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AFRICA

*This is an anthology of how we might go
beyond resilience and into nurturing the
space where we are safe*

- Marwa Helal

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Contemporary
Poetry

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This year's anthology design reflects and spotlights the conflict in Congo and Palestine echoing the well-known Kuba fabric of the Congo area and Palestinian embroidery as a backdrop. The characteristic yellow of the *20.35 Africa* cover designs is accompanied by the red, green, and black that form Palestine's National flag. The granular elements pinpoint the fact that in all unrest at national and international levels, it is important to emphasize and reflect on the effect of war on each precious and innocent life lost.

– Nnenna Tochi Itanyi

Dear Readers,

Sometimes when we wonder if language is enough in times like these, we may look back on our literary forebears for guidance. We meditate on what is happening now in The Democratic Republic of Congo and return to the words of Gwendolyn Brooks: “[...] We are each other’s harvest: we are each other’s business: we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” June Jordan offers evergreen wisdom regarding Palestine when she said “[...] I was born a Black woman and now. I am become a Palestinian against the relentless laughter of evil [...].” With both The DRC and Palestine facing one of the most brutal humanitarian crisis we may witness in our lifetime, what can language even offer? A compassionate record of our dead. Calling truth to power. Arrowing us towards hope. Right now, many of our peers are putting their bodies on the line protesting for a better future. These are the times that challenge what we are made of. Audacity. Relentlessness. Community. None of us are free until we are all free. It’s Free The Congo and Free Palestine unless it’s backwards.

Yours in Letters,

The Editors

For these poets, there are more questions than answers, and there are no easy labels or solutions. Each gifts us something better: the struggle to find identities, relations, meanings, and the struggle for a language that can do heavy lifting. Many of the poems grapple with the meaning of family and connection with others, with what we can find in God and what may be needed of us to answer that call properly. In “All Those Losses” by Prosper Ifeanyi there is compassion and poignancy around a family’s past and present. Sarah Yanni writes about a father who gave up music to support his family, asks his child if she writes poems about him, which she responds “no, words / are not enough, too hard / but what I mean is there is too much aching here / and the music is too silent.” Lola Oh uses simple language to reveal the subtle relational complexities in a family in “The Fishmonger.” In Nicole Adabunu’s “God Gets Caught Sobbing Uncontrollably in His Hands,” an inversion of roles (God wracked with guilt) is sustained wonderfully, plus we get the fantastic line: “How all this blood amounts to nothing.” Many lines have stayed with me for days, and are with me as I write now. From the blunt power of Rutendo Chichaya’s “Who is allowed to breathe?”; the complex and glorious concluding image, complete with a Donne-style pun, in “Mosquito Bite” by Chinuzoke Chinuwa, to the complex world, richly on the edge of the surreal that we are almost lost in, offered by Brian Gyamfi. Please read for yourselves and take pleasure in these poets who have found their voices, and in the immense variety of ways African poetry flourishes.

– Len Verwey, *Loving the Dying*

In an ailing world, these poems are testament that the cure is in our hearts and the heart is always Africa. These are poems that travel far and wide but always find out: “every road leads to our doorknob.” Even in the face of loss, of escape, of genocide, these are poems that still find gardens to tend and hands, even burnt hands, are enlivened. This is an anthology of how we might go beyond resilience and into nurturing the space where we are safe.

– Marwa Helal, *Ante body*

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This Grasping for Hope Walks with Us

The politics of poetry lies primarily in its functionality. This is an intrinsic quality of a poem regardless of whether its atmosphere is charged politically or with internal turmoil. In writing a poem, one introduces a narrative, and this involves a risk taken first by the poet and finally by the reader. Herein lies its social function – how it’s perceived by the reader, and what becomes of this perception, how it moves and changes consequently.

At the intersection of poetry’s aesthetics and its social function is responsibility. The poet takes up this task of extending their inner and personal life and writing it in a way that accounts for the happenings of their immediate environment; they use the singular to give voice to the many. And as far as happenings and people go, variety is spice. The thing that speaks to and piques the artistic interest of one poet the most is often never the same with the next poet, even though they live in the same locale, walk the same streets, and protest the same injustices. The responsibility that a poet takes up in their creative work is one that shares intimacy with the workings of their mind.

Opening 20.35 Africa’s Volume VII is Rutendo Chichaya’s “And. And. And,” which embodies the present war and genocidal crises happening all over the world: “another day goes by, and the rubble piles, / the rising dust settles on wet bones yet to dry, / the hunger strikes on sinking stomachs, / the rift remains unfilled, graves unmarked, / and some heavy laden with names.” What this poem asks of us, which is not to betray humanity with our silence, is perhaps the most important work of taking responsibility, of calling things what they are and being loud about it: “in muting yourself, you silence / the voices under the ruins... / silence in the face of injustice is betrayal. / Death. Wounding. Displacement. / Sudan. Congo. Somalia. Mali. / Burkina Faso. Niger. Palestine.”

A sense of belonging permeates the poems in this anthology, an acceptance of one's place in a flawed world. But in speaking out about the things central to their being, the poets strip off helplessness as a consequence of such acceptance. Sarah Yanni compounds this with defiance, writing about the subtle yet open way people body-shame the persona in her poem, "At the Family Lunch, My Uncle from Egypt Says 'You've Gained Weight'": "I have the exact body of my Egyptian father, / & his mother & his mother's / brothers, a round belly & broad shoulders / which will someday disappear / nearly three years of crushed almonds / & seltzer water." And in "Adam of Abak," Chinuzoke Chinuwa raises this question: "So, if the world is different now / that I don't belong in heaven, do I have / to grow paradise alone?"

