



20.35
AFRICA

*"The literary bread of this anthology is ancestrally communal.
The breadth, the ballad, the sonic structure of this volume
spans generations and defiantly plants itself in rich soiled
pastures of won and lost kinship.*

Anastacia-Reneé,

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Contemporary
Poetry

volume viii

GUEST-EDITED BY:
Sarah Lubala and Logan February

20.35

AFRICA

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The cover reflects the political and economic unrest burdening several African states. Each flowing stroke echoes the forced migration of people driven by societal collapse and conflict. Yet, within the turbulence lies a quiet hope – for rupture, for discontinuity, for a break from the norm that might usher in freedom.

– Nnenna Itanyi

As a writer and poet who calls themselves spiritual and maintains spiritual practices I hereby declare with outstretched arms, forehead to the belly of mother earth and wind as my ancestors that the literary bread of this work is ancestrally communal. The breadth, the ballad, the sonic structure of *20.35 Africa: Anthology of Contemporary Poetry Vol. VIII* spans generations and defiantly plants itself in rich soiled pastures of won and lost kinship. Portals elevate rabbits to goddesses and cancers slow deaths to afterlives. Each poem kneels at the presence of heartbreak, severed umbilical cords or the knowing that can only be felt in the crux of a haibun's prayer. Ase'. Every poem an intentional beaded work threaded by an omnipresent spell of words.

– Anastacia-Renee, *Side Notes from the Archivist*

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The Desired and the Divine

Several threads weave our lives together in this world, and their commonality makes them integral to our existence. I refer to our strong suite of feelings which are raised past essential status to irresistible forces in this anthology. In every poem in this volume, beneath whatever story they tell, we are haunted by these emotions. The craft here is direct and rooted in the poets' traditional and religious backgrounds, but also deploy language that seeks, primarily, to break past the limitations of cultural heritage.

The anthology begins with desire. It also begins with the divine. We walk with Paul Damilare who tasks God with cleaning up after the expression of his impulse: "if i tend to his creation, / let God tend to my desecration" ("Rebellion on Lent Morning). He contemplates shared responsibilities, reclaiming power as a worshipper of it, and discrediting any one way to ask things of one's God: "there's a place for such prayers on / heaven's road. / they pile into a bonfire / and illuminate the way for well-made petitions." Often, the desired and the divine are separate; sometimes they co-exist. In "Eskista," Hiwot Adilow reflects "I could never dance before / born wound tight by piety." And perhaps this is what these poems charge us with, to find our "chorus of illita," to break free until: "I'm ready / to quake."

Desire changes forms. This we garner from Catherine McNaught Davis's "Synesthesia," which takes us into that sensory mind, and we see how perceptions of the persona take different shades, how bliss is "lightning strikes of silver / forking through my cells," and light blue when their lover is "under me / her delight this perfect heavenly hue." Language, on this level, is used as a snapshot for the working and malleable shapes of the interior. We could project desire into the future, into what we long for, and it would assume materiality on the page as in Loic Ekinga's "Patrice": "In

the year 2060, my lover will be 63 years old / and we'll hopefully continue to talk about loss & giggle”

Or, like Naomi Nduta Waweru in “Towards the End,” we could visualize it through mournful eyes: “a sunroom. a bell-ringing ritual. / you swaying your hips to *kwaito* in your ill-fitting camisole / as if you could not possibly break.” Grief here is written in its original meaning, as memories that haunt without palpability, growing desolate, made more sorrowful outside this loss, through the finality the poem ends with, the sound that echoes in the persona’s head: “your bones disintegrated into shards/ like porcelain / i cannot stop replaying the crack sound.” Somewhere else, the persona in Hiwot Adilow’s “Feeling Fucked Up” goes to a “sticky dancefloor” seeking the songs of her favorite singer and damning everything that isn’t or reminds them of the singer: “fuck history and the ties that bind / fuck the fingers that play and / your hands that mapped and digitized desire fuck / what it could have been and fuck what it was.”

When we sit with these yearnings and mourning that tie our lives together, we see the necessity of tradition – a key element in every aspect of our lives. We interact with the divine through tradition, so that a single religion manifests differently in different cultures. The way we express joy, the way our longings fold out of our skin, is skewed by the weight of customs. Our interaction with ourselves, with family, and with the environment, is defined by the outlook and philosophy of the places we come from. So that what the poets in this volume explore, the way they take it apart, differ from the lens of other poets from different backgrounds who, with the same parameters, try to write similar things. Mind you, I do not refer to the bias of personal experience but to the framework from which the thought and creative processes happen.

