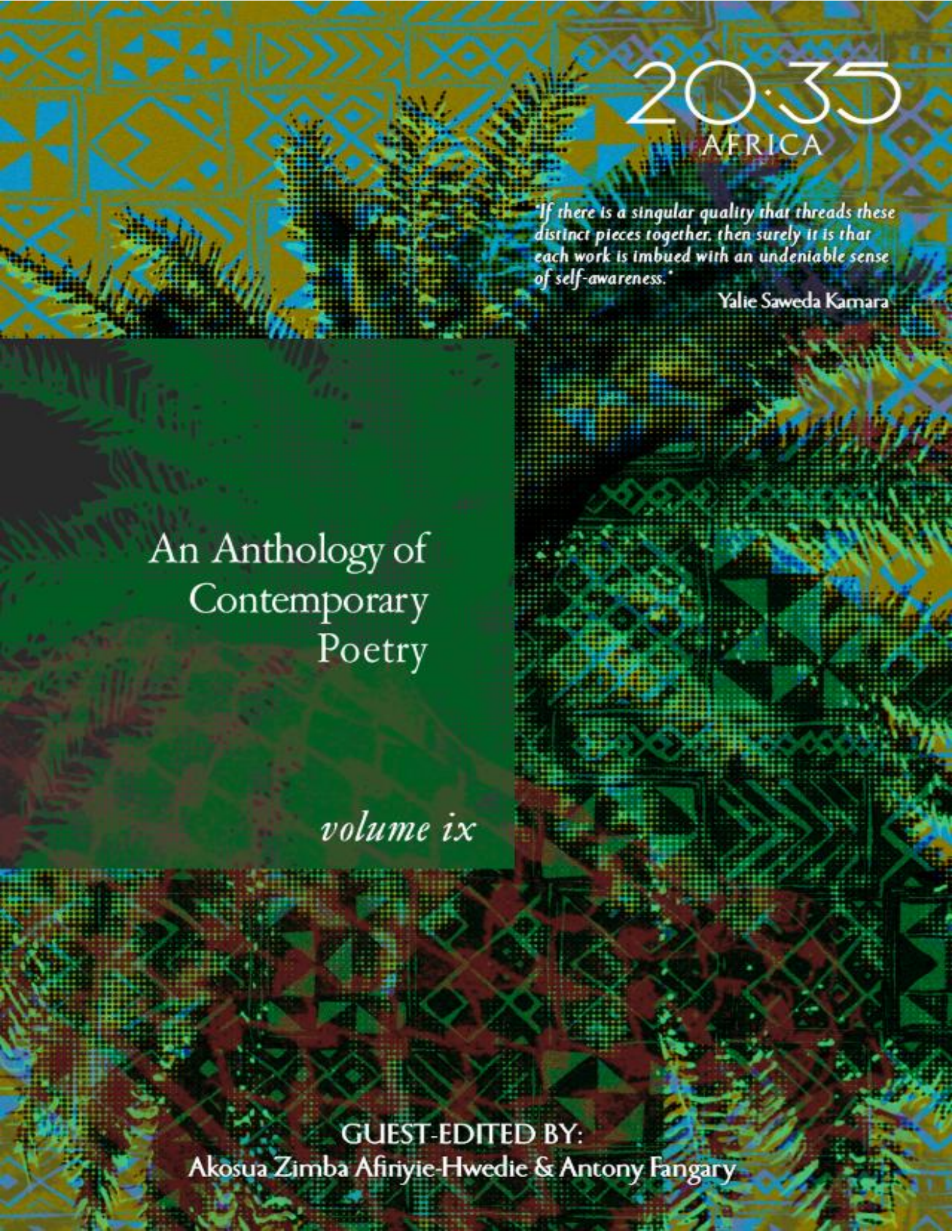




20.35  
AFRICA

*"If there is a singular quality that threads these distinct pieces together, then surely it is that each work is imbued with an undeniable sense of self-awareness."*

Yalie Saweda Kamara

An Anthology of  
Contemporary  
Poetry

*volume ix*

GUEST-EDITED BY:  
Akosua Zimba Afiriyie-Hwedie & Antony Fangary

# 20.35

## AFRICA

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The layering and/or collage effects design style used in the cover image works towards the idea of interconnected struggles; Palestine, Sudan, and Congo (and other movements worldwide) are all suffering under the continued effects of colonialism and capitalism, and their individual liberation is dependent on collective liberation, and vice versa. By looking at each pattern closely, there isn't simply the symbolism of one – the Kuba textile, the date palm, the keffiyeh – but layered echoes of the others. None of us are free until all of us are free.

– adia robinson butler

*cannot study war from satellite pictures*

– Fatima Elbadri

*20.35 Africa Vol. IX* highlights the poetry of some of contemporary letters' most brilliant and audacious poets living in and beyond the continent. This anthology, which boasts voices from 9 nationalities, is as kaleidoscopic in its thematic range as it is manifold in its aesthetic approaches. If there is a singular quality that threads these distinct pieces together, then surely it is that each work is imbued with an undeniable sense of self-awareness. The point of divergence, however, lies in how the artist decides to treat this. Each page reveals the poet's nuanced query and rendering of geography, materiality, longing, confession, grief, hope, survival, memory, history, the numinous, the quotidian, the unknowable, and the possible – this, an inexhaustive list of some of the collection's explorations. Incandescent, visceral, pulsing, and indelible, *20.35 Africa* is an oeuvre to celebrate, to savor, to study, to share, and to revere.

Lend your ear to these poets, for the vanguard has spoken.

– Yalie Saweda Kamara, Ph.D., *Besaydoo*

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## Editor's Note

Off the page, different concerns plague our lives. Sometimes, they present as ordinary and inconsequential, and other times, as global and moral. All of these are nonetheless existential. They shape our being, the way we navigate and make meaning of the world. Writers go to the page to tell the troubled stories that animate their ways into their lives, countries, and continents. These poets in 20.35 Africa Volume IX show the range of the existential crises faced in the world they live in, and they paint all the filth, beauty, and joy of it.