I am thinking also about how Tramaine Suubi embraces her heritage, "return[s] to our all-forgiving mother, the sea," shuns and refutes society's policing of self-expression, "i moor my self on these ssese islands, rather than wait / for my soul to sop while transoceanic, with raw ankles / lake nalubaale buoys me as i stage / a revolt against you for daring to baptize / my obsidian skin in sin, to soak my largest organ / in your guilt, i say no more / no longer will i pacify your shame, your desperate claws at absolution." Even God is held in contempt and brought to the stand in Nicole Adabunu's "God Gets Caught Sobbing Uncontrollably in His Hands": "he looked at his hands, looked / at his children's looking of him. carnage for miles, / generations, the wail of a mother swaddling / a purpled corpse, screaming against heaven / for answers. how all this blood amounts to nothing."

There is so much dissatisfaction in the world, "too much aching... / and the music is too silent," Sarah Yanni writes in "My Father Plays Five Instruments." A lot of our desires are never translated into reality as there are always things beyond our control, on a universal level, that keep us in an endless compromise of letting go or waiting for them. In Prosper Ifeanyi's "All Those Losses," the

material hurt of this compromise is made evident: “what did he wait for? / A wife who owed him a kiss, a crown from a dying / king's head, an ill child's embrace, a life after death?” At the crux of this waiting and painful letting go is the humane need to always reach for hope amid abject despair.

This grasping for hope walks with us throughout the reading of this anthology. The poems are looking at the unsettledness around them and imagining something different, something less than the present fate they are borne of. “We find ourselves / in search for freedom / rent our hearts to love / ask the last light for / a Lutheran prophecy,” writes Mariam Hassan in “How Have We Become New?” in which she ponders about memory and our need for human connections.

In “Lehare La Pelo Ya Ka,” Katleho Kano Shoro is extending hands to everyone and promising them rest; it says, “I am finally / building you a sheathe. come rest / under my tongue easy / after days of chiseling / breath.” And in the poem that ends this volume, Ezinne Igbokwe's “Today, I Spit Them Out Generously,” faith in God is what we fall back on, the ultimate hope, a light that can peel away the darkness of blindfolds: “A dead force. I fed slowly on the remains of jumbled peace. / One dull evening, a light shone down my path as I swallowed / Easing words of the scripture. Faith renewed, I climbed lofty / Heights.”

To our community, we owe a lot. In writing, a way to honor these roots is to give them voice. We honour both their glory, which is the peculiarity of their everydayness, as Damilola Omotyinbo writes in “Ìbàdàn”: “the day is not ripe yet / but a muezzin harvests it with a sickle, / spreads it on a tray & calls the world / to feast. a preacher would not bulge, / he walks past, throws punch-like sermon: / the world will end soon”; and their shared pains: “blackness in girl form is a round / and rotating emptiness / that one can hold in a disappearing / hand. / put it on the table and a hole

appears. / put it on the ground/ and a hole appears. put it in a / cup and it is no longer ‘cup,’” as Manthipe Moila writes in “Dedication.”

In this volume, the poets write and take responsibility for those in the same boat as they are and for those who are not, who are mere spectators; for little animals, for mothers who’d torch the world for their sons, fathers’ who sacrificed all for their daughters, for a self living with internal disjointedness, and for those longing through distance. These 28 poems speak of the unkindness prevailing in the world; they ask of us to have even the minutest of hope and be resilient. I hope you enjoy them as much as we the editors did.

Precious Okpechi

Managing Editor

Introduction

In this latest edition of the 20.35 Africa Anthology, we are presented with a remarkable collection of poems that navigate the intricate landscapes of contemporary African existence. These poems resonate with a profound sense of place, identity, and the continuous struggle for liberation and understanding. As you explore the pages of this anthology, you will find voices that are both fierce and tender, each offering a unique perspective on the complexities of life in Africa and the diaspora.

This year's anthology reflects a collective exploration of themes that are both deeply personal and universally resonant. The poets featured in this volume confront themes of injustice, displacement, resilience, identity, and transformation with a daring authenticity and emotional depth.

Rutendo Chichaya's "And. And. And." sets the tone for the anthology by emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the moral duty to act against oppression. The lines, "the hunger strikes on sinking stomachs, / the rift remains unfilled, graves unmarked," evoke a visceral image of suffering and unresolved grief. This poem, like many others in this collection, speaks to the relentless pursuit of liberation and the importance of raising our voices against silence. The recurring "And. And. And." underscores the ongoing and relentless nature of these struggles across various regions, including Sudan, Congo, Somalia, and Palestine.

Chinuzoke Chinuwa's poems "Adam of Abak" and "Mosquito Bite" take us on a reflective journey, exploring themes of innocence, exile, and the enduring hope found in waiting. In "Adam of Abak," the poet writes, "We woke up to winds of the Atlantic kissing / our feet, our lives so small but everything to us," capturing the juxtaposition of a vast, indifferent world and the intimate,

cherished moments of personal experience. These poems evoke a sense of longing and the quiet resilience needed to navigate the uncertain spaces of displacement.

Faith and identity are intricately woven into the fabric of this anthology. Israa Hassan's "Innocence" and "Devotion" beautifully intertwine spiritual and cultural heritage, offering a lyrical exploration of the adhan and the sacred moments that define a Muslim's journey through life. The lines, "The intentional lyrical love left him / and settled in the seashell of my ear," from "Innocence" poignantly capture the intimate and profound impact of faith on identity. The adhan, a call to prayer, symbolizes both a beginning and a return, reflecting the cyclical nature of faith and existence.

Brian Gyamfi's "F I S H H E A D" and "W H A T W I L L P E O P L E S A Y" challenge our perceptions of identity and legacy. His vivid imagery and fragmented storytelling invite readers to contemplate the multifaceted nature of self and the legacies we inherit. The line, "My grandfather visits the cardiologist on Mondays. He believes there are angels walking on his chest," from "W H A T W I L L P E O P L E S A Y" illustrates the blend of personal memory and broader cultural narratives, creating a rich, textural experience of human existence.

