nation-state of omdurman of what it means to truly be at home of father of self lost, the only thing he feels the only thing he is to me

## **Red – *Hiwot Adilow***

let me not forget the cliché scents  
of my dad, all red: cowboy killers  
on his hip, old spice, his phillies cap  
faded and stained with sweat, arab  
oils on his wrists, wot my mother  
cooked clinging to his hands.  
i want to remember his dimples,  
how he'd pour red label into oj  
and say all the ladies used to kiss  
me here and here in the morning  
i'd sit at his bedside and listen  
to his dreams of phantom children  
crawling beside me on crimson carpet  
he wanted a dozen sons  
when the house was bright  
before time covered it in dust  
i peel back my own scabs to pluck  
memories from my waning brain  
shotgun, i stare while he steers,  
his left hand still alive, he drums  
some tizita out on the wheel  
while he drives to kaffa  
he says: daughter, do you know  
where you are? in a pink shirt  
his cane clicks thru the present,  
he invites me for a tour of his new  
kingdom :: fluorescent buzz, death

behind a curtain screamed for help,  
grunting while he yells threats,  
tells the sick to shut the up  
uses his good arm to rise, to guide  
me past a staff of daughters  
who smile and call him papi,  
they call me pretty, and finally  
he says, of course this is my last  
drop, my baby, he walks with me  
slowly to the door, i don't want  
to let go or say i love you,  
when he shows me out,  
when he says stay good  
instead of goodbye



## Other Ways of Saying – *Nour Kamel*

after “Glossary” by Safia Elhillo

ya nihar azra2

oh blue day

from sacre bleu

meaning

the french were here

ragel lousy!

that guy’s lousy!

from the british

meaning

they said it to us, often

7ewar over shwaya

it’s a bit over (the top)

from some tv show

meaning

I don’t know which is which

merci

thank you

from a lady’s mouth

and never

shukran

farang

the whites

here, there, colonized everywhere

meaning

whiteness, us less

a mind chokes on

two words (at least)

and wonders why

nothing

ever comes out too good

## **Hysteria – *Hiwot Adilow***

I'm problematic, I'm toxic,  
I appropriate white culture,  
I rock sneakers 'til they talk,  
I wear flip flops in October.  
When it's 50 degrees out,  
I'm four, five seconds from  
catching a coochie cold  
all cuz I'm getting drunk  
just to trick my body  
to believe it's warm.  
It's that nordic shit.  
Somewhere, deep down,  
I am part neanderthal,  
therefore, it is not wrong  
for me to live my best  
caucasoid life: a murderer,  
his wife, licking knives,  
pointing out men I wish  
to be lynched. I am a witch  
because I want to talk nonstop  
and make niggas drop.  
Train hopping beside 9 bucks,  
my girlfriend and I decide  
to pickup tricks from  
amongst the vagrants.  
I play my part, scream  
so loud with thrill I lose

my wits, it's wet everywhere,  
kids drip down my thigh  
and I consider  
what I've always been  
guilty of, since I was Helen,  
since my fathers invented Hell.  
I can't cock a gun 'cause I'm  
a debutant counting coins,  
wincing when lil nigger  
fingers touch my hand.

## **Her Bag of Vegetables – Opeyemi Rasak-Oyadiran**

My mother's hands on the kitchen counter, the way she gathers and cuts through spinach like a slippery dream. A reaper's symphony of green.

How she stops every three-fifth of a minute to slip her fingers through the mound, grab a handful and then let it fall slowly back into the tray like a bridesmaid testing confetti.

I would sit on a little stool where my grandmother had once sat to rein my arms back with sturdy thighs while she poured some vile medicine down my throat. My head angled oddly, still in protest to the tight cornrows on it.

This is where we meet, mother and I. She with her trays and array of knives: cleaver, spear point, serrated blade, the ones still in their casings on the wall. Chopping, slicing, scrapping and I sitting on my little stool, watching, translating.

The day father died and they took him away, his eyes wide open, mirroring the shock in mine, Mother chopped. Carrots, lettuce, even ginger that she didn't like. She had arched her back and rolled her shoulders intermittently, the rhythm of a fish gliding through water.