Star Zahra's "Soot" opens the anthology with these lines: "When I close my eyes to the pleasuring / sound of rain drops dancing on the tin roof, / A child closes theirs / to soot." — a poem that reconciles beauty and privilege with the suffering around us. It is arranged like a wall galleried with paintings, and while three of the five frames capture the simple pleasures of life, they are interrupted with differences from places and people who can't have those pleasures. It begs the questions: Who gets to experience the beauty of living and who doesn't? What's the cost of this disparity? Soot?

This dark aftermath of burning and its threat to life recurs throughout this volume. Joemario Umana writes in "What the Road Refuses to Name" of a burnt vehicle by the roadside "crow-coloured and smoking, opens a door of fear / inside my body, how its windows reflect the half-moons / of men running from a country that keeps swallowing its own breath." He confronts how a country's failure has led to the constant death, kidnapping, and terrorizing of its citizens. Each line grapples with the danger of being in a place that refuses you the refuge of home, and the anxiety that comes with looking for death in everything. His other poem, "Sunflowers at the Mouth of a Closed Door," contends with a similar struggle, the freedom and dreams of people stifled and hope gradually lost:

“I do not know / how to stay loyal to a wound that keeps opening / its mouth... / Even heaven seems to be rationing light.” This juxtaposition of the bodily and the spatial, and the doubt of “I do not know,” hold the poem’s core reality and the writer’s relationship with his country Nigeria.

This anthology is concerned with the body, the land, the harm and damage done to their soft expressions of life. In a time when the machine and industrial complex numb our relationship to the body and the earth, how do we as writers respond to the lack of spiritual connection that ensues? Aishat Yahkub captures well this bodily violence in her beautiful and inventive “Bodies. Bodies. Bodies”:

light, hollow, winged **bodies**  
tethered only by memories **bodies**  
**bodies** poised on red blade kn/life **bodies**  
breakable, mourning, weary **bodies**  
endless, birdless, limbless, colorless tree **bodies**  
efflorescing, bullet-opened, bomb-caressed **bodies**  
**bodies** curved with terror, braked, stilled  
on screams **bodies**

The body becomes a thing erased and transformed into a small site for warring. It’s made ordinary (“sweet with ache, small, hungry”), tender (“light, hollow, winged”), but inflected with violence (“war, quenchless thirst”), and made plastic with grief (“breakable, mourning, weary”). We lose sight of the body as it becomes numbers bloodied by death’s hands.

In her other poem, “In the Painting, *Bejeweled Palestine*,” Yahkub continues interrogating the cruelty facing the body, and, in the last line, extends it to the land: “the suspended bombs freckling the sky’s intense blue / face, haloing her body, framed before impact, / look like starry gold gems,

witnessing – / would this bed of brilliant green grass be made into another grave?” The painting *Bejeweled Palestine* might as well exist or not, but the world illustrated here is reminiscent of protestant art, capturing the reality of a place in both metaphysical and realistic standpoints. Perhaps the most haunting part of this poem lies in it being one sentence, stretching out the pain and hollowed war and destitution of a place and its bodies.

Most importantly, these poems remind us that the suffering in the world is inflicted by us, on us. “The shore returns what we have killed. / Says: / I have rolled my waters dry / to present you, your guilt,” writes Tonye George in “Elegy for Things Failed Twice.” George’s poem resists abstract musings and theories of the origin of violence on everything living, keeps its language literal while looking at and calling violence back to its source: man-made. The natural world is turned to both witness and victim in the centuries of man-made destruction, historic lands of beauty pillaged, destroyed, and turned into graveyards. The poems critique the effects of our wars, colonialism, capitalism, and how the systems that drive all of these persevere.

In “El Fasher,” Fatima Elbadri writes of the remnants of war and its effects on the titular city, the capital of North Darfur State in Sudan: “in bosom i hold an’ lick wound of city with tribeless tongue (unsiege an’ cry monsoon) (pull fruit from cracked depths).” Elbadri’s poem holds affection for El Fasher, opens its tender arms to it, but also remembers, in its non-punctuated lines, the “spool of gunfire tongues twisting to break an’ steal children’s singing smiles wiped.” The continent and its people are still recovering; how do we then reconcile with the devastation that generations to come will inherit in their bodies?

But the ghastly disregard of human lives and the earth are not all these writers are occupied with. They also indulge the beauty of the everyday – cute glances stolen from either side of a bench,

origin stories that make up childhood, desire for aesthetics, newness, fear of forgetting fond memories. When Hana Meron writes in “Mengedegna,” “I finally understand... / knowing I didn’t have to / come so far to find myself, loving that I have. / Up here on the roof, there’s room: for beauty, for writing, for me,” one is immediately reminded of the journey of an artist as they find spaces that reflect the beauty they express from within, spaces that will open as creative outlets. Creating art has always been a spiritual endeavor, tied to the natural world. The persona searches for mountains that feel like home, hills that let you see the shine of the world beneath, and waters that snake back to the ocean: “Everywhere, I am looking for the perfect place to write.”

There’s love in these pages. Sometimes it appears as a wish for comfort, as in Sarah Uheida’s “Let Me Let the Rosewood Rot”: “Either let me let the rosewood rot / or lend me a night of yours / to know your shoulder / with my chin.” The most endearing aspect of tenderness could be this, how it seems little but holds more weight and significance than it appears to. And Uheida’s poem enacts this with its yearning for more, for softness: “I do not mind pining / I do not mind poetry / I just need sleep / And you to love me back.”

Sometimes love in these pages is unabashed and transcends time and place, like in Mario Melo’s “A Caged Pastoral”: “It is loud and awkward. / We are loud and awkward, writing love letters / to prisoners. Extending sentences.” In these lines, we sit with loss and remembrance of love. Other times, love presents itself as a worry, of not telling a lover something. Seems simple, seems normal, ordinary, but a pressing anxiety regardless.