Transformation and healing are central to the narrative arc of this anthology. Simon Ng'uni's "Gazelles" and Tahnia Barrie's "To Call the Air a Limb" use the natural world to explore resilience and adaptation. In "Gazelles," the poet writes, "there must be wings, to carry a doe to his beloved if his feet have failed / to catch the flight of his longing," using the metaphor of wings to symbolize the continuous process of healing and self-discovery. Katleho Kano Shoro's "Lehare La Pelo Ya Ka" and "Sejo Sa Ledimo" further delve into the process of healing, depicting the poet's journey towards self-reclamation and renewal.

The complexities of love and sacrifice are poignantly captured in Jerry Ayodele’s “Longing to Suffer” and Sarah Yanni’s “My Father Plays Five Instruments.” These poems explore the deep emotional bonds between individuals, highlighting the sacrifices made in the name of love and the unspoken emotions that define familial relationships. In “Longing to Suffer,” the poet writes, “I’ve been longing to suffer / with you in the normal everyday way,” expressing a profound desire for shared experience and connection.

Isaac Parbey’s “A Balancing Act” and Goodnews Karibo’s “Portrait of Disjointed Parts” and “The Roost” offer messages of hope and perseverance. These poems reflect on the personal struggle and the journey towards self-acceptance, emphasizing the importance of resilience in the face of adversity. In “A Balancing Act,” Parbey writes, “I hope you know you deserve better. / I hope you know it's not your sins / catching up with you,” offering a message of encouragement and perseverance.

Damilola Omotoyinbo’s “Ìbàdàn” captures the vibrant life of the city, using vivid imagery to celebrate its cultural and historical significance. The lines, “seven hills beckon / the sun to a dance. two steps / forward, another to the left,” create a dynamic portrait of Ìbàdàn, reflecting the poet’s deep connection to its rhythms and people. The anthology also explores the cultural dynamics and intergenerational relationships in Lola Oh’s “The Fishmonger,” where the poet writes, “the fishmonger holds / his knife like a surgeon. removes / the bones of a fish like milk teeth.”

Nicole Adabunu’s “God Gets Caught Sobbing Uncontrollably in His Hands” presents a powerful depiction of divine sorrow and the weight of creation. The lines, “teardrops race his elbows, veining his arms / lightning. it’s a foggy sight for the angels –,” capture the intensity of divine grief, offering a poignant reflection on the human condition. Hana Meron’s “Bathsheba

Remembering” explores themes of loneliness, loss, and the cost of unraveling one’s identity and relationships, with lines like “Unmoor everything around me to grieve; / The cost of unraveling all mine to pay.”

In this anthology, we witness a convergence of voices that illuminate contemporary African realities with a raw and unflinching honesty. Each poem invites readers to step into a world of vivid imagery and profound emotion, offering new understandings and connections. This volume is a celebration of diverse experiences and the transformative power of poetry. As you read through this anthology, may you find yourself moved, challenged, and inspired by the voices within these pages. This volume is a testament to the transformative power of poetry and the resilience of the African spirit. It is a celebration of diverse experiences, a call for collective action, and a reflection on the beauty and complexity of contemporary African life.

This anthology is dedicated to the resilient people of the Congo and Palestine, and all those around the world who are fighting for freedom and justice against the forces of global imperialism. Your courage, strength, and unwavering spirit inspire us all. Through the power of words and the shared human experience, we stand in solidarity with you and your struggles. May these poems serve as a reminder of the universal quest for liberation and the enduring hope for a brighter, more just world.

Kwame Opoku-Duku

And. And. And – *Rutendo Chichaya*

another day goes by, and the rubble piles,
the rising dust settles on wet bones yet to dry,
the hunger strikes on sinking stomachs,
the rift remains unfilled, graves unmarked,
and some heavy laden with names.
still, you say you are not getting involved.

the truth is you and I
know liberation is the goal.
in muting yourself, you silence
the voices under the ruins.
in distancing yourself,
you shy away from clothing humanity.
you say you are not getting involved
but already are, for it is your duty
to treat others as worthy as yourself.

how many more must it take,
who is allowed to breathe?
some are deemed more worthy,
yet silence in the face of injustice
is betrayal.
Death. Wounding. Displacement.

Sudan. Congo. Somalia. Mali.

Burkina Faso. Niger. Palestine

And.

And.

And.

Innocence – *Isra Hassan*

4 MINUTES and 49 SECONDS

was how old I was when the satin of my father's mouth
was a salamander's length away from my becoming.

The intentional lyrical love left him
and settled in the seashell of my ear.

In balmed language, the soundscape heard
welcome child. Ergo, my intro to Allah سبحانه و تعالی

In this world, the adhan is the antidote.
It promises *listen for me and you will find them*.

My ummah.

8 MINUTES and 14 SECONDS

was how old I was when I first smiled.

After genesis, Muslims hear the adhan twice.
The birth. Then, conducted by death, the rebirth.

The adhan comes as a vision. A confession.

It washes over you. It swears to you, this

enlightenment, that your soul has, exists.

To remember: even in emptiness, there is air.

Devotion – *Isra Hassan*

Certitude stowed in geodes, stowed
in embryos, stowed in a Tribute's
uterine space. Perhaps this where
the voices of ancestors convene.

Adam of Abak – *Chinuzoke Chinuwa*

We woke up to winds of the Atlantic kissing
our feet, our lives so small but everything to us.

Here in the South, not even thunders could
match your heartbeat, you who left your old life
with nothing but a backpack.

We watched the end of the world and chose
to live with birds and trees, groping
for each other's warmth on cold nights
like Adam did with God in Eden.

So, if the world is different now
that I don't belong in Heaven, do I have
to grow Paradise alone?

Answer me, dear ghost
of my youthful lust.

You who led me here,
naked and clueless.

Mosquito Bite – *Chinuzoke Chinuwa*

There is so much to wait for in the world
and your father called it virtue, but what did he wait for?
A wife who owed him a kiss, a crown from a dying
king's head, an ill child's embrace, a life after death?
So much waiting, so you look forward to night-time
when dreams unlikely to come true are the brightest.
How much hope does it take to linger in airless spaces
because you have nowhere to go, and if you can dream
of towers, how hard can it be to fall asleep again
in the pit of your torment?
Patience is what the ancient books teach, the name of
the mother who hesitates to curse her child, the slow
decline of good times.
Patience is the waiting for an end, your loss of a friend,
the path to your drowning, the approach of your big break,
that long walk to the secret place where he kisses you and says:
I am leaving this country.
Patience is your still arm as the insects, having waited all day,
pierce your skin and draw blood, too entranced to expect their death.