The morning we woke up and found that my brother had left, she had gone out and returned with a bag full of vegetables. That night, she bathed me with herself and we slept in my bed. When it was morning again and she found me downstairs trying to silently open the front door, she said nothing.

Now, we still say nothing. She's still cutting, still chopping. I'm listening.

## **Hiding Place – *Busisiwe Mahlangu***

i

How many mouths can you trust with your name?

How many hands can you trust with your body?

ii

I remember you shrunk

Crumbling when words became stones

They hit your knock-knees and stopped the kissing

You learnt to walk like you're falling apart

iii

You make a wish on your face

You pop a zit

You scar yourself to measure the time healing takes

After years of scratching pimples, you know

Calling your skin ugly

will not make it go away

iv

The advert on the television

said, "give us your scars, we will drown them"

You tucked your cellulite in a jean

wrapped a scarf around your chest

You went to the shop

and bought Bio-Oil under disguise

v

There is always someone suggesting a way to fix yourself

There is a way to make tummy-rolls roll off you

There is a way to burn the bulge under your arm

There is a way to cut your hips

There is a bra that can hold your breasts to your chin

All these people think you want to exit your body

vi

You can start running

from all the mouths that want to swallow your body like a fault

You can start running

from yourself when you are holding a spade to collapse the fault

Remember that you own one body

This is not a suggestion

vii

How many parts of you do you let your mouth speak?

How many parts of you do you let your hands hold?

viii

Once, you could fit your whole body in a hand

Where do you go to carry yourself now?

## **Poem At Twenty-Four – *Abdulrahim Hussani***

*After Sonia Sanchez's "Poem At Thirty"*

perhaps I should begin by telling you about the night  
but I'm six long, long miles away  
bewildered, traveling in a boulevard of dead bodies  
and merrying vultures –  
a quadrant, where lies the rest of me.  
But I can tell you of the dreams  
the real ones that found sloughs to dwell in  
away from the cold of their own terrain  
watching indifferently, the shivering bodies of their own occupants  
I'm climbing out the splintered piece of a shipwreck  
my eyes finding its tears, how did I survive?  
how did I survive the deluge  
I thought I too fell with the resigned bodies  
Fell. Who picked me up from this dream  
who ruined me so  
who dragged me away from the confines of my own blue miracle  
my father is dead, long, long time ago  
my mother enthralled in trauma  
my shadow, my closest ally, forsakes me in the dark  
I reach for my father's hand in the curtains  
I think of love as a straw guiding me down a steep hill  
I think of joy and happiness  
as twined helixes too crooked for my mind  
I think of this fire as magical claws  
leaving incurable bruises in their wake  
I think of many things that stink like blood clots unmopped



I reach for his hand in the curtains  
guide me, guide me through the lengthy hunger, fire and desolation  
through the tongue's pestilence, anger and betrayal  
guide me, I'm six long, long miles away  
from encountering the girl on that couch  
who holds the manual for overcoming fear and resentment  
from being afraid no more of the night  
from having no use for a shadow that abandons me in the dark  
from falling in love with dust clinging to my feet  
from finally letting the sun find space in my eyes  
even though I don't know where I go from there

## **Lamentations of a Wanderer – *Victor Enite Abu***

### PART I

I was warned not  
To wander too far  
To the places where  
The flesh is ripped open to reveal our skeletons

### PART II

Could I have known that in the dark corners of a building  
In the chaos of music and swinging hips  
In the cloud of smoke and streams of liquor  
I'd find meaning

### PART III

At the bottom of each drop of liquor  
In the last whiff of smoke  
And the warmth of a maiden  
I'd find the emptiness I tried to escape from.

## **Banach-Tarski/Suddenly – *Akpa Arinzechukwu***

The day breaks like all breakable things:

It was like that when Young Cub wrapped it up.

A boy opened his hands to pray, became a prayer instead.

Pandora's box. Dad unsettles us in a grid of eights & fives.

One goes. The house is the house, still. & suddenly,

Prometheus has no hands to wipe his own tears.