Felix Eshiet muses about a rabbit he took in as a pet and the reverence he extends to her as an Ibibio indigene: “I don’t feed her carrots, I feed her elephant grass – / she’s a goddess.” What we see through these musings are veneration for the rabbit’s ways of being, and when he releases her into the wild: “I open the door. I let her out. / Not because I am kind, but because I am afraid. / A goddess should not live in a cage.” In “Willingness,” Chiagoziem Jideofor ponders acceptance in familial relations, where all flaws and “beasts are loved equally”: “family is willingness to be cured, pruned out with bloody hands / ...the same way of digging, of heaping the barn, of drying next season’s meat”. When Ojo Blessing’s persona reminisces on help that they received in the past, the physical appearance of their helper, their cultural facial marks, is what’s described: “All the mercies I received, / I remember. The tribal mark of a boy who chased his cashmere goats / to the cold hands of night to give me shelter looked like God.”

This anthology closes, also, with the divine. As the poets interrogate their relationship to God through imagery, metaphor, and theme, I couldn’t help but notice how the verses of this generation reflect a struggle with piety and modes of worship, in a world that is redefining how we interact with, and demonstrate, our belief systems. In “Agnostic,” Obáfẹmi Thanni wrestles with his doubt in God: “Paul became those he persecuted after / witnessing. Yet, history holds its grudge against / Thomas for a moment’s doubt. Despite acknowledging / his Lord’s divinity afterwards.” And in “Arke 82,” Kaleab Abayneh exalts the waters of the earth: “As if you weren’t the path / of the sun and the moon and the stars. / A god worth worshipping, / and the thing beyond a metaphor...”

The eighth volume of 20.35 Africa anthology, guest-edited by Sarah Lubala and Logan February, is an invitation to think about poetry not just with creative lenses but also with cultural ones, to understand how literary tradition differs from continent to continent, country to country, city to

city. Experiences, they reveal, are not limited to internal make-ups of individuals; they are environmental, familial, and traditional.

Precious Okpechi

Managing Editor

Introduction

To write from the continent today is to stand at a crossroads – where memory meets imagination, where elegy and emergence share the same breath. This anthology is not a map but a field recording: voices emerging from silence, desire braided with loss, faith threaded through doubt, and language stretched to its breaking point. Here, poetry is not escape – it is engagement. These poems confront ghosts, name longings, and bend form to house the contradictions of living and writing from Africa now.

These poems dig into the familial – seeking an individual self alongside lineage and belonging(s). In Chiagoziem Jidefor’s work, the heavy inheritance is embodied, genetic. Family is “a progressive campaign” connecting present to future (“Willingness”). The poet speaks to inherited trauma, bones passed down like unfinished sentences. Solape Adetutu Adeyemi’s “Jalopy” is less concerned with descendance, more with duty and debt – the “we” of this poem resounds in the reader’s memory. Other poems blur the line between ancestry and belief. The charge of heritage links the bravery of language with its failure to define. Felix Eshiet’s “Ballad of an Ibibio Poet” poignantly calls forth “A name older than my father’s father’s father. / A secret the folktales never told.”

Belief, too, is not a static possession but a trembling inquiry. In “Agnostic,” Ọbáfẹmi Thanni writes: “my foolish heart – home of first doubts – silenced,” capturing how spiritual longing can coexist with rupture. Jasmine Tabor’s “My Shift Begins at 7PM” reveals a quieter devotion – an everyday holiness that gathers in the stillness between worship and work, between velvet pews and rolled-up sleeves. God, here, is neither sermon nor certainty but saturation. These poets do not evangelise. Instead, they inhabit faith’s hinterlands: the night shift, the prayer whispered in a

lower-church bathroom, the cold where “your silence” becomes its own kind of scripture. Even rebellion, as in Paul Damilare’s “Rebellion on Lent Morning,” is a spiritual act: “the morning is God’s making; the night my unmaking.” These are not testimonies – they are questions sung into the silence, improvisations that carry faith not as doctrine, but as a desire to be met.

The poets also use lyric as mourning ashes, uncovering griefs both public and private. “When Hugh Masekela died / I thought of you,” writes Hiwot Adilow in “Feeling Fucked Up.” Loss here is not pure but multilateral, tangled with desire, rage, renunciation. The expectation of elegy is refused as language leans aggressive and profane. A bereaved voice, a banished music – and yet the longing never leaves. Adilow’s speaker remains “desperate for the electric buzz / of your attention.” These poems reach thirstily for the lost, the dead, the desired.