It is part of 20.35 Africa’s mission to establish that there’s no limit to the range of African poetics. Volume IX, comprising 17 poets from nine African countries, represents a share personal and socio-political experiences in the worlds they live in. There’s a comfort that comes with knowing

the different ways that beauty and joy enter our lives and writing. Despite the terminal state of the world, it is a source of hope on its own that people find time to write, sit with their grief and try to make meaning of the senseless wars and destruction, find love and hold on to it, on and out of the page. These poems remind me that the thick layered air of exhaustion has not rid us of our resilience. Has not rid us of our dreams to right the current state of our lives and the earth's. I hope that they speak to you the same way they have to me and my co-editors.

**Precious Okpechi**

**Managing Editor**

## Introduction

Much like past anthologies, this ninth volume of *20.35 Africa: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* features established and budding poets who are continuously expanding the breadth of contemporary African poetry from in and outside of the continent. The poems in this anthology manipulate language in ways both familiar and unfamiliar. They weave the proto-semantic and the semantic elements of language into a rope that pulls us into reimagined depictions of romance, violence, wars, the everyday, the past, and the present, and even the mundane. The poems explore what is hardly seen by most but must be said to all. These poets use language for grief and its many heads, for longing, and its many stomachs. They scratch at what is refused a name, dig the truth out of the darkness, and walk between timelines, unafraid to occupy the uncomfortable corners and the places they are unwelcome.

The poems demand that we sit with questions like “What is at stake?” These questions take on different shapes throughout the anthology leading us to think about what memory cannot hold, what the dark devours as it travels from one place in time to the next, what cannot safely be named and what loss forces us to call out directly.

The anthology begins with Star Zahra's “Soot,” where a traveling dark tells the story. Normalcy and destruction run together through the same sky. The poem's lines travel with it, framing across the page, centering and snapping back. It starts, “From here, / not much can be done.” It is direct and aware. “The stove burns blue,” “the hummingbird sings,” and even the “clouds... [run] towards God.” But the sky that draws so beautifully here “remains, somewhere else, dark and even worse.” The poem closes on a single mirrored gesture: the speaker shuts her eyes “to the pleasuring sound / of rain drops dancing on the tin roof,” while elsewhere “a child closes theirs to soot.” The same

act, eyes closing, opens onto two different worlds, one to comfort, one to ash. That is the duplicity the poem turns on, how the same darkness is simply weather in one place but ruin in another.

While Zahra's poem moves through what the eyes can see, Mario Melo's "A Caged Pastoral" begins with a location we can only get to through memory: "In a place that is no more." The place is gone before the poem can enter it. We arrive through this absence, and the poem is shaped by this absence. The pastoral arrives in a similarly uncertain place:

At the center, an eagle dives for a fish,

anteaters feel out for fire ants

and a hippo practices swimming.

It is loud and awkward.

The pastoral is "At the center," but that center is left uncertain: the center of the bench, the memory, the pastoral? The poem does not answer this. Instead, like many of the poems in this anthology, it pulls us into the surreal. For Melo, nature is not working in these images. The hippo, who needs practice enacting its own nature, is "loud and awkward," and that awkwardness turns back toward the speaker and the "you." And just like nature, their reality does not function as it should. The pebble drops in the final lines:

We are loud and awkward, writing love letters

to prisoners. Extending sentences.

We are no longer in this awkward pastoral. We are in a world with incarceration, where sentences are forever extending. The pun functions as a political gesture, and for Melo, even love letters are punctuated with violence, and the stakes are forever expanding.

Fatima Elbadri's work moves through violence differently. Elbadri's poems work with violent imagery, syntax, sound, and questions as the spine and flesh of the poem's logic. In "dar," the poem begins with the problem of measuring war:

cannot study war from satellite  
pictures drenched in color of  
what soaked hibiscus does to  
innards outside of grasslands

War is too complex to be understood from above, and the sentence itself struggles to hold the image together or refuses to hold it. The syntax does not arrive at a clean description of war because war itself has become insurmountable. When the poem asks, "so what of it? war?" it is asking what war even is, while also showing that the word cannot contain what follows:

like sun burning  
genocide or woman  
child cracked from  
taking then watan  
sunk from it! sunk!  
sunk! from it!

War spirals the language into an unfamiliar place. The lack of capital letters and successive enjambments add to the stakes; this is how violence enters even the form. Language, like nature in Melo's work, is denied its usual order, perhaps the only protection the speaker has from war.

In Joemario Umana's, "What the Road Refuses to Name," the war continues but where "dar" denied language its order, here the brutality is held in couplets, a traditional form. This stylistic choice makes violence look neat, almost routine, as though it is a common thing. The neatness

helps hide the disarray of harm, extending the same refusal that the title names: systems and structure refusing to openly name the injustice. The poem reads as an announcement of the speaker's position, a recognition that what it says is not safe to say, not supposed to be said, and is the reality regardless. "Anxiety is a constant." The bravery is in speaking while showing how unsafe the speaking is.

The road itself works as a vehicle in both senses. It is continuous, so as the speaker rides past in the bus, the road follows, echoing the longevity of the unspoken "harm" and of the silence around it. The road, so often government infrastructure, becomes a thing that has seen and made space, unstopped, for the "dark animal" hungering, for the "ladies whose footsteps once trekked," for the "nomads now gone." The poem makes you ask what happened to them, and why we can't name it. The title tells us the refusal is a decision. The road does not speak, yet it acts as a "long throat," an image of voice, putting people in the position of prayer, kneeling, begging for mercy, seeking refuge.

The doubling reaches the speaker too: if the road can't speak, what of me? "I do not want to write... I tell myself not to imagine their faces."

The speaker writes in the margins, saying what they can say, facing what they can face. It echoes the witnesses and story-bearers of war, who say enough to be understood but hold the rest back, the doubling of harm and disappearance set against innocence and presence, "of boys who learned to whistle the music of grass."

Paul Obongodu also probes into the details of what is unsaid. Tackling memory and questioning what stays as time moves on. In "Harmattan," we must take "notice" of what we leave behind in change, even if we don't quite know "what to do with that." There is a cycle to it: the dust arrives

every year “on everything left outside too long,” and you only register the threads of change once you put your hand on the surface of it, “you only notice when you run your finger across something and it comes away grey.” Memory here can be sealed out like a closed window to dust or involuntary, it can settle with you the way the dust does.