All Those Losses – *Prosper Ifeanyi*

We have no use of our suffering.

A kind of forgetting my father tells me is necessary.

I am looking at a photograph of home: my mother

with her neatly chiseled nose, my father with

bad legs eaten by a bomb during the Biafran war.

There is a radio, older than any of us children,

& the one true

survivor of the war. Sometimes I listen to my

mother & father talk in the bedroom; they must love

each other so much even in their muffled cries of

things they both have lost. What can they do if not

place hearts into each other's chests?

From the picture, you can guess who first peels away

from the scenery. My mother, whose voice

chimes with heat & lead. Then my father, whose

cough and hisses escape back into his throat.

I turned to my mother's nose, it was cracked

beyond recognition. I turned to my father's bad legs,

there was something about his gait—

persistent & then dying again.

FISH HEAD – *Brian Gyamfi*

I slit a piece of hallowed bread and ate.

That afternoon, unsatisfied with the ginger-scented
pits, I bathed in cold water, stillness came.

The same stillness that paralyzed my feet at the service
where men smothered divinity.

-

The day I hosted the priest in the garden he stole a tomato.

His solitude, reminiscent of my sound. Greenthread

flowers walked out of the soil and gnawed beneath his feet.

I wanted the heat of a black tire, the whale named Furnace

on the boat harbored by a continent I once visited,

where the devil was a place. The orange, the television,

the orange, the black-lit wires in the dark.

The priest stared into the sun – the horizon falling

into his throat. A battle between two whales broke the sea.

My own ship-eater visioned in a book. A season of birthing

without a midwife. “Get the fucking towel Paul!”

-

I slit them. Each cut smoked and flourished.

I became heaven, water flowing from flesh,

blemish-black ginger scent. The priest left the crust

and I smiled like an old man’s

house, sadden to see crumbs scattered, a hopscotch

in blur.

-

WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY – *Brian Gyamfi*

On Mondays, my grandfather visits the cardiologist. He believes there are angels walking on his chest. It's Tuesday and I'm walking home with his old heart in a jar.

At Sea World my nanny once said, "it's ridiculous to be given an old heart as if it's an object, like expensive cement, or a leg so blistered and plunging." Now she's dead.

Reincarnated as the centipede father squashed; she's dead again. This is why mother became a therapist, for people like grandfather and father. Occasionally, the clouds resemble the terrible things

I see in the lake. A stone falls from a cliff, the dog barks, and a boy cuts his thigh. I trust grandfather could see the future with the exactitude of a prophet, a magician, a witch. He could turn wars

into carnivals, hospitals into planets, sprinkle glitter on the militant helmet, the war-beating-drums, the gun barrel, a barrel of crushed eggs and salt. For a time, father hunted like a bee, and mother,

as a magician, transformed his Heineken into vinegar, winged creatures in greenbottles; doves, vultures, owls. I flip through *The New York Times* as the rainstorm begins.

The headline reads *A POET SETS HIMSELF ON FIRE AMID THE RAINSTORM*. A death atoning for God's loss. Soon father proceeds to speak of a house frequented by dead centipedes.

I think of illnesses as I watch father speak to the breeze, and mother bite her bottom lip. Outside, there's anger in the clouds and the house remains quiet. I cough and I smell my own breath,

an aged air. Father is everywhere, wandering from the kitchen to the verandah to the bedrooms, to the hallway, walls painted in blue and green, the photos telling he still lives.

"So, do you want a clean house or a heart," he murmurs. Nothing like father's hunt for bees; I do not crave honey. I will not beat on the pristine sink. Father wonders under the anemic light

excavating old personalities from his Heineken years. It's not good to see him there, flirting his way through the house as a peacock. "Your husband is okay if you are okay with your husband,"

I hear mother speak under her breath as she too watches. Tonight, the mangoes are pungent, and the rain continues to fall on the patio. The entire continent begins to flood,

and Bach can be heard on the radio. Father goes on to measure the weight of the rain to see if it's heavy like the earth. I know I have despised everything, rain and drought, night and day,

gold and sand, words and numbers. I've turned on my own organs as I watch father's memory drag itself through a thousand lanes to the verandah.

He claims, “we own the rain.” Mother no longer looks for salvation in the fantasies of churchgoers
though father continues to catch rain drops. What will people say

when they hold grandfather’s heart in a jar? What will people know when they hear mother
whimper or see father chase cars? For now, I’ll stand on the verandah and call out to the sun.

Gazelles – *Simon Ng'uni*

you move from rain to passing rain
you come onto weather
through change and coming change
you step into seasons

I tell you, for all that does not happen,
you are never the same;
sturdier in some places
callous in others

tender when you crisp and fold
as water does. rain is beating down this reed

see how there are pools on the shoulder of every other moment
these lakes brim, ebb, and echo your need to breathe
beneath the weight you carry

the ground is breaking
the earth is quaking, like this

always, looking to stand what is rooted in it
looking for things to burn.

forget the old towers
a pebble too can fell a giant

there must be wind high enough to raise this song above the mountains;
there must be waves full enough to fill the hollow which forms

the valley should the tides break

if your feet fail, there must be wings, and only such things that belong to air
to carry a doe to his beloved
to catch the flight of his longing and alight where it lodges;

and if the trees can still dance

today is as good a day as any to ~~die~~ live

To Call the Air a Limb – *Tahnia Barrie*

Blue spirit with hair of red cosmos,
Held by a ribbon of water,
Tear stream of fuchsia.

Her heart is green geometry
Become line, become stygian edge.
Sternum a tarn, a settling of light.