To write from Africa is often to write beside ghosts. This anthology teems with hauntings – familial, political, ancestral. In “Towards the End,” Naomi Nduta Waweru catalogues dust and memory, echo and disintegration: “your bones disintegrated / into shards / like porcelain.” These poets sit in the ruins and let the echoes speak. Memory isn’t memorial – it’s unfinished mourning. Even love, as in “Patrice,” becomes spectral, folded through timelines and imagined conversations with Lumumba in a moonlit room. History is not to be put down but dressed differently for the future, speaking to its own definition. “We’ll hopefully continue to talk about loss & giggle.” The hope is not optimistic but announces a truth of dwelling with ghosts. These poems show that our shadows – historical, personal, and metaphysical – are not obstacles to clarity. They are the material of it.

This anthology is a polyrhythmic ensemble. The range is exhilarating: the sensual synaesthesia of Catherine McNaught Davis, the incantatory charge of Chinaza James-Ibe, the performative

fragmentation of Edoziem Miracle's "Addiction II" Form is flexible, ungoverned by convention. Instead of homogeneity, we get vibrancy: hybrid forms, haibun, list poems, near-psalms, sonic ruptures. Even within a single voice, we encounter multiplicity – irony beside sincerity, fury beside elegy. This variety is not a lack of coherence but an ethics of refusal. These poets resist simplification – of themselves or their contexts. In that refusal, they offer a richer, riskier music. There is a kind of formal sovereignty here – one that insists language must stretch to meet the life that births it.

The poems in this volume are poised between historical consciousness and contemporary concern. Writing on memory, on martyrdom and migration, they reckon with power structures in the surrounding struggles and collapse. They weave language into vessels that grieve and resist and autonomously negotiate with communal heritage. Frameworks of colonially inherited religion become remoulded and personalised, holding belief in tension with transgression and doubt. The urgency of these intimations speaks to the complexity of today's young African poets: how they construct (and deconstruct) imaginations of identity and belonging, duty and dreams, in language.

Sarah Lubala

Logan February

Rebellion on Lent Morning – *Paul Damilare*

i heave the morning on my shoulders.
let God bear the weight of my nights.
my ma says it is sin to make God
my errand boy. a prayer is no prayer
if it makes God do my bidding.
there is a place for such prayers on
heaven's road. they pile into a bonfire
that illuminates the way for well-made petitions.
rebellion, i say, will light the way to redemption.
the morning is God's making;
the night my unmaking of his making.
if i tend to his creation,
let God tend to my desecration.

Synaesthesia – *Catherine McNaught Davis*

pink at the opening notes of Chateau
plinking softly in the dawn
i wake enrobed in roses
entirely surprisingly blissfully blush

light blue when she spun into oblivion
at the curious work of my hands
over me and under me
her delight this perfect heavenly hue

lightning strikes of silver
forking through my cells
blazing bliss in every atom
alive at last in the throes of silver!

golden incandescent glory
charging through my veins
ecstasy cascades and floods
love as lust as lava, molten in my core

seething, all-consuming scarlet
as my blood becomes me
indignance to rage to roaring fury
you cannot do this to me

pearlescent peace, heavenly white
heralding the birth of my nephew
a beacon to glow in my darkest hours
light to keep me living

and dark blue, its sirens spinning out
colors circle the room as music soars
orange fizzing, purple blooming from stuttering white
eyes closed, i follow these fireworks

when everything is frozen numb
these heaven-sent shades visit me,
watercolors here and there
blessed pulses of life in the dark.

Towards the End – *Naomi Nduta Waweru*

i. A list of things that collect dust;
the Polynesian flower pot. the lilies you preferred to water yourself.
the missal: top most compartment of the medicine cabinet.
i'm thinking about belief.
and how cancer cells take their time in the host. also: slow deaths.
and afterlives.

ii. and before that; a sunroom. a bell-ringing ritual.
you swaying your hips to *kwaito* in your ill-fitting camisole
as if you could not possibly break.

iii. after: i observe light for what it does not reflect/sometimes/every time
a flash appears/i think it as one way dead things/may choose to reincarnate/
everyone who saw you last says/your bones disintegrated/into shards/
like porcelain/
i cannot stop replaying the crack sound.