The anthology ends with Obongodu’s “What the River Keeps,” another narrative poem that demonstrates his eye for detail. A grandmother kept her money in a tin “buried under the third yam mound from the fence,” trusting that “paper rots but soil remembers.” She could name exactly where in the ground the money was buried. That has now been replaced – a cousin sends airtime, “just light moving through a cable.” In both poems, the old way is a placed thing, the sealed window, the buried tin, knowledge that lives somewhere you can point to. The grief is in watching that place dissolve. When money becomes light moving through a cable and the spot under the third mound has no equivalent anymore, home means “the distances are all wrong.”

It has been a pleasure reading these poems and making selections for the ninth volume of *20.35 Africa*. We are grateful to the poets for sharing their work and are excited for you to read it. What these poems share is a desire to understand the stakes of the human condition fully. No matter the genre or type of poetry they are writing, whether it be romantic, philosophical, surreal, imagistic, interested in sensation, or focused on the protosemantic, these African poets are reestablishing the English language on their own terms. This is the work of African writers on the continent and in the diaspora, and it demands to be read and heard for what it is, as it is said.

**Akosua Zimba Afiriyie-Hwedie**

**Antony Fangary**



## Soot – Star Zahra

From here,  
not much can be done.

The stove burns blue, coffee boils over,  
and the morning hummingbird sings south.

The sky is dark and it  
draws, the way that it does,  
clouds of little chickens  
running towards God.

Somewhere else, the sky remains,  
like this, dark and even worse,

but when it pours over my window,  
When I close my eyes to the pleasuring  
sound of rain drops dancing on the tin roof,

A child closes theirs  
to soot.

**After the Vote – *Daniel Naawenkangua***

*for Barack Obama*

The streets knew it first. In 2008, the sidewalk said nothing;  
it waited. While the future shouted from a high, digital glow,  
we were still tracing cracks in the sidewalk, unaware that the

years had already outrun us. Then, a single voice caught the wind –  
a viral warmth, and the crowd carried it forward, body to body,  
until the cold air became something breathable. The city drank it in.

The young took that draft and exhaled flame. What we sought has been  
there all along, the very pattern of the oscillation. Look at the stage: raw  
plywood and prayer. He stands at the intersection of the No and the Now,

where the old silence is shattered by a new, collective roar. The silver  
at his temples marks the evidence of age. The podium sits on a glass floor,  
and looking down, we see the ceiling was only a smoke veil we built

out of fear. History today is a mirror reflecting the impossible.  
2009: South Side sends its son to sit at the table of blood and belonging.  
The collar is open. The mouth is a song. The ballot was a seed, and now

the child is a giant. They say he pulled the dream from the mud – citation  
needed, perhaps, but the spirit in the voting booth doesn't require a footnote.  
The world hasn't darkened his eyes yet. The plywood is steady.

The mystery is standing right in front of us. I am here to witness the light.

## Self-Portrait as the Gallery Wall – *Daniel Naawenkangua*

*after Jennifer Packer and Jean-Michel Basquiat*

The city's walls could be scratched away, then re-dressed  
in oil stick; in the studio, the ghosts who rubbed out, line by

line, the sitter's gaze, a king's jaw, and left the unseen ones  
their bones pushed against the canvas, laid out a primary

red that made the light shiver or bleed. I didn't want the likeness.  
I wouldn't stay still either; my language was the wash of ochre

on the yellow sofa, in the corner by the door, which opened  
to the street. A critic mistook my mark for mess, so I drew

a crown, three-pointed, cut from the air of a basement after dark.  
I imagined the painter leaning over a private wreckage of loose

bristles for the blur of a shoulder, then the thick crayons for a pile  
of ribs. Later, the face would return beneath the clouded varnish

of memory, and before I could fix the blur in me, a paint-drenched  
arm guided the hand further into the charcoal's black dust. Burning

then in the fully stroked heat, the figures seemed to move but within  
themselves. A group of men, that day, walked over with their clean

lenses and notebooks, gold watches tight above their wrists, the price  
I'd scratched into the corner a makeshift label atop a canvas smear.

They asked me if I wanted to be famous. I put my oil stick down.  
I didn't know I could be the ghost, so I said I'd be the wall. They

called me Legend. One man put on a suit, silk ties. Two others,  
cameras in hand, the witnesses. One began to speak of value

and a voice absurdly sure. We arranged the frames by size for the  
rooms in the gallery home. I played my part. I stood in the white,

on the hardwood, the labels, a price, a date. My job, I'd decided,  
was not to jump into the frame, pretend smiling at the world's feet

with the hunger painters give when they want to be seen, but watching  
the light hit the texture, the room full, the sale complete, curled up

in my own constant obstinate heat, to guard my made-up post, on the  
painted floor I stayed by myself, untouched by any voice calling me back.

**Odo Nnyew Fie Kwan [Love Does Not Lose Its Way Home] – *Daniel Naawenkangua***

*for mum...*

Delayed short rain season, yet she stands at the low table,  
The dark gourds of pigment weighted like smooth stones  
Against the grain of the white mourning cloth. She stands  
at the aperture of the quiet porch, Looking down onto the  
red floor of the yard. Her mother's patterns now hers, though  
she says nothing of the sons who slept once in the village,  
Knowing the boys she prayed for are out somewhere in the  
tall grass of the border, Walking with the shadows every  
evening at dusk. As the grief of a Duafe comb runs down  
the silk, Stamping the wood's teeth into the faded weave  
And along the borders, seeping slowly as ink from the  
crushed bark of the Badie, Those silent stamps of an  
Adinkra night. The Gye Nyame etched like a wing against  
the wall, holding the weight of what the earth has taken.