There's one more forever room with no occupant. Upon all our efforts grasses grow  
at someone's nightstand. Corked lager, unlit cigarette. Suddenly, it is cold.

Geometry has put our home at the centre of the world: Grief's Capitol. & suddenly

All the flowers are sick, we are not sure who to not save.

It is very cold this morning. The house calls

A roundtable. If we don't eat, forgetting will be

Hard a thing. Which doesn't mean that in the country

Of the bereaved we eat to forget.

We are mere observers, witnessing tradition: a long line

of trauma. Ah Lord please take our silence, send us back the soured prayer.

Let the soup be both the house & the arguments.

Fill a boy with longing.

Bless a mother to sleep well tonight.

## **Sickle Cell is the New Tribe – *Jeremy Karn***

*for bijoux*

you've heard about flowers that grow in the dirt.

there are flowers with thorns that grow in the bones & some that grow  
in your aunt's backyard garden

every morning as you fix your bones & dress for the war on your  
tongue; to look for the new body advertised on the TV last night

your mother would say,

you've learnt how to overcome the fear that's wrapped around your  
ankle, you've learnt how to sneeze with your eyes open,

& how to say a prayer for the little things that are starting to eat the  
large things inside you,

there are sicknesses as old as time, there is a tribe as new as the pain your body invented,  
and there are rivers that were once here but have now dragged themselves into your eyes

last night you took your sister to the other side of the room and said, this is where i am from  
showing her a hospital picture you screenshot in your phone

there are some wars we fight with others and there are some wars we  
fight alone...

when the night folds itself with the tablecloth & your body gets flooded  
with your tears,

what will happen when your body becomes an empty  
house where children run around laughing loudly?

there will be someone who will set god down in a dark room  
and interrogate him about his likeness

or say maybe God has sickle cell like you

## **Ellipsis – *Nwaoha Chibuzor Anthony***

*We all have excuses for praying to the gods to fill our broken frames with ellipsis and dots*

but we are silhouettes hoping to come alive from the light of the moon.

My mother once told me to be cautious of headless creatures offering me crowns,

for I shall run into homes eating faces barefooted and with naked tears.

I remember in Orlu when the dust lured us into finding blocks to fill the blank spaces

created by the gods, but we ended up in bistros,

whispering into the *kaikai* in the cups and naming each dot of our ellipsis.

We all have excuses for being born in a graveyard of living corpses

but we cry every morning, singing melodies of ancient folktales,

dreaming ourselves into thorny floors of stolen images.

A goldsmith said to his kinsmen:

*Kill me with my sword, burn me and feed my cremains to the little ones. Perhaps, they will*

*grow up without the broken jaws of emptiness and burnt gazes.*

We are graphics drawn by a maestro during an eclipse,

pasted on every wall of a dusty street, and trying to create new kind of beauty from

the dust and sun. This is cartography.

This is how we are; we live our lives growing in the branches of things

and spend our lives trying to carve words to fill the ellipsis.

## **Half-mast In Idlib – *Agunbiade Kehinde***

i open into the chilled bones of the uncovered children in Idlib & find blooming tulips shut off in the reflection of extreme cold. hawks carrying firebricks on their beaks hover in the sky, ready to unleash terror on helpless preys. the night gets halved as the broadcast from the radio declares another series of loss. grief is no place to seek asylum when borders close & the shadows of your lost ones haunt the nights. i see women with children strapped to their backs & the lanes stretch before them. They unfurl into the mouth of extinguishers. & sometimes I wonder why the world is formed into a triangle of loss: dream drowning in large waters to meet high walls of rejection.

## **Kwa Esther #8 – *Clifton Gachagua***

the artists could be gangsters, the poets the conmen,  
we drink together in this haze, always willkommen,  
B says,

Esther's is a small space,  
with those childhood curtains our mothers loved so much,  
an old & broken radio on a stand, the air harmattan.  
a neighbor plays old bongo and we listen  
the way we have always listened,  
the conversations are odd, between friends,  
old animosities about definitions of art,  
while we all know money is what artists fight about.

I sit in a corner and drink my cham,  
I'd like some water. there's none. this is a house of men.