Eskista – *Hiwot Adilow*

You dance an ancient dance thru the sage hills of my dreams
every shame dispersed under each clap's drunk mask

I finger a masenqo and sing
this meadow buds with ballads

butterflies tonguekiss
my eyelids are heavy with nectar

one stomp of your foot wakes me
my eyes never leave your pulse

I could never dance before
born wound tight by piety

prudish even in this perfect future I'm still afraid

until the chorus of illita parts my chest
and music pours me to the floor guiltless

your blades beckon me to trill
I flutter like a charmer has called

ecstasy shivers
from your shoulders
to your shoes
a single bead of sweat
drips
my simple city dress

slips

I'm ready

to quake

Feeling Fucked Up – *Hiwot Adilow*

After Etheridge Knight

When Hugh Masekela died
I thought of you / it startled me like a trumpet
instead of Heaven I got sent back
to that sticky dancefloor in trenchtown
where I sipped blue fluorescence
desperate for the electric buzz
of your attention –

fuck Nostalgia and brass
fuck madiba makeba fuck jazz
fuck history and the ties that bind
fuck the fingers that play and
your hands that mapped and digitized desire fuck
what it could've been and fuck what it was
it comes back to me like a chill
like a song played sharp and shrill

Patrice – *Loic Ekinga*

In the year 2060, my lover will be 63 years old
& we'll hopefully continue to talk about loss & giggle.
At night, my version of Patrice Lumumba purchased on Amazon,
sits across from me quietly reading one of my poems.
I dress him like an astronaut and set the moon behind him...
large and white. I ask him why did you order the boat to turn back?
I thought they'd listen, he answers.
My son or daughter appears. A beam of light from the coffee table
because my grandson or granddaughter wants to say goodnight.
I wave. I smile. I might live forever.
Patrice asks why the word martyr is spelled the same in French and English
I don't know, I say. I tell him that it originates from the old Greek word for witness.
But he knows this already. He's quiet. I hear my lover's body sink into our bed.
On the news
A new mineral is discovered in the place formally known as Kisangani.
I think about the Western freedom that is coming our way soon
Patrice says I never got to witness any of it. What happened outside the vat of acid?
I say you're my hero. You've lived well. You're no martyr

Ballad of an Ibibio Poet – *Felix Eshiet*

I don't know any Ibibio poet who owns a rabbit so I became one.
I tie a bell to her neck and name her Idioñ, deity in Ibibio.
Her fur is mane-hard and stainless like *Anansa Ikañ Obutoñ's* in full bloom.
I don't feed her carrots, I feed her elephant grass – she's a goddess.

At dawn, she watches the river mist rise,
ears twitching at the silent voices only she hears.
The elders say spirits favor small bodies,
that power wears a soft skin so no one sees it coming.

She does not flinch at the shadow of the hawk.
She does not run when the dogs bare their teeth.
She knows what they do not –
a goddess need not be large to be feared.

At night, I hear her whispers beneath the moon.
Not a prayer, not a plea – just the low hum of omnipresence.
A name older than my father's father's father.
A secret the folktales never told.

Somewhere in the village, a child falls sick.
The priestess says the gods are restless.
I find Idioñ staring at me through the bed slats,
her eyes black like river stones, like bottomless grief.

I open the door. I let her out.
Not because I am kind, but because I am afraid.
A goddess shall not live in a cage.

**Anansa Ikañ Obutoñ* is an Efik goddess of the Obutong people of Big Qua Town, Calabar.

Migration I – *Rasheed Ayinla Shehu*

Leaving Ilorin

Today, the adhan for fajr is only an echo.
Somewhere a mother and her son are observing
the first ritual of departure – silence.
It thumps within them. Sprouts between them.
It's a language, this silence: lips muffling teslim
as if audibility would slash the grace, hands
taking turns with the kettle in a rehearsal
of unscripted mimes. It's fajr, & the mother
scans the room, like an eagle, in search of
the perfect qiblah to send her prayer to heaven.
The son, in hope of meeting the first rakah with
the congregation, hastens his ghusl. Worn as
a skin, doesn't commitment levitate a prayer?

The mother shapes her hands into a cup &
unbundles her wishes: they are whispers –
punctuated by the son's name – filled to the brim,
still intact, in their firmament. (I think this is
how grace works: it flows, might overflow, but
never erodes.) After his solah, the son reels off
adhkar – each syllable, a blanket of infinite mercy,
of heavenly blessing for the mother:
Rabbi irhamhuma kama rabbayanee sagheera.
Isn't prayer a mirror of our lacks, our fears?
Mother and son observe the last ritual of departure:
the conviction that it might be another beautiful way
to name what makes her a widow; him, a fatherless child.