**Mercy – *I Echo***

The man uses his brother's head to feed the pigs.  
Oracle suggesting, *where there is love, there is*  
*Also a conflict thereof*. It snows in a black man's  
Mind, & the man walks, a large mountain of wool,  
Yet the brother knows the wool will not suggest  
An intimate climate to save the eyes or the palms  
As they swell with fright. The pigs laugh & chatter  
About the taste of a honeyed moon. This brother  
Who is warming up to the presence of passion  
Also smears the heart with ill. Long has it been  
Since the man knelt by a bed, a once-ailing lover  
Coughing smoke to deprive the man of his life.  
So the brother cannot understand who has risen  
After fate. *What do you know of disenchantment*  
*Boy?* The man asks his brother. There is a quiet  
As the pigeons nested in an attic sing the end  
Of grace. If not a creeping broom, then a long  
Suggestion of fire will unmake this house. Now  
The brother wants them to begin again. Go back  
Towards what can carry a faint childish warmth.  
I, pig, pick the serenity of a sting crashing down.

## **Things of Dust – *Veripuami Kangumine***

Maama used to say that our ancestors travelled by wind

Sometimes they would use the light

gentle breeze grazing our faces, every now and then

To let us know they were around

Other times when they were in a rush or angry they would pick up sand

And hurl it at things or at us

Aunty Uno always knew exactly

when they would do that

She could tell by the way the earth lifted

Like the aunties in their Herero dresses lifting the hem of their skirt around a body of water

She would point her index finger at the growing sandstorm in the distance

With the pride of a woman who has been in the dark for years

And knows what a speck of dirt can do

to an eye.

Her finger like a warning, a weapon

And like that, the growing wind would disperse

Cowering away in shame

“What do they want,” I wondered

“To be alive again,” she would say.

On a day when she was not home,

the wind picked up outside the yard

The thing of dust began growing,  
twirling around itself  
Lunging straight for the house  
By then it was too late to close the windows,  
and the doors  
And my finger not proud enough  
To point at and chase it away  
I watched as they entered with the wind through the open door  
and the windows  
And covered everything in dust  
Making themselves at home  
Making things fall apart

I spent hours that afternoon  
sweeping away the sand dunes in the kitchen  
Under the bed,  
in between the refrigerator and the wall  
Pointing a finger in the mirror  
At the speck of dust in the corner  
that refused to leave  
Watching as four fingers  
pointed back at me.

## **The Rotting Animal in Your Body – *Veripuami Kangumine***

They never believed in you  
Maybe it started with the coins  
going missing in ma's purse  
Or the sugar in the canister atop the counter  
Or the list of things  
in the house always going disappeared  
Without anyone else to blame but you  
It taught you that it was never  
easy for someone to take your word  
Especially maama,  
especially the sun  
On the day it happened  
you couldn't speak  
First, out of shock, and then because of the fear that engulfed you after  
Like a thing around your neck  
It began to weigh you down  
He said no one would believe you,  
And they never did  
So you kept quiet

The smell arrived one day  
whilst you were at school  
Something only you could smell,  
a kind of taunting

that attack your nostrils  
Even the cheap adolescent spray  
you got from your aunt  
for your birthday couldn't mask it  
That shame, wasn't it too much for you to carry?  
That load, beloved, was it not too heavy to bear for such a small body

You dosed yourself in paraffin  
To wade the rotting smell  
of your own body  
You began to smell  
like a thing on fire  
But it was better  
To smell like something you  
were familiar with  
Like Uncle Maandero's house  
when his wife locked him in his shack  
With his mistress and set it ablaze

Or the smell of the forest fires  
late in the spring when the rains were late  
And the grass couldn't handle  
the glare of the sun

When you and your cousins  
would sit around the fire

burning the fur off the goat  
head for the smiley  
auntie would cook for dinner that night

Burning was a smell you were used to,  
was a scent you could live with  
But this rot wasn't

It was obsessive, abusive  
It attacked your nose early in the morning  
and was the last thing at night  
It was better to smell like a thing on fire,  
than shame

For shame smells like a rotting animal  
in the dead of summer  
When all you want to do is  
close your eyes  
And breathe in the fresh air

## Poem I – *Aria Deemie*

I.  
headlines tighten  
your jawlines,  
teeth clenched  
  
between history  
and blame.  
  
the shores still hold  
the prints  
of the centuries –  
  
from the 1500s to 1800s,  
over twelve million Africans  
taken across the Atlantic,  
their names  
swallowed by wet salt,  
  
bones dissolved  
into foreign tides –  
  
the gravest crime  
against humanity,  
yet still  
you circle the question –  
  
you held the rope,  
authored the system,  
set the terms,

and called it trade,

now you stand  
distant from the crime,  
as if innocence  
could be negotiated.

But our own adage warns us  
that a soul  
sold to a stranger  
is never far from your shadow.

II.

Ships did not walk  
into our villages  
but waited offshore.

And you delivered,  
naming the cargo  
counting profit  
in human breath

turning brothers  
against brothers,

demanding loyalty  
proven in blood,  
heads of a kinsmen  
laid at your feet  
as a tribute.

III.

Must you  
always walk back  
through history's  
burning corridors  
explaining your wounds  
When the same hands  
that shaped the chains  
shape the systems.

The baton of inferiority  
has only changed form,  
not purpose.

They sit in rooms of power,  
raise hands to vote  
on your pain,  
some silent,  
some absent,  
some untouched  
by the weight of it.

And still you ask  
for reparations,  
as if justice  
must be approved  
by those who profited  
from injustice.

If guilt is a river,  
it does not flow

in one direction.

Yet even rivers

know their source.

## Poem II – *Aria Deemie*

borders spell the same  
and we segregated  
its natural habitat,

drawn lines to claim rights,  
while the borders  
laugh at maps,  
indifferent to rulers' pens.

the colonizers  
once rode its waves  
to Africa,  
their tongues,  
coded as universal,  
ours a barrier.

They cut lands like pizzas,  
named them territories:

a Vai in Sierra Leone,  
Guinea,  
and Liberia,

tongues similar,  
songs alike,  
but minds confined  
by invisible fences.

they drew lines,

lines that still echo in our rivers,  
our markets, our homes.  
we fight to preserve  
the Motherland,  
but does Mother Earth  
know  
we have divided her flesh  
into parcels?