Esther's reminds me of my father,  
times he took my hand, showed me all those great dens  
of his glory days. he sold fantasies to a kid with no imagination.  
at least the radios worked then. Buju Banton & Capleton.

here, there's no time for memory or regret or any feelings  
of shame, or nostalgia, or experimenting. no looking back.  
to start something with someone I want to impress  
I mention I'm reading Delany's Hogg.  
but they do not speak my language.  
another shot on me, what's forty shillings between friends.



& at last, James, I come back to you,

back to the soft grace of those arms.

no matter. touch here does not exist.

you dream your dreams, I mine.

an ascension to a place that resembles homes

we have come to disagree on, like definitions

of ragga and dancehall.

**<sup>1</sup>Iriabo – Fubaraibi Benstowe**

I hear drums summoning your feet  
Into spaces where women  
Change their waists to rivers  
And youths dance vigorously  
Creating waves with their limbs.  
She comes in procession of singers,  
Barefooted woman  
Dancer submerged in music  
Swing, swing on  
The waist is praised for ripples made in the arena.

I know you must dance with the elite class  
And merge skill with passion  
I know you must greet the drummers too  
And wave them well done  
Woman, pride of my riverine clan  
You must be tired from countless steps  
From the suppressive weight of beads  
And heaps of heavy wears  
But tarry,  
Tarry, the drums are damping silence.

Noon, I hear drums clinging again into decibels  
Fast, tempest, like a starved rain  
A mass of delighted people rushes in  
Interweaving oceans and winds.

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<sup>1</sup> Iriabo: a girl or a woman undergoing the rite of womanhood

It's night, the crowd is ready,  
Ready to cheer you up, homeward.

## A Long Dance – *Clifton Gachagua*

/ I'm back in my room in a court in Umoja, Moi Drive, listening to the first line of Yasiin Bey's Supermagic. what a grand and delusional way to start my day, the first line of the Holy Book, although now it's late afternoon when the day is dead, the afternoon of a Balthus painting, when the voices of children playing outside remind you less of joy and more of the hums that haunt you as you try to find your way out of a dream maze / the antonym for my maze is not a dreamless night / the music of distant light

/ on the walls are names of flowers, and of birds. I'd like to explain why they make me smile. not the material or actual objects as they witness themselves, and not that I want to call them material, or objects, or even actual, because they do not mourn their dead, or grief, what some teach us to be... – what do the anthropologists teach us?, but that I understand in their existence they have their own ideas about language and naming and nomenclature and whatever way they chose to grief is a language I'm happy not to learn /

what I'm considering is the simplicity of the words, their Greek and Latin roots. here I curse that while other roots exist this is where I must come to. so, the words. their meanings and sounds, especially on my tongue, which carries the th and the dh as the same sound, the g and k as if they are related, the s and c as familiar cousins. I don't even know what the w sounds like because I spell it as I see it and not as anything phonetic.

when my mother first spoke to me in Sudanese Arabic and I replied in sheng I wondered if we were ever going to learn how to love each other.

here are some flowers I like – I only mean the sound of their names:

dahlia: reminds me of dania, how it was always overcooked at home. a lover in my dirty room.

Antonio: because my baptism name at age thirteen should have been Antonio but the priest, an Italian, reckoned it is no fit for a black child.

rhododendron: because I cannot pronounce it.

lobelia: makes me happy. mountain vegetation. failed geography exams.

anemone: looks nothing like it would in the sea. also reminds me of Au Revoir Simone, who I liked in Twin Peaks.

carnation: this sounds like a useless british royal ceremony, or something like when the prince has his first homosexual dream.

/ what I am is metadata, dream text. mathematics without the science. fuck roots. these names continue to mean nothing. I'm a blue, underlined link to a page of useless language / I'll love this place even when, as I ignore all the senses, the festival continues / I shall adorn my garments for the masquerade / outlast David when he danced.

## <sup>2</sup>Kunju Seghi – *Fubaraibi Benstowe*

See, the magical ripples of these waists have launched me into stars;  
The undulating moves that toss men to trance, of gazing,  
Of nodding, of smiling and wishing end would never come tapping.  
I have often swum in your music like the rest  
Yet the beats of your background songs  
Still come to me, soothing like the breeze  
And the rhythms of your accompanying drums  
Each time tinkles me to the core.