Jalopy – *Solape Adetutu Adeyemi*

You must always remember
We were there for you when no one else was
We contributed money for your education
And when you were done
We contributed money for the jalopy you drive
Some of us own the steering wheel
Some of us own the tyres
Some of us own the dashboard
The seats plus the seat belts!
Even the engine!
The brakes and accelerator, inclusive!
Just so you remember
We own you

Willingness – *Chiagoziem Jideofor*

family is where all beasts are loved equally
a progressive campaign broaching how much we borrow, the places

we borrow from to create the lycanthrope, the perfect daughter, the absent father
main characters who walk freely into ensuing myths

instances of base form—base hunger. always, we sing
odes to the participating ropes, odes to bodies climbing with stealth

family is willingness to be cured, pruned out with bloody hands
more theories on superposition, the logic of layering, something to do with the genes

strands that never get old in an over-exposed tree, one body recalled too many
times—the same way of digging, of heaping the barn, of drying next season's meat

Self-Portrait as Bone in Three Lives – *Chiagoziem Jideofor*

Bones can speak long after the flesh has gone

– Victoria Adukwei Bulley

*

i was born in the middle of a farming season
with the same makeup as a prompt, satisfying rain

i was born before someone yelled *fire*
before the band of humanity broke and people ran into bushes

i was born attached to the mother's hip, barely dropping on all toes
O di n'agbo, people say, explaining this pliability of inherited bones

*

after the war when i became this human
too wrecked for credit, wilting and in dire need of help

with a face of shame; its full material
my rambunctious descriptions of home within a house

the new government wouldn't offer me rest
wouldn't care for my pleas to be left with one straight bone

*

in a new place
you repeatedly ask what made me mad

as if it is one thing
that brought on the hives, ripped a face off me

interesting exchange—your probing versus
what precedes me, native weight in my bones

Rattus' Haibun – *Chinaza James-Ibe*

I am morally constipated, woman, I have no excreta to offer. However green the mint eyes.
However scarlet the blue sea. However auburn the purpling sky, I will not bruise into a scab. Black
& beaten & bound, I will not be. I will cruise – jocular – upon the devil's spear-cackle, past the
orifices of heaven and hell and love and brittle and tender and please – I will live my death and
kill my life. I, crater. I, liar. I, thief. From the crepuscular corners of my rotting mouth, I pus you.
Glorify the bloated dead & poison & glue-board & trip-wire & cheese-trap & murder – kiss my
browning whiskers, lick my slimy tail. You do not know what it means to be born dirty and
scampering with a distrust of unscarce bread and fear and fear and fear of –

.

glum shadow,
raven and foot-sized life-pit
pooling, pooling.

September – *Chinaza James-Ibe*

at the sound of rain,

ants file out his eye sockets

like pupils, spilling.

What Happened – *Fatihah Quadri*

Our neighbor's wife drained the river before us, left the house thirsty and wanting. The bucket returned from the well as a failure. We watched small fires swallow large bushes. On the news, they said there are dark places beyond the sea; deserts of silence, islands of suffocation, rooms bursting with the thirsty laughter of a dead humor. That harmattan, the river took two girls and left their buckets behind.

A Book of Remembrance – *Ojo Blessing*

It's been a long history of passing, of hunger & resolution.
I do not like to talk about it, but it's okay to scroll names.
I won't marvel if I discover you have a diary for your losses,
requiems & for the birds teaching you to sing beyond lamentation.
I write in my manuscript beyond poems, & on the apex
is the war that chased us into exile, the mercies we received
from strangers after we took the route to safety, the road
a hunter stabbed & curved in a crescent by a buffalo
once called the boulevard of no return. The chemistry of the road
has changed since the day we walked it, since the day
we made music with our feet that's not elegiac. We chorused,
wàhàlà for who no get wings. The mallard didn't mock us,
& we ran, *kálukú pèlú ẹnì kejì rẹ*. On that day, all those running
were in pairs. My twin – misfortune, a stubborn shadow
that followed me even in my sleep. God, can't I dislodge
my plight into a sea? Do I have to pass through the eye of a needle
to spot your kingdom? We're still breathing, but entered the ground
that wasn't dug for our repose. All the mercies that I received;
I remember. The tribal mark of a boy who chased his cashmere goats
to the cold hands of night to give me shelter looked like God.
What are animals compared to a man? he thought.
I remember the willingness of the goats to give up their comfort
for a better world, & before they departed, they left a message:
the world will be better someday if we love & sacrifice, honestly.