**El Fasher – *Fatima Elbadri***

you living graveyard جنينة of darfur eden invaded fruit siege forest runes of city's heart dig  
city thread spool of gunfire tongues twisting to break time an' steal children's singing smiles  
wiped an' fire burn land rape gold made from an' to it you return

you و

fall city into me i all arms ready to catch you kiss black limbs an' stack tender houses on shoulders  
you in bosom i hold an' lick wound of city with tribeless tongue (unsiege an' cry monsoon) (pull  
fruit from cracked depths) (ginger root blood vein) an' mother birth away your twice genocide  
lifetime you

dar دار

city

gold

city

fur فور

**Oct 2 · 25 – *Fatima Elbadri***

devils on  
tankback like  
hellscape driven  
into/jinn  
    ja weed/  
so shaytan wouldn't not swear by 99 names?                      an'  
empty barrel pointed at trees ripe with fruit -earth corpse kind-  
stripped soul light (of which)  
                    jannah they will be called to                      an'  
bodies sway by benevolent bliss of numbers taken in mass graves of  
black skin variety (of which)  
                    cracked nail bed wool strands unclean  
by brown iron rot (of which)  
                    only glories those becoming of torn earth's final  
                                    Zalzala

**Dar – *Fatima Elbadri***

cannot study war from satellite  
pictures drenched in color of  
what soaked hibiscus does to  
innards outside of grasslands

so what of it? war?  
like sun burning  
genocide or woman  
child cracked from  
taking then watan  
sunk from it! sunk!  
sunk! from it! so place  
is cleft asunder **fur** it  
has not healed  
                  (it all circles)  
in eternal punishment

but which dimension of  
reaching for dark luster  
of dove's cooing?

## **What the Road Refuses to Name – *Joemario Umana***

i do not want to write

how an abandoned sienna by the roadside,

crow-colored and smoking, opens a door of fear

inside my body, how its windows reflect the half-moons

of men running from a country that keeps swallowing its own breath.

i do not want to say that the man with the keffiyeh,

his clothes the color of restless grass, sits across from me

like a prophecy sharpening its teeth,

or that the sugarcane skins scattered on the asphalt

look like the husks of old stories, stripped of sweetness.

but anxiety is a constant, a small stone lodged beneath the tongue

refusing to dissolve. and the news of nomads taken from the road

travels faster than harm itself; it enters me like smoke from a burning

shrine, like the ghost of a name i forgot to bury properly.

what is fear, if not the memory of a body

trying to return home? what is the road,

if not a long throat teaching us how to pray?

i tell myself not to imagine their faces –

ladies whose footsteps once trekked the fields,

boys who learned to whistle the music of grass –

but imagination is a stubborn thing  
it keeps throwing itself at me.

as the bus i'm inside yawns past the scene  
i watch the abandoned van from my window

and ask the asphalt what it remembers.  
it does not speak, only holds the weight

of everything we refuse to name, everything  
that follows us like a dark animal

faithful to its hunger.

## Sunflowers at the Mouth of a Closed Door – *Joemario Umana*

Sad to say the door to our dream  
has closed itself. Here, the dream

is not to arrive but to escape, because home  
is a mouth full of teeth. Even when it smiles,

something is being crushed. The ban  
flies into us like a loose stone from a catapult.

It hit the soft part of our wings. I swear  
if this country had its way – body filled with sunlight –

she will force the pledge into us now, like a blade  
pushed into the belly, with the highlight;

*“to be faithful, loyal and honest. To serve Nigeria  
with all my strength”* Forgive me, I do not know

how to stay loyal to a wound that keeps opening  
its mouth. Somewhere here, Habibti is learning

how a stare is a softer brother of a bullet  
because she lets her body free in her clothing. Her sin

is air touching her skin. Like me, she wants  
to go to where she can make the wind jealous

of her freedom, where she won't have to learn  
the fear of men. But the door has closed itself.

Tonight, she and I sit beneath a sky  
empty of holes for angels to lower their torches through.

Even heaven seems to be rationing light. Only  
the moon stays. It leans into us, soft, almost ashamed

how gentle it is, its smile resting on our skin  
like wet lips. If only this country can learn

the language of that tenderness. If only she could glow  
without setting fire to our bodies. If only she could stop

being a tinder thing, always waiting for our hope  
to be the next match.

## **Bodies. Bodies. Bodies – *Aishat Yahkub***

**bodies** nameless, soft with rot **bodies**  
sweet with ache, small, hungry **bodies**  
stiff and wet with fear, wide window-eyes **bodies**  
witnessing, **bodies** beheaded like chicken  
knife kissing/stinging clean through  
stretched-swan neck **bodies**  
light, hollow, winged **bodies**  
tethered only by memories **bodies**  
**bodies** poised on red blade kn/life **bodies**  
breakable, mourning, weary **bodies**  
endless, birdless, limbless, colorless tree **bodies**  
efflorescing, bullet-opened, bomb-caressed **bodies**  
**bodies** curved with terror, braked, stilled  
on screams **bodies**  
**bodies** hopeful, helpless, desperate **bodies**  
bubbling with dreams extinguished **bodies**  
**bodies** blessed, bloodless **bodies**  
praying, praying, preyed upon **bodies**  
bright, precious, lost **bodies**  
h(a)unted, flee(t)ing, defleshed **bodies**  
cold, blackened, smelling **bodies**  
fluttering, afflicted with war, quenchless thirst,  
unrestful **bodies**  
(t)o warm death, brilliant scarlet stained rivers  
**numbers bodies human bodies numbers**

### **In the Painting, Bejeweled Palestine – *Aishat Yahkub***

is a broken-necked bride gathered  
in a punishing embrace, a kiss being forced  
on her pale, wet cheeks by a giant,  
storm-swaddled, bald, faceless man,  
eyes squeezed shut and ripe, bruised lips  
straining away, her right hand comes up  
to grip his fat neck in a scratch, nails  
catching in the folds,  
her bone-white veil adorned by blood-  
red ringing patterns at its hem  
flows to the field of roses necklacing her  
half-kneeled, lifted feet – at a distance, their petals  
seem like drops of blood dispersed from her womb,  
the suspended bombs freckling the sky's intense blue  
face, haloing her body, framed before impact,  
look like starry gold gems, witnessing –  
would this bed of brilliant green grass be made into another grave?