Copper plated and soft,
Dimpled as the saltless sea she is born of,
Her soul flows upward

Away from the shadow
We mean to tuck in her backbone
There to nighthen, to drink the color and the flight from her

Before she knows enough to call the air a limb,
And to call the limb, a wing, two,
Growing on marrow.

God Gets Caught Sobbing Uncontrollably in His Hands – *Nicole Adabunu*

teardrops race his elbows, veining his arms
lightning. It's a foggy sight for the angels –
they've never seen him like this, twitching
crooked under cloud light. he remembers the sixth
day of creation, having spent the eve dusting Adam's
rib alive, every blood knock gorgeous at the wrist.
how quickly the serpent found blush point,
the loud distance of an afterimage. so when God
saw his designs in the limp of their nakedness,
irises backed against the garden of shame,
he abandoned all tender, all father's favorite, Lord
of bloated mercy. and when he recovered
consciousness, the hot wet anger dying
beneath lungs, he looked at his hands, looked
at his children's looking of him. carnage for miles,
generations, the wail of a mother swaddling
a purpled corpse, screaming against heaven
for answers. how all this blood amounts to nothing.
and when God realized his voluntary doing, the ache
of earth's missing light, he retreated to the corner crying
pathetic, whispered whispered whispered into his wrists
monster you're a monster you're a monster a monster

you're a monster you're

In Memory of Those Who Chose the Other Sea – *Tramaine Suubi*

i moor my self on these ssese islands, rather than wait
for my soul to sop while transoceanic, with raw ankles

lake nalubaale buoys me as i stage
a revolt against you for daring to baptize

my obsidian skin in sin, to soak my largest organ
in your guilt, i say no more

no longer will i pacify your shame, your desperate claws
at absolution. take your projections & pathetic fallacy

feed those tears to the ancient crocodiles of our Nile
unblink the noble savage & uncuff the magical

negro to take back our final hour. foreign iron
evaporates from our wrists & clasping shaky hands

in reverence, we, my sisters & me, submerge
return to our all-forgiving mother, the sea

Bathsheba Remembering – *Hana Meron*

after Toni Morrison

Jerusalem glints in the gloaming;
Once more I own the rooftops of the world.

Like a candle flame he was, then wasn't.
I hear or imagine his sigh. I dip one innocent foot
into the fiery, golden pool.

Eyes rise like redolent smoke.
Hungry doesn't begin to describe.
Who can tell the shape and weight of loneliness?
Gold, grit, glossolalia.

No opening to new gods after, for
heaven owes me this one thing.
I was not perfect, Lord knows.
I needed a center to know my own circumference.

Unmoor everything around me to grieve;
The cost of unraveling all mine to pay.
There's not a man in this world I would die for,
including the Lord.
I'd burn the whole world for my son.

The Fishmonger – *Lola Oh*

in the morning, I take it off
fold back the wailing flesh
and stand outside the fish-
monger's. mom says *you can tell*
an old fish by its eyes. they sit
shallow, cloud like dust

I'm not afraid of the water
but what it makes of me. the
fishmonger wraps a trout
head in brown paper and I want
to say wait stop it can't breathe
I want to take all the fish back
to the sea where they cannot
keep change in their pockets

it's okay to want to go fishing
with your father. mom says this but
she hasn't seen the way his mouth
jams the line, how his words grow
teeth and bite through the net

no matter how I try, I can't run

away from the riddle that ends in
his laughter. the fishmonger holds
his knife like a surgeon. removes
the bones of a fish like milk teeth

I know better than to listen out
for the sea in old shells. I keep
standing at the end of the
dock with the line cast out
waiting for a fish to bite

At the Family Lunch, My Uncle from Egypt Says “You’ve Gained Weight” – Sarah Gianni

he hasn’t seen me since I was 19

a girl’s body, wild with restriction & clear liquid

never opened except for light, wrist

like crescent moon

only shadows of a whole bone

I want to say I’ve grown

say my body is that of a woman now

but this is not a woman’s problem

13 years old – my French ballet teacher

bobbed hair & caustic

told me to suck in my stomach again

& again, lower back near concave, skin un-hideable

putting her hands on my fat & I’d cry

wondering how all the other girls got tall-bone genes

lean & opulent, their dance somehow

less moving, more floating

remember wanting to say

I have the exact body of my egyptian father,

& his mother & his mother's
brothers, a round belly & broad shoulders
which will someday disappear
nearly three years of crushed almonds
& seltzer water

I will get past it, fall in false love, leave
my lover who tells me this body is incorrect
outgrow a decade of clothes
buy new ones, dance
decide I want to garden, tend

& let longing return to my bones

My Father Plays Five Instruments – Sarah Yanni

rhythm his gravity, his

this could be life

stopped in motion

at my birth, severed

his guitar strings for

a latecomer degree

still, he sang to me all childhood

composing tender songs

eluding one dream for another

in the immigrant way, loyalty

exceeding a drumbeat

all so I could be benevolent

with pen ink

and intuition, find

funding to float

in a cloister of trees

often he asks

if I write poems about him and

I say no, words

are not enough, too hard

but what I mean is

there is too much aching here

and the music is too silent

Ìbàdàn – Damilola Omotoyinbo

after JP Clark

seven hills beckon

the sun to a dance. two steps

forward, another to the left. kongas powder

their rhythm on the rusty face of Beere & Òjé.

like a blooming peduncle, Bódijà gives her arms

to the wind. bejewelled hips

of Agodi sway in joyful

abandonment. amidst the seamless blend

of Sàngo, houses with smelly

gutters cluster like beehives. here,

street children stomp their feet

with hysterical laughter. slowly,

Mókólá opens up its mouth,

the melody drowns in a pool

of honking vehicles.

the day is not ripe yet

but a muezzin harvests it with a sickle,

spreads it on a tray & calls the world

to feast. a preacher would not bulge,

he walks past, throws punch-like sermon:

the world will end soon. the world might end

now. he walks on, jagged alleys morph into neatly

paved roads, where humans in micras groan to the music

of communal misery. he walks on,

till he finds people speaking in the tongue of his

neighbor. everywhere is home.

every road leads to our doorknob.