My Shift Begins at 7PM – *Jasmine Tabor*

(but the choir director insists i stay one more moment)

for Mr. Charlton

outlooking an empty church parking lot / smoke unbridled / wander ears through fuzzy / quiet into
distant choir – HAIL MARYs practiced / echoed with a mystical non-committance / a GLORIA
while the orange yolk / glow of 6:30 PM burns / away blue sky into black evening / they don't clap or
stomp / limb desires stillness until SUNDAY / energy staved until divine things strike / when pressed
coffee beans and sugar cubes / and glowing morning dustmites and mint green gowns / and the quiet
intoxication / of abnegated passions / creates a sublime totality on velvet red rows / high above where
laypeople sit / enjoying in spiritual revue / holding something honest / high, higher still / full of light /
and god's life.

but for now / it's a WEDNESDAY night / so i must submit / to this grueling shift / so i must
surrender / to the chunky brick and / my backpocketed / rolled stupor of / smoke and subduction /
becoming a doll for the / totality of a hungrier / more honest god.

In the Lower-Church Bathroom – *Jasmine Tabor*

and you see yourself sing

when your mouth moves in a
mirror, do you marvel to hear it when you barely
know the next note? speak with your reflected mouth
agape i promise the song will come *back* to you from
somewhere in the vast where between *about after*
and *about before*. some spirit possesses your mouth
and you'll be given the content of your creation;
you've always known this song. in some version of
this story, you even penned it and all you needed is
that first find at the piano with you and yourself and
the vibration of your throat, a full confession at the
foot of the sink's basin to conjure the page number in
your mind's missal. your voice/image is a triptych
once you rise to the mirror: you and you in the mirror
and you together and do you fear it, the recognition
in your pupils? the holiness in you? do you die, an
insurmountable joy wells at calling and having had
some grand answer?

Addiction – *Edoziem Miracle*

I have given you dominion see it on the roads of your hands wet history
calligraphing in flesh under a tanned hide of old people waltzing
tap-tapping as you undo the blood-bond then
the world dances for you spinning on your fetus

everybody has one grown from salt and the water of a bruised side victory
is mine but what is mine also runs after me
in naked hopeless streets
maybe salt is meant to be recycled
chased after as you lose yourself in the torrents
and your feet unravel to a place only dreams know

Addiction II – *Edoziem Miracle*

run a needle across these lips right a story on this land sin a tale

ballads of a crumbling mind

thrush

push

hush

cry

time is a dagger's smile and your body is a disunity of scattered screams that each tooth weaves
together when you drop

there somewhere in the whispering cold air your voice grinds a feeble note

light

but your windows are mirrors and like marries like in the osmosis of things

wrap your fingers around the emptiness long enough and you learn how to thread ropes from
nothing

for every falling is still a chapter in the scoring of living and you might learn something out of it

Agnostic – *Ọbáfẹ́mí Thanni*

I envy the believer and the atheist their certainties.
Envy, as Nietzsche saw it. That green mirror where
we stare at what we hope to become. Yet, I remain
the son who cannot discount his mother's prayers.
Perhaps it began there. In Nietzsche and like readings
that unravelled faith's woven threads until I lay bare
in Godless cold – sickle-edged questions lacerating
my mind. I longed for prodigal privileges. To have
my foolish heart – home of first doubts – silenced.
Resisting my longing, I unread your word. Learned
to be good without you. Faithfully forgot psalms
by heart. Eschewed the believer's instincts in my
vocabulary. *Amen. By []'s grace. [] bless you. []*
forbid. You seemed everywhere, but the nowhere
endures. My longing lingered still – worn but
unsevered. My shivering heart found little to envy
in your martyrs. From its Sanskrit root, the martyr is
one who remembers and from the Greek, one who
witnesses. Paul became those he persecuted after
witnessing. Yet, history holds its grudge against
Thomas for a moment's doubt. Despite acknowledging
his Lord's divinity afterwards. Despite remembering
Christ's wounds and accepting his own – four Indian
spears draining his body of blood. Was I lacking desire
in that cold? All those nights I sought your face –
something to witness, to remember? Years have
passed, teaching me how longing makes its subjects
real. The cold is familiar now. So is your silence.
A boy gnawed to the bone by yearning

is nothing new to your omnipresent eye.