Tell me, what semblance in nature can outshine your steps?  
The dance of mangroves when the wind plays their drums?  
Or the bubble dance of boiling soup  
When the firewood plays their gongs?  
I have seen men cook thunder with their palms  
Heard strangers ask:  
“What metal springs lie within these waists?  
What grease is smeared within these loins?”

O Kunju Seghi, which father rolls  
When the net befriends a big fish  
Which a dancer performs at the dance arena  
Which the hawker gazes at and forgets to sell  
Which the sun too stares at and forgets to set  
Hear me, hear me  
This dance is bliss.

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<sup>2</sup> Kunju Seghi: an old and popular dance amongst the Ijaw people

## Touching Tips – *Jarred Thompson*

i.

When the tip of me touches the tip of you  
it is only the tip of the iceberg  
plunging deep and forgetting  
the fear of the leap off  
the highest point in the heart.

ii.

In high school we had a science project to make a Jacob's Ladder.  
We bunked school, Muhamad and I, alone at his house,  
working all morning to reach the penultimate moment: connecting  
positive to negative without any wire playing the root.  
Then a flash, a cackling pop, running like demented laughter through every bulb.  
When I looked again, the wires were gone.

I remember how instant it was: that bright bruising lick that wantswantswants –  
it promised to burn down the house.

## **If I Die, What Would My Family Write as My Biography – *Ugochukwu Damian***

1.

i am not buoyant enough to hold joy spilling from a lover's mouth. also, i eulogize my fears a lot & sometimes i am everything at the edge of my fingers. my lover holds my hands & whispers *safe* into the labyrinth of my right ear to calm the tremor dancing on my hands, but still, this revival crumbles at the foot of my demons.

2.

sometimes the frenulum underneath my tongue shrinks & fear grips my larynx until it shuts like a banged door. i want to say *see, this is where it hurts*, but i say *see*, & break down into tears as though i love to bask in consolation.

3.

outside my window, the wind blows dust & sand into my windowpane, & here, i am also a synonym for paralysis. i lie in bed all day, whirling my fears away. but last night an effeminate boy was bullied, the mob turned the street into a runway for him & filled their bellies with laughter. i sometimes imagine me as him, god knows, i would bare myself open until death finds me.

4.

if i die, what would my family write as my biography? aside education, maybe, so calm & gentle, cute & cries a lot, he holds his anger tight, even when his face turns red, he still wouldn't let go.

5.

point to a wound & watch me stutter. sometimes amnesia got nothing on me. i once forgot a razor stuck on my thigh. i once forgot myself in a chapel, found myself hours later kneeling with hands rested on the pew wondering what i was doing there.



6.

if my fear succeed, & maybe you find me in a pool or in the hands of men burning with rage  
& bliss, set me on fire & please gather my ashes between pages of my favourite book. & in my  
next world, i promise, i will come as a happy poem.

## **Ikoja (Passing) – Jubril Badmus**

This machine regulates me  
in ways;  
at times it secretes serotonin  
at certain junctures  
in the way a dial returns again  
accordingly to indicate  
passing  
like a crepuscular firefly  
awaiting twilight:

I found myself grimacing  
at your foot again, asking for  
permission into your absence.  
Should I?  
before entering –

1. Obey the purplish glow
2. master its betrayal
3. don't blink

if you do, the world is going to  
take from you and convince  
you that taking is beautiful.

A broken home or a field with  
dead bergamot nectars?

I like it better when we crawl  
on each other's voices, cenotes

of old wishes flashing by in the  
November sun.

Here is to last somberness  
before arriving.

**[This morning, in the Mirror] – *Henneh Kyereh Kwaku***

This morning, in the mirror

I saw my dead uncle. This time, he didn't have an afro  
he had grown beard, looks like he brought his afro  
to the chin & cheeks.

Of all the dead uncles, he's the one  
the aunties cry about.

Even death loved something about him  
to want him from us. Something the others didn't have  
or death just takes – like a lottery, random picks.