Longing to Suffer – *Jerry K. Ayodele*

I've been longing to suffer
with you in the normal everyday way
to witness the bad in your good graces
I want nothing more than this

eyes like mine have failed
to present a more arresting glance than yours
so I must be forgiven for these forbidden wants

I've been longing to suffer
the weight of the final crush
a way to wake up to the everyday reality
that our worlds are eternally set apart

Dedication – Manthipe Moila

you come across a tweet by a white
girl your age. “three things black girls
don’t have: long hair. a boyfriend.
fathers.” you think of an unlit
candle gathering dust, of a gust
of tattered curtain lining, the absence
of a whole tooth.

you wonder at this world where
blackness in girl form is a round
and rotating emptiness
that one can hold in a disappearing
hand.

put it on the table and a hole appears.
put it on the ground
and a hole appears. put it in a
cup and it is no longer ‘cup’ but a
broken thing.

round it out even more. make it
the size of a room where there
is no one here, sitting at this desk,

writing this poem.

A Balancing Act – *Isaac Parbey*

I

I'm in awe of your complexity,
even when it reverberates like conflict,
and trickles down into despair,
you ride it like it's the wind on your back.

It's almost as if you exist in light –
When you come in and go out,
you leave no traces behind
of the threats trying to take you under.
No clues. Only assumptions.

If only they knew. Not that they matter.

Yet if I were to tell this story of a boy
who has never known a home,
about the nights he has tried to snuff his life,
what difference would it make?
He says he fears this tale of nothingness
will reach its murkiest parts and drown him.

II

I hope you know you deserve better.

I hope you know it's not your sins
catching up with you.

I hope you continue in hope.

I hope you know you're the gold in all of this,
and soon the sun won't feel like lightning on your back.

When you stand in the mirror
you won't shudder at the one who stares back.

I hope you know I'm learning to love you.

I hope you know I'm learning to find courage again;
all this trauma did a number on you, child.

Lost too many things before you could find any.

It's not a pity party, it was just the deal.

But you will be fine. It's uncertain right now.

Let's give it time.

Portrait of Disjointed Parts – *Goodnews Karibo*

the propped up edges of my life are
wobbling again. each garment of
growing trees bustling with urgency
as if made for the act, as if its darkness
learned to spread over
a scarecrow. these days, I walk
out into the fields, I give in to
the red light of the perpendicular
moon on my skin, I let the gauntlet
down, then the open threads of
sobriety, then reach for the heft of
bones pitted against each soft gush
of light. nothing blooms that is not
from a place of ruin. the birdsong
watered down by shifting mildews,
the benevolence sprouting like confetti,
the gift of whispers in the dark. how
quickly the days grow old. how
rambunctious the hands unknotting
the loop of entwined fates. I look
back at all the oceans that have
washed through me, none knows
where I was most unclean.

The Roost – *Goodnews Karibo*

you move through the cords,
naming each loop by the glimmer
of its elbow. you fondle the two
sides of the world, which are
hope and disaster. a bird suspended
by the whip of the universe.
all the rustling emptying into the
bright lake front, carpet thin against
studs of dark stars. burnt hands bleeding
through their paleness, through their
gaping devastation. you walk out of the
door enlivened as if there is an
encroachment fluting around you,
you make bold to clasp the ugly shaft
of solitude, to hunch over a small laughter
sprouting where your indignation
used to roost, to key into the soft of its fur,
the blood of its sprawling eyes

Lehare La Pelo Ya Ka – *Katleho Kano Shoro*

I am finally
building you a sheathe. come rest
under my tongue easy
after days of chiselling
breath into swords and freedom

Sejo Sa Ledimo – *Katleho Kano Shoro*

I've never met anyone who didn't

at least once

collaborate with her demons

to master cooking her own wounds

momentarily

revel in hosting a banquet

with peckish wolves

whose fangs cleave at her

medium-rare

in due course,

she clears her house of malimo

to lick herself to scars

decisively

alone

she learns the taste of her new skin's language

Damn the Prayers of Permanency – *Amina Akinola Bamidele*

1940.

The bones that carved my mother
have yielded an album
stones, sculptures. this is to say;
damn all prayers of permanency

1972.

I waded beneath the brims
of distances, how his body
once owned him, like reflections
he forbade to flee. now, he walks
with undefined stability, my father

1974.

my mother had walked too
my mother has poured away
outside her skin, her hair, stretch marks,
the joy in her breath, the strength
in her bones, and for the first time

1999.

I began counting drowning titles

at becoming an adult, or what
is living if it is not a journey
to expiration. draining bodies
in search of safety, & we call it ageing

2010.

my body harbours the doom of growth
not me. I hold my little laughter
fondly. in the beauty of the night, I wrap
around my man, he calls me sugar
this is to say; my chest is a holy temple,
still,

2020.

i am contented to know
that i can never in years become
an entity, than now. or how do you adore
the melody of music when your head
is buried in anamnesis of clamors?

2024.

you will pour away like my mothers belly

your name will be stuffed into candle
flames, but before your tribute comes,
i hope you leap a little, swinging
to the voice of music before the wave
claims your feet. i hope you love too,
live a little before you leave

202.....

the bones that carved my mother's
mother remains, stones, sculptures
damn! the prayers of permanency.

How Have You Become New? – *Mariam Hassan*

I am tasting
again in my mother tongue
every greeting now is
pricking itself back
into place
each swelling,
a memory.

I want to tell our house
cat about communication,
my theory is that it's all vibration
and indeed we do understand
each other in spite of our
differences.

I am in a field of time
listening to Live
a hymnal of negatives,
turning points, rubies
and rhinestones, reminded of need,
verses and verses of need
and its declarations
after 21.

I am learning there are
many things we are afraid
to ask about like
why things happen to us,
why things change
so we find ourselves
in search for freedom,
rent our hearts to love,
ask the last light for
a Lutheran prophecy
but still.