Note: This poem reimagines lines from Psalm 14:1 (ESV) “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.” and Paul Valéry’s quote: “God made everything out of nothing. But the nothingness shows through.”

Arke 82 – *Kaleab Abayneh*

Water at its purest, you,
omnipresent.

Under and above the firmament,
 and the firmament itself for us,
 blue before our earthly eyes.

As if you weren't the path
of the sun and the moon and the stars.

A god worth worshiping,
and the thing beyond a metaphor,

A poem worth dying for.

(of thirst!)

Contributors' Bios

Blessing Omeiza Ojo is a Nigerian poet based in Abuja, where he spends most of his time teaching creative writing, crafting poetry, and guiding children to literary and art festivals. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Frontier Poetry*, *Split Lip*, *The Shallow Tales*, *Còn-sciò*, *The Poetry NND Column*, *The Deadlands*, and elsewhere. He serves as the Abuja coordinator for the Hill-Top Creative Arts Foundation. His work has earned numerous honors, including semi-finalist recognition for the Jack Grapes Poetry Prize and mentions in Best of the Net. Other accolades include the Ambassador Special Prize in the 9th Korea-Nigeria Poetry Prize, the 2020 Artslounge Literature Teacher of the Year Award, the 2021 Words Rhymes & Rhythm Nigerian Teacher's Award, the 2022 and 2023 HIASFEST Best Teacher Awards, the 2024 Eugenia Abu/Sevhage International Prize for Creative Nonfiction, and the 2025 Golden Award for Art Administrators. Beyond writing, sermonizing, and playing PES with friends, Omeiza enjoys daydreaming about paradise where he embraces his resurrected loved ones. He tweets at [@Blessing_O_Ojo](#) and shares his creative journey on Instagram as [@ink_spiller_1](#).

Catherine McNaught Davis (she/her) is a 26-year-old writer from Stellenbosch, South Africa. Taking inspiration from the exquisite natural world around her, writing is her attempt at capturing the intangible and feeling the living of life. Her writing is usually confined to diaries but occasionally sees light on <https://catherinemcnd.substack.com/>.

Chiagoziem Jideofor is Queer and Igbo. Her debut collection, *local remedies*, is forthcoming from *Host Publications*.

Chinaza James-Ibe writes and practices photography in Nigeria. Her work has appeared in *Luminary Lines*, *Poetry Column-NND*, *Poetry Sango-Ota*, *Akewi*, *Isele Magazine*, *Lolwe*, *The*

Shallow Tales Review, *Agbowo*, *Brittle Paper*, and elsewhere. She recently won the 2024 Awele Creative Trust Short Story Award, and the Nwelechi Prize for Non-fiction.

Edoziem Miracle is a Nigerian writer with a degree in English and Literary Studies from the University of Nigeria Nsukka. His works have appeared in the 2020 Afritondo Anthology, the 2021 Toyin Falola Anthology, the Muse, and elsewhere. When he's not writing literature, he works as a content/ghostwriter. You can find other works on www.themiracleedoziem.com.

Fatihah Quadri Eniola is a Nigerian page and performance poet who uses poetry as a tool for advocacy. She is a strong advocate for gender equality, human rights, and community issues. Fatihah is the winner of the inaugural Pawner's Paper Performance Poetry Prize for Peace and the 2025 Centre for Black and African Culture Poetry Prize, among other accolades. Her works have been published in *Torch Literary Arts*, *The West Trade Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and more. She has a background in Law from the University of Ibadan.

Felix Eshiet is a Nigerian writer and Efik-Ibibio poet. His debut poetry chapbook *Never Look a God in the Eye* is set for publication in 2026. His works appear or are forthcoming in *Chestnut*, *The Madrid Review*, *Afritondo*, *Kalahari Review*, *Paraselene*, *Ink in Thirds*, *The Crossroads Review*, *African Writer Magazine*, *Fiction Niche*, *Luminary Lines*, *Afrocritik*, *Akpata*, *Afrihill Press*, *Stripes Magazine* and elsewhere. Felix was longlisted for the Wale Okediran National Poetry Prize, 2025.