Death is like a lie, it never ends –  
it keeps taking in defense.

When we asked for answers  
he took another & another & another & –

until grandma asked her only living son to take/want  
his nephews as his brothers.

But that did to him what this line does to this poem.

## **The Summer My Dad Fell – *Ebuka Evans***

the summer my dad fell like a spring

I was the yellow confusion at a jigsaw

I remember my smiles were numbered

I could count happiness, my tears were

liquid, uncountable things. My brain was  
in a constant – those annoying ads that pop

up during video games. and my eyes were  
clay, his falling baked the way I saw things

last august, there was a parabellum in the sky  
not the silvery blue marsh of softness and calm

an arrow pierced my eye, my secret love for  
dark things fulfilled by a negligent cupid

in this vacuum I retrospect space in connection  
to springs and how his falling would have been

a stiff pause in mid-air while I catch my breath  
ferrying him down like loose paper.

## **The Past Tense of Country – *Tiwaladeoluwa Adekunle***

is when you leave

your own on purpose

and fracture

your name on purpose

and yield

your accent on purpose

and measure love

and halve joy

and swallow

indignities with thanks

and flail

as the bloated belly

of memories rise to the surface

## **Like Light Moving Across Oblivion – *Stanley Princewill McDaniels***

& after many lives – you, your life, that is: all the many selves  
you've laid claim to, when all the while to lay claim to one is to  
relinquish the other, others, I mean – I don't know; others which you were  
& now may have to – bird in hand, hand outstretched, I release into  
the wind –

let go by becoming fingers, the selves being air, meaning  
you have to know what it's like to be vacant, & to live your life like that,  
the place everyone leaves – that's it, that's  
my life. I have reached that point I, now, think I'm lucky enough  
to get to, & should be grateful for, as in the gratitude of the rescued –  
yes, I am the rescued; that point where, at last, blank as water,  
I know when to stop trying, & agony is simply agony: raw, red; & being  
lost is being nothing else, means no more, than being  
lost, unfindably – now grateful, grateful as I let go, let go  
of the reins.

## Contributors' Bio

**Abdulrahim Hussani** is a 25-year-old Nigerian writer. He is a graduate of Pure Chemistry from Usmanu DanFodio University, Sokoto, Nigeria. He has received several recognitions for his writings, including 2019 Poetically Written Prose Contest (winner), WRR Green Author Prize 2016 (winner), *Boston Review's* Aura Estrada 2019 Short Story Contest (finalist), 2019 ACT Award (shortlisted), Nigerian Students Poetry Prize 2019 (shortlisted), Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize 2019 (shortlisted), 2018 ANA Kano/Peace Panel Poetry Prize (winner). His works appear or are forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Praxis Magazine*, *KSR*, and *Memento: An Anthology of Contemporary Nigerian Poetry*. He is presently working on a poetry chapbook.

**Adedayo Agarau** is the author of chapbook, *Origin of Names*, selected by Chris Abani and Kwame Dawes for the New Generation African Poets chapbook box set (African Poetry Book Fund, 2020). He is a human nutritionist, documentary photographer, and author of two chapbooks, *For Boys Who Went* and *The Arrival of Rain*. Adedayo was shortlisted for the Babishai Niwe Poetry Prize in 2018, Runner up of the Sehvage Poetry Prize, 2019. Adedayo is an Assistant Editor at *Animal Heart Press*, a Contributing Editor for Poetry at *Barren Magazine* and a Poetry reader at *Feral*. His works appear or are forthcoming on *Glass Poetry*, *Mineral Lit*, *Ice Floe*, *Ghost City*, *Temz*, *Linden Avenue*, *Headway Lit*, *The Shore Poetry*, *Giallo*, and elsewhere. Adedayo is said to have curated and edited the biggest poetry anthology by Nigerian poets, *Memento: An Anthology of Contemporary Nigerian Poetry*. You can find him on Twitter @adedayo\_agarau or [agarauadedayo.com](http://agarauadedayo.com).