Today, I Spit Them Out Generously – *Igbokwe Roseline*

The priest stood solemnly at the altar blowing words
Into the air – words that were meant to soothe any
Troubled water. I sat and watched the letters break
Off from each word and they were headed directly,
Like an arrow, to the centre of my soul. Hymns flooded
My ears with melodies screaming holy, sowed me in an
Epiphany as choristers parcel out songs that iniquities
Surrender to. My journey of faith was mountainous; affixed
With intermittent doses of straying off like a stubborn sheep.
Life avalanched enticing-Godforsaken-vanities. Faith became
A dead force. I fed slowly on the remains of jumbled peace.
One dull evening, a light shone down my path as I swallowed
Easing words of the scriptures. Faith renewed, I climbed lofty
Heights. I mirrored my life and blew off doubt as chaff. His love,
Like a boomerang, returned to me. I was like a puzzle, yet it fixed
Me back together. This journey of faith – a journey of the soul –
Moulded me into an instrument for warfare. Heartfelt praises have
Been stuck in my throat and today, I spit them out generously.

Contributors' Bios

Amina Akinola Bamidele is a part-time poet/writer, community health professional, and graduate of Lagos State College of Health Technology. She's currently a full-time student at Lead city University, Ibadan, an entrepreneur & a product developer student at Google. Her works are published and forthcoming in *Asterlit Magazine*, *Brittle Paper*, *Efiko Magazine*, *IHRAF*, *Ice Floe*, *Lumiere Review*, *Maroko Magazine*, *Nigeria News Direct Poetry Column*, *South Florida Journal*, *Visual Verses*, and others. Amina is a member of the Hilltop creative art Foundation, Lagos.

Brian Gyamfi is a Ghanaian-American writer from Texas. He is a recipient of the Pushcart Prize, two Hopwood Awards, and a finalist for the National Poetry Series and the Poetry International Prize. He is a contributing editor at *Oxford Poetry*.

Chinuzoke Chinuwa is from Ahoada East in Rivers, Nigeria. A law graduate of Rivers State University, he is interested in the essence of storytelling in various endeavours, from social justice and climate change activism to archaeology and astronomy. Find his recent work in *Love Grows Stronger in Death*, a project by Witsprouts. Some of his earlier writings are published under the pseudonym Jude Chike in *Lolwe*, *Abandon Journal*, *LitGleam Magazine* and elsewhere. He runs a Viewbug account for his photography.

Damilola Omotoyinbo is a Nigerian Creative Writer and Software Engineer. She is a fellow of the Ebedi International Writers' Residency, the winner of the SprinNG Writing contest, a coWinner of the Writing Ukraine Prize, the winner of the 2023 Writivism Poetry Prize, a joint winner for the SEVHAGE-KSR Hyginus Ekwuazi Poetry Prize and a finalist for the 2022 African Writer's Awards.

Goodnews Karibo is an Ijaw poet from Abua, Rivers State. He is a Best of the Net nominee. In 2023 he emerged as a finalist in the Unserious Collective Fellowship. Goodnews tweets via @slendergrass.

Hana Meron (she/her) is an Ethiopian-American storyteller, writer, and joy-chaser based in Albuquerque, NM. She is a 2022 Hurston/Wright Fellow in Poetry, a 2023 VONA Fellow in Poetry, and a 2023 Poetry Fellow of The Watering Hole. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming

in *EcoTheo Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Transition*, and *Library of Africa and the African Diaspora (LOATAD)*. Hana holds a B.A. from Harvard University and is a current MFA candidate in Poetry at Pacific University Oregon. Find Hana on Substack (Kaleidoscope Black) or on her website hanameronpoetry.com.

Igbokwe Roseline is a Nigerian medical student who enjoys creative writing. She hails from Igbere in Bende LGA, Abia State. She has works published in the *Moveee*, *Kalahari Review*, *Brittle Paper Festive Anthology*, *Icreatives Review*, *Stripes Literary Magazine*, *Arkore Arts*, *Poetik Africa Magazine*, *Shuzia Anthology*, *World Voices Magazine*, *Arts Lounge*, *Eboquills*, *Stethoscopes And Pens*, *Pawners Papers*, *Ma Keke*, *Writers Space Africa*, *Ta Adesa*, *Conscio Magazine*, *Afrihill Press*, *ABSUMSA Pulse Magazine*, *CMDA ABSUTH Healing Balm Newsletter*, *EOPP anthology* and many other anthologies. She was shortlisted for the Labari Prize for poetry, BKPW prize, EOPP, Shuzia prize; longlisted (twice) for the Wakaso Poetry Prize for Female, Idumaese Alao Prize For Literature, TeamBooktu Poetry Prize, DKA Annual Poetry Prize; winner of the Poetree IWD Spoken Word Contest, and Challenging The Writers writing contests. Apart from being a writer, she is a graphic designer, health volunteer, performance poet and public speaking enthusiast. Roseline's on Instagram @igbokweroses and X @IgbokweEzinne

Isaac Parbey runs The Storyboard Café (TBC) in Accra, a creative clinic dedicated to telling stories and driving narratives that bridge arts and wellness, across media. He is the author of the novel, *Saving Rainbow*, and the short story collection, *The Beautiful Side of Things*. His academic background is in media communications and education. Reach Isaac across social media @acreativeclinic

Isra Hassan is a Somali-American poet from Minneapolis, MN. Her work can be found (or is forthcoming) in *Poetry Wales*, *Poet Lore*, *Logic(s) Magazine*, *Guernica*, *The Waterstone Review*, *Denver Quarterly* and elsewhere. *NAYSAYER*, her debut collection, is now out. Her manuscript, *OPAQUE*, was a finalist for the 2023 Center for African American Poetry & Poetics Book Prize. Hassan takes the economy of truth seriously. As a lover and black nihilist, her work centers surviving during these cataclysmic times. Find her @israology on all social platforms and on her website israhassan.art

Jerry K. Ayodele is a Nigerian-American poet, editor and writer based in London, England. His work, spanning poetry, essays and short fiction, has appeared on *BESE*, *Afreada* and *RADR Africa*. He is currently the founding editor of *Communa Magazine*.