Hiwot Adilow is an Ethiopian American poet from Southwest Philadelphia. She is the author of the chapbooks *In The House of My Father* (Two Sylvias Press, 2018) and *Prodigal Daughter* (Akashic Books, 2019). Hiwot is the co-winner of the 2018 Brunel International African Poetry

Prize and is a fellow of The Watering Hole, Anaphora Writing Residency, and VONA. She holds a BA in Anthropology with a certificate in African Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

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Jasmine Tabor is a writer from the deep south. She is a Mellon Mays Graduate Fellow, a recipient of the Edith A. Hambie Poetry Prize from Spelman College, and received her MFA in poetry from Syracuse University. Her works appear in *Poets.org*, *Michigan Literary Review*, *Agnes Scott Literary Journal*, among others. Jasmine is the author of the chapbook *Mirror Myths* (Bottlecap Press, 2024) and a 2021 Best of the Net award nominee. She served as Salt Hill Journal's editor-in-chief in 2022, was a Stove Works resident and Meacham fellow in 2023, and in 2024 was the Vermont Studio Resident. She currently lives in Charleston, SC revising her first manuscript and working on her second.

Kaleab Abayneh is an Ethiopian writer, poet, and translator residing in Addis Ababa. He holds a degree in Electrical Engineering from Addis Ababa Science and Technology University. In 2023, he was selected as one of the winners of the short story competition organized by Goethe-Institut Äthiopien, and his work was subsequently published in an anthology featuring the awardees. He is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Medina*, a locally rooted digital magazine that focuses on art and literary expression. Deeply committed to the craft of storytelling, his writing explores themes of myth, faith, and memory. He is particularly drawn to genres such as magical realism, fantasy, historical fiction, and religious literature, often weaving biblical and mythological allusions into his narratives. Find him on Instagram @kalamalab5.

Loic Ekinga is a writer from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is the author of the poetry collection *How To Wake A Butterfly* (Odyssey Books, 2021). His works of fiction and poetry have appeared in *Agbowò*, *Tint Journal*, *Type/Cast Magazine*, *Salamander Ink*, *Ja. Magazine*, *Poetry Potion*, *Lolwe*, *A Long House*, *New Contrast*, *Brittle Paper* and elsewhere. His experimental mini chapbook *Twelve Things You Failed at As A Man Today* was an honourable mention by JK Anowe for *Praxis Magazine Online*. In addition, his short story “Loop” has been adapted into a short film by Vivanation. He is a finalist of Poetry Africa’s Slam Jam competition, a Kasala writer and teacher, and A Best of the Net nominee.

Naomi Nduta Waweru, Swan XVIII, writes her poems, short fiction and essays from Nairobi, Kenya. Her writing has been published in *Lolwe*, *The 2023 Best Spiritual Literature Anthology* of Orison Books, *The Weganda Review*, *Ubwali*, *The Tribe*, *Poetry Column-NND*, *Clerestory*, *Down River Road*, *PepperCoastMag*, *Olney*, *Paza Sauti* and elsewhere. Her essay, “The Beacons. The bearers of Our Light” was listed in Afrocritik’s 50 Notable Essays from Africa in 2024. She made the 2023 Kikwetu Flash Fiction Contest longlist, is a Best of the Net Nominee, a member of The Omenka Collective, an alumnus of the Nairobi Writing Academy as well as the Ubwali Masterclass of 2024. Reach her on Twitter and Instagram @_ndutawaweru.

Ọbáfẹ́mi Thanni is a poet whose works of poetry and fiction have received Pushcart Prize nominations. An alumnus of the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study's Writers' Workshop, he spends his time between the cities of Ibadan, Abuja and Lucille, making attempts at beauty.

Rasheed Ayinla Shehu (RAS) hails from Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State. He is a graduate of English and Literary Studies, from the University of Ilorin. A fellow in Spring Writing

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Solape Adetutu Adeyemi is a dedicated professional with a bachelor's degree in microbiology and a master's in environmental management. She is a researcher, a consultant, a passionate environmental sustainability enthusiast and a talented award-winning creative writer, with her works published in esteemed journals and magazines, including *Writenow Literary Journal*, *TVMetro*, *Poetry Marathon Anthology*, the *Guardian* newspaper, the *Kalahari review* and the *Indiana review* among others. Currently, Solape serves as the Vice Chairman of the Association of Nigerian Authors in Lagos, Nigeria, where she continues to contribute to the literary and cultural landscape of her community. Her dedication to both her professional career and advocacy for environmental sustainability demonstrates her multifaceted talents and unwavering commitment to making a positive impact in the world.