## **Elegy for Things Failed Twice – *Tonye George***

There is a vast white sand,  
dry with the darkened bodies of seahorses  
scattered like showers along the shore.

There are not many hands in my body  
to bury them.

There are birds too,  
spiked from sipping the sea  
to feed their saplings,  
their wings hardened mid-air,  
their legs emptied of water.

We are mutations of mistakes  
our ancestors archived into us,  
again and again.

The shore returns what we have killed.

Says:

I have rolled my waters dry  
to present you, your guilt.

We practice drowning as a form of migration.

We hover on history as mitigation.

There is a country rehearsing its own ruin,  
beaking at the exhaust pipe of a hurricane.

This has happened before –  
to cities blistered by roasted air,  
to skins taught new colours by heat.

It happens to history  
as it does to us.

The ocean returns to us  
dead things that were failed twice:  
first by its people,

then by the waters.

Repetition has found lust  
in the bosom of my country.

It learns desire  
through our forgetting,  
through leaders fattened on selling us back  
ourselves.

The sand awaits offerings from the tide,  
our dreams, fermenting toward a life  
that arrives with dawn clenched to the throat  
of dusk.

There is liturgy  
in everything the water brings.

And it is written by us.

## **Gutter Spaces – *Mario Melo***

I was so lost in loving you  
Forever  
That I forgot what it means to love  
In the spaces between panels,  
Filled with speed lines  
And other such things,  
Like Kinder chocolate eggs  
Or funny McDonald's orders  
Of small sprites –  
third-definition figures –  
bubbling towards a truth hitherto unknown,  
combining red and blues to make:  
a horizon purple.

## **A Caged Pastoral – *Mario Melo***

In a place that is no more  
I catch you glancing at me from the brass bench,  
insisting: scoot on over.

At the center, an eagle dives for a fish,  
anteaters feel out for fire ants

and a hippo practices swimming.  
It is loud and awkward.

We are loud and awkward, writing love letters  
to prisoners. Extending sentences.

**The Salt Witches – *Nana Afadua Ofori-Atta***

in the times before the spider became the custodian of stories  
the kingdom of the coradze slid into the ocean  
no one knows how it happened but –  
all the tales agree it was the fault of the salt witches

the salt witches in the days gone  
before creatures of kaolin arrived in their cloth canoes  
augured for the rulers of coradze –  
women adorned in ropes of golds  
omens read in bowls of saltwater counselled the stool  
the queen  
it's not of import which one it was –  
crafted a creature of malevolence in a bid for immortality  
this was in the time when the spider was searching for the hide of the python –  
to offer to *Nyankopon*  
a creature, lithe and carved from obsidian  
the tales speak of a man with teeth which pricked the skin of hunters like the leopard  
its maker was its first victim

the forests of coradze gained a new god  
a dangerous thing to happen when gods have since shared minds –  
driven to insanity a chosen few  
once more the salt witches looked into their bowls of saltwater  
for an answer  
the people of coradze were withering on its cobblestones

the queen's daughter  
again, it's of no import which one it was  
for she was born and reborn –

shall be born once more  
into her fingers was carved the symbol of her household –  
a singlet ring to seal her mother's creation in the pits of hell or wherever evil goes to lament its  
actions  
and the salt witches disappeared with her

in time right before the spider captured the hornets  
out in the jutting piece of land south of our fireside  
south of all our land  
a statue of obsidian rose with circles engraved in its fingers  
three pillars of salt around it –  
pointing to the place where coradze once stood  
or so the fables that spider snared in his web say

### Self-Portrait While Washing Dishes – *Jarred Thompson*

somehow dirt always *is*; i shield it from my orifices,  
    cup it with my hand, fish it from the drain.  
water dissolves it: luminous colors turned sickly.  
    there are nights I go to bed with his under my fingernails.  
its disquiet runs; what's clean is what's borne.  
    its smells vary: morning breath, smeared roadkill,  
everything sours in the sun, eventually, for everyone  
    this mirror of floating bits  
inserts: *the deeper the hurt the harder the scrub.*

## What Really Happened in Eden – *Wasilah Oyekan*

*“Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always.”*

– Khaled Hosseini

In the garden, Eve frolics by the forbidden tree. Her companion has been suggesting their siestas inch closer and closer to its shade. A migration spanning earthly eons. Adam sees the serpent slithering its way up Eve's sleeve of leaves. *I wonder what it has to say*, Adam teases and Eve leans in, eager to please. When the serpent's tail nudges a red apple, Eve looks to her companion, eyes wide and questioning. *I'll protect you*, Adam says. He doesn't collect the forbidden fruit from her. Instead, he takes a bite, crunchy as the robe of roses that fall to his feet. Adam doesn't tell Eve to eat the apple as she cries out to God for help. He says, *What do I do? Eternity is emptiness without you*. Later, they stand naked before their maker. Adam points a finger to the manifestation of his ribs, blind to the bulge in his throat.

**Let Me Let the Rosewood Rot – *Sarah Uheida***

Look at this nosebleed-cough-syrup crescent.

Too yellow or too red.

I would die for it.

Spend Mother's gold

on a direct flight.

I want to be pearlescent and necklaced.

I want to return from somewhere new.

And if not then

at least let me burn

the dark-shelved hardcovers

I spent our savings on.

Either let me let the rosewood rot

or lend me a night of yours

to know your shoulder

with my chin.

Give me a day of not deciding

which of your two wrists to blame

poem and pang on.

But when I'm bruise-lit like this

when I am bloodshot iris

I do not mind pining

I do not mind poetry.

I just need sleep.

And you to love me back.

**De Bange Hoek, 1704 – *Sarah Uheida***

She is about to forget  
to tell him how the place  
earned its name –

a historical connection  
to leopards,  
still there, still watching,

though almost never seen.

*Banhoek: scared corner,*  
named by settlers  
who dreaded

what prowled the ridges  
after dark.

She is going to forget  
to mention the leopards,

and some months later  
be unreasonably upset  
about it –

the urgency  
of such a worry,

as if he were roaming  
those plains tonight, not

November, not in Paris.

How angry she is  
with herself  
for having failed

to warn him,  
failed him –

such crucial advice,  
such a bad tour guide,  
a worse lover, really.

And now her *mon amour*  
is unprepared  
for the shadowed valley

and all that sits  
unsaid  
and unseen

*ce soir.*

*NOTE: Banghoek was originally known as 'De Bange Hoek' which is how it was indicated on a transport map of Zeven Rivieren in the year 1704. This translates directly to 'the scared corner'. Not only was it dangerously steep, but there were gangs of criminals as well as escaped prisoners living in the area.*

## Mengedegna – *Hana Meron*

*"Better to love a mountain*

*The one that never leaves, never abandons you."*

– Gigi

The mountains anywhere remind me of home.

When Imaye & Abaye visit, we take them to Shenandoah. In Addis,

we climb Ent'ot'o Hill, survey the sparkling city in the gloaming.

Everywhere, I am looking for the perfect place to write.

In Lisbon, I stare over the water from Cabo da Roca in the Sintra  
Mountains. I extend my stay – restlessly searching for

that elusive feeling, the moment the perfect words arrive  
on the page. It is not the mountain that travels, it is me.

In Marrakech, looking over the Atlas Mountains, I finally understand.  
I take out my notebook, knowing I didn't have to

come so far to find myself, loving that I have.

Up here on the roof, there is room: for beauty, for writing, for me.

ሰፖ

I could write here.

ወርቅ

I could right here.

## **Grief in Flux – *Kataru Yahya***

Your departure cleaved my heart and after all this time,  
it has yet to remake itself.  
I have left the space you occupied untouched,  
and I have declared it holy.  
I confess, the floor my forehead kissed  
echoed my prayers for healing back to me.  
They were riddled with disbelief and empty faith.  
They were insufficient, and in those moments,  
I wanted to hold your pain in my hand  
like a burning coal and grant you respite.  
Attempts to sketch a map of my heart turned into your name, mother.  
I broke quietly, orbiting a million what-ifs.  
I remain tethered to you, but this grief is beginning to gather dust  
and tangle with mundanity.  
It's an expanse with ossified bits and pieces.  
There was a flood that swept away the hope of the early days,  
that I'd wake up and find you sitting on your prayer mat,  
but I remained.  
See, I have remained.

## **Harmattan – *Paul Obongodu***

Every year it arrives the same way.  
The dust first, before the cold.  
On the mango leaves, on the plastic chairs,  
on everything left outside too long.

My aunt used to seal the windows with old newspaper.  
She said the cold gets into your chest if you let it.  
Some things you keep out by being deliberate.  
She said that too.

The man who sells groundnuts near the junction  
has been there every harmattan I can remember.  
He does not cover his face.  
I used to think that was toughness.  
Now I think it might just be that  
he ran out of things to cover his face with  
and kept going anyway.

I do not know what to do with that.  
It sits with me the same way the dust does.  
You only notice when you run your finger  
across something  
and it comes away grey.

## **What the River Keeps – *Paul Obongodu***

My grandmother did not trust banks.  
She kept her money in a tin  
buried under the third yam mound  
from the fence.

She said the ground never lies.  
That paper rots but soil remembers.  
That a man who cannot point  
to where his money sleeps  
does not really own it.

Now my cousin sends me airtime from London  
in four seconds.  
No envelope, no bus, no waiting.  
Just light moving through a cable somewhere  
and a number on my screen that changes  
before I finish reading it.

I keep thinking about the tin.  
Not with sadness exactly.  
More like the feeling when you go back  
to a place you grew up in  
and the distances are all wrong.

The third mound from the fence.  
She knew exactly.

## Contributors' Bios

**Aishat Yahkub** is a creative, poet, art enthusiast, and fourth year medical student from Ilorin, Nigeria. She was the first prize winner of the African Human Rights Poetry Competition '25, Kukogho Iruesiri Samson Poetry prize '25, finalist for the Akachi Chukwuemeka Prize '24. A Best of the Net nominee, her poems have been published in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Brittle paper*, *Agbowó*, *Isele Magazine*, *Full house*, *PoetryColumnNND*, *Poetry Sango-ota*, *Peppercoast mag*, *Ubwali Magazine* and elsewhere. She is a member of the swan collective. Her work seeks to explore all that haunts the body, belonging, the wound of home, returning, and the wide, wild road. She's a whimsy daydreamer, stubborn escapist & lurks on twitter @AishatYahkub.

**Aria Deemie** is an award-winning Liberian journalist, factchecker, and poet. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and a Master's Degree in Clinical Social Work, which informs her community-centered approach to storytelling. She has worked as a Climate, Environment, and Science Reporter with New Narratives and previously with Local Voices Liberia, where she led fact-checking initiatives, media literacy training, and radio production. Her journalism and fact-checking work have been published by *FrontPage Africa*, *Africa Check*, and *The Liberian Investigator*, and she is a recipient of multiple Press Union of Liberia awards. As a poet, she is an African Poetry Book Fund-published author, with two of her poems selected for publication by *20.35 Africa*. She is currently a freelance journalist engaged in media literacy and youth-focused initiatives, using storytelling to amplify underreported voices and strengthen public understanding of key social issues.

**I Echo (b. Chris Baah)** is an MFA student at George Mason University. A Ghanaian-Nigerian, he is the author of *Among the Secret Things*, forthcoming in the African Poetry Book Fund's New-

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**Daniel Naawenkangua Abukuri** (he/him) is a Ghanaian poet and prose writer. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry Wales*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Transition*, *Decolonial