**Agunbiade Kehinde** is a 21-year-old Nigerian poet and campus journalist. His creative works have been featured or are forthcoming on *Vagabond City Lit*, *Kalahari Review*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Little Rose Magazine*, *MusicInAfrica*, amongst others. He studies English Literature at the department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University.

**Akpa Arinzechukwu** is a twenty-four-year-old Nigerian genderqueer. They have work in *Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Saraba*, *Transition*, *20.35 Africa: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, *The Southampton Review*, *New Contrast*, *Sou'wester*, and elsewhere. They are the author of the poetry pamphlet, *City Dwellers* (Splash of Red).

**Alain Jules Hirwa** lives and writes from Kigali, Rwanda. His works appear or are forthcoming in *Wasafari*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Lolwe*, *Jalada*, *Praxis Magazine's* *Through the Eye of a*



*Needle* chapbook series, Welter at the University of Baltimore, and elsewhere. He is starting an MFA in Poetry at Texas State University.

**Busisiwe Mahlangu** born in 1996, is a writer, performer and TEDx Speaker from Pretoria, South. Her debut collection *Surviving Loss* has been adapted and produced for theatre at the South African State Theatre as part of the Incubator programme 2018/2019. Busisiwe is currently studying for a BA in Creative Writing at the University of South Africa.

**Clifton Gachagua** is the author of *Madman at Kilifi*. He writes from Nairobi.

**Dalia Elhassan** is a Sudanese-American poet and writer based in NYC. She is the author of *In Half Light*, a chapbook in the New-Generation African Poets Series (Sita) published in collaboration with Akashic Books and the African Poetry Book Fund. She is the recipient of the Hajja Razia Sharif Sheikh Prize for nonfiction and was shortlisted for the 2018 Brunel International African Poetry Prize. Dalia can be found online @daliaelhassan .

**Ebuka Evans** is a 21-year-old male writer from Nigeria, currently pursuing a B.A. in English and Literature at the University of Nigeria. His writing touches on the deep happenings of life, depression and death mostly. His works appear or are forthcoming on *NantyGreens*, *Our Life Logs*, *Ngiga Review*, *Rigorous*, and elsewhere.

**Ernest Ogunyemi** (b. October 2000) is a writer from Nigeria. Some of his works have appeared/ forthcoming in *The Indianapolis Review*, *Yemassee*, *Glass*, *Memento: An Anthology of Contemporary Nigerian Poetry*, *Erotic Africa: The Sex Anthology*, among other places. He is an assistant editor at Counterclock, and a poetry reader at *Palette Poetry*. He is also curating *The Fire That Is Dreamed Of: The Young African Poets Anthology*. His micro-chap *my mother died & I became \_\_\_\_\_* is forthcoming from Ghost City Press.

**Fubairabi Benstowe** is a Nigerian poet born on the 4th of August 1991. He was educated at the Niger Delta University in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. His works have been published on *Praxis Magazine*, *Nigeria/South-Korea Poetry anthology*, *Mariner ANA Bayelsa State Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere. In 2014, he was shortlisted for the Africa-Wide BN Poetry Award, and in 2016 was longlisted for the same award. He was a guest poet at the Ake Art and Book Festival in Ogun State, Nigeria in 2014 and the First runner-up in the Eriata Eribhabor Poetry Prize in 2014. In 2018, Africans in the Diaspora listed him as a role model. He is presently working on his debut Poetry collection, *I Dare Not Spit On Your Grave*.

**Henneh Kyereh Kwaku** is the author of *Revolution of the Scavengers*, selected by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani for the APBF New Generation African Poets Chapbook Series. He won third place for the Samira Bawumia Literature Prize in 2020. He does poems; he has poems. He is a Bachelor of Public Health, Disease Control graduate of the University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ghana. Kwaku is from Gonasua in the Bono Region of Ghana. Contact him via—Twitter/IG: @kwaku\_kyereh & Henneh Kyereh Kwaku on Facebook.