Katleho Kano Shoro is a South African artist-scholar currently pursuing a PhD in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of the poetry collection, *Serurubele*, and more of her poetry has been published in journals and anthologies both nationally and internationally (latest poem contributed to: *Chants, Dreams and other Grammars of Love: a Gedenkschrift for Harry Garuba*). Her writing practice includes short stories and essays (latest essay: *Black Butterflies: Black Women's Philosophies of Freedom*). Shoro also undertakes editorial work (latest editorial project: *The Constant Reader: Poetry Reviews by Poets in South Africa*).

Lola Oh is a Black British poet, photographer and facilitator. Lola was born to a Jamaican mother and a Nigerian father, and is currently based in South London. Through her poetry, Lola uses her work to explore family, loss, and ideas of black womanhood. Through photography, Lola uses her creative eye to document the world around her, distilling the essence of human emotions in the mundane, or intimate moments of everyday life. Lola's poem "Bad Daughters" was shortlisted for The White Review's Poet Prize. Lola is an alumnus of the Roundhouse Poetry Collective, Griots Well and Barbican Young Poets. She is a Roundhouse Slam Finalist, and has been featured by Apples and Snakes, BBC1xtra, English Touring Theatre, and Roundhouse's The Last Word Festival.

Manthipe Moila is a 30-year-old poet from Johannesburg, South Africa. She holds a BA Hons. in English Literature from Rhodes University. She has been published in *New Contrast*, *Stirring*, *Kalahari Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Agbowó*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *Thimble*, *Hotazel Review*, *Watershed Review* and *Saranac Review*. She is currently based in Seoul, South Korea.

Mariam Hassan is a poet, writer, filmmaker and journalism student whose work has been published in several literary magazines and anthologies. Her writing explores themes of identity, love and self-discovery formed under formulaic and intimate writing styles. She was raised in Pretoria, South Africa but now resides in Tanzania, her country of birth.

Nicole Adabunu is an MFA in Poetry graduate from The Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is a 2024 Cave Canem Fellow, and her work has been published by *Writer's Digest*, *The Academy of American Poets*, *The Drift*, and elsewhere. She currently lives and writes in Chicago.

Prosper C. Iféányí writes from Lagos, Nigeria. A finalist for the 2024 Greg Grummer Poetry Prize and the 2023 Gerald Kraak Anthology Prize, his works are featured or forthcoming in *The Offing*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Obsidian*, *ANMLY*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *New Delta Review*, *the Oxonian Review* and elsewhere.

Rutendo Chichaya is a Zimbabwean writer, poet, and book review blogger. She is the winner of the 2023 ShonaReads Zimbabwe Speculative Fiction Competition and has been nominated for the Intwasa Short Story Prize (2020), the Hamwe Short Story Contest (2021), and her blog for the Afrobloggers Award (2021). Her work appears in *Intwasa Short Stories: Volume One*, *The One Poem Anthology: Survivor's Edition*, *Ipikai Poetry Journal*, *Words Remember: Poems and Stories from Zimbabwe and the USA*, *Tesserae: A Mosaic of Poems by Zimbabwean Women*, *The Kalahari Review*, *Harare Review of Books*, *The African Feminist Anthology: Women's Tales*, *Brittle Paper*, *The Makings of Revolutionary Hope* and *African Ghost Stories*. Rutendo hosts *Ihwi*, a podcast that documents the experiences of creatives.

Sarah Yanni is a Mexican-Egyptian poet in Los Angeles. She is the author of two chapbooks: *Hard Crush* (Wonder Press, 2024) and *ternura / tenderness* (Bottlecap Press, 2019). Her writing appears in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Mizna*, *SPECTRA Poets*, *Autostraddle*, *Full Stop*, *Wildness Journal*, *Iterant Mag*, among others, and is anthologized in *INFINITE CONSTELLATIONS* (University of Alabama Press, ed. Khadijah Queen) and *FUTURE/PRESENT* (Duke University Press, ed. Elizabeth Webb). She has been recognized as a Finalist for BOMB Magazine's Poetry Prize, Kelsey Street Press' QTBIPOC Book Contest, the Andres Montoya Letras Latinas Poetry Prize, the Hayden's Ferry Review Inaugural Poetry Prize, the Outpost Fellowship, and Poetry Online's Launch Prize. A Best of the Net Nominee, she was a Finalist to be the Poet Laureate of Glendale, CA in 2023. She has received support from Community of Writers and the California Institute of the Arts. Formerly, she served as the Managing Editor of *The Quarterless Review* and Poetry Editor of *The Dry River*.

Simon Ng'uni is a Zambian and Oliver Mtukudzi fan. He writes about the wind and the stars but mostly, he writes about the wind, and the rain which comes in that wind's passing. He likes music with an old soul and songs that sing the silence deeply enough to teach patience, because the heart is always longing, because sometimes it catches a tune; because sometimes the heart dances and it is true. Some of Simon's writing has appeared in *WSA Africa*, *A Long House*, *Poetic Africa* and *20.35 Africa*.

Tahnia Barrie is a Sierra Leonean poet and writer, currently based in her country's capital city, Freetown. She is an alum of the 2023 WAW residency at the Library of Africa and the African Diaspora. She is calling on you, dear reader, to join her in refusing and resisting the genocide of the Congolese people, the Palestinian people, and all oppressed peoples around the world. Wherever you are, get in the way however you can. We move with the Intifada to liberation and beyond. Together, we resist, resist, resist.

Tramaine Suubi is a multilingual writer from Kampala. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her forthcoming debut is a full-length poetry collection titled [*phases*](#), which will be published in January 2025. Her forthcoming second book is also a full-length poetry collection titled *stages*, which will be published in January 2026. Both books will be published by Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins. Tramaine serves as the managing editor of [*Writivism*](#).