**Hiwot Adilow** is author of the chapbooks *IN THE HOUSE OF MY FATHER* (@twosylviaspress) and *PRODIGAL DAUGHTER* (@akashicbooks, @AfricanPoetryBF). She is one of the 2018 recipients of the Brunel International African Poetry Prize and has been supported by the Pink Door Retreat and Callaloo Writers Workshop. Her writing appears in *Winter Tangerine*, *Callaloo*, *The Offing*, and *Voicemail Poems*, and has been anthologized in *The BreakBeats Poets Vol 2.0: Black Girl Magic* (Haymarket Books, 2018). Hiwot earned her BA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison as part of the First Wave Hip Hop and Urban Arts Learning Community where she studied Anthropology and African Studies.

**Jarred Thompson** is a queer, mixed-raced writer, researcher, and academic. He has published poetry, fiction, and non-fiction in multiple publications, including the forthcoming *Living While Feminist Anthology*, to be published in 2020 by Kwela Books and compiled by Jennifer Thorpe. His fiction publications include *The Johannesburg Review of Books*, *ImageOutWrite* (2018), and *The Heart of The Matter* (2019) among others. His short story, “Changing I’s,” was longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and his poetry and fiction was shortlisted for the 2019 Gerald Kraak Award and Anthology. He has recently won the inaugural 2020 Afritondo Short Story Prize.

**Jeremy Karn** a 24-year-old male poet from somewhere in Liberia. He was born between 1995 and 1997 but not in 1996. He writes from his room he barely leaves. He has poems published on *African Writer*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Kalahari Review*, *Odd Magazine*, and elsewhere.

**Jubril Badmus**, 25, is a writer from southwestern Nigeria, He has lectured at the Kaduna Polytechnic. He is an avid chess player and compulsively enjoys reading essays and poetry. In reciprocating the kindness of the world, he writes as much as he can. He has served as creative director to magazines like Kaduna Institutional Press. His works have appeared in *The Weaver Press Journal*, *Nantygreens*, *Dainty Scribbles* among many others. He enjoys thought provoking arguments. He currently lives in Abuja.

**Nour Kamel** is perfectly lit and writes things from Cairo, Egypt. Their chapbook *Noon* (2019) is part of the New-Generation African Poets series and their writing is featured in *Asameena*, *Anomaly*, *Rusted Radishes*, *Khabar Keslan*, *Ikhtyar*, *Voicemail Poems*, *Sukoon* and *Closet Cases* (Et Alia Press, 2020). Kamel writes about identity, language, sexuality, queerness, gender, oppression, femininity, trauma, family, lineage, globalisation, loss and food.

**Nwaoha Chibuzor Anthony** is a Nigerian male poet who lives in Orlu, a sleepy city in the southeastern part of Nigeria. He's 21 years of age and hopes to write his continent into poems someday.

**Opeyemi Rasak Oyadiran** is a Nigerian poet and short story writer. She has works published on *Expound*, *Nantygreens*, *Praxis*, and the SankofaMag Chapbook. She is an alumnus of the 2018 Purple Hibiscus Creative Writing Workshop. She is 25 years old, lives and writes from Nigeria.

**Stanley Princewill McDaniels** is a Nigerian Poet and 2016 Ebedi International Writers' Residency fellow. His works appear or are forthcoming on *African Writer*, *Lunaris Review*, *Kalahari Review*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *Bombay Review*, *Deepwater Literary Journal*, and *The Shore Poetry*. He is a Review Correspondent at *Praxis Magazine*.

**Tiwaladeoluwa Adekunle** is a writer and graduate student from southwestern Nigeria. Her poems have been published in *Indiana Review*, *2017 Best "New" African Poets anthology*, and *Breakwater Review*. She was selected for the New York State Summer Writers Institute in 2016, and was honored to have won the 2017 Flo Gault Student poetry prize.

**Ugochukwu Damian** is a 22-year-old male Nigerian writer and poet. He was one of the 21 mentees in the second cohort of the SprinNG Fellowship, and an alumnus of the Purple Hibiscus Trust Creative Writing Workshop. In 2019, he was the 1st Runner Up in the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize. His works appear or are forthcoming on *African Writer*, *Barren Magazine*, *The Penn Review*, *The Rising Phoenix Press*, and elsewhere.

**Victor Enite Abu** resides in Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria. He is a graduate of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, where he studied Horticulture. He is a drama minister and a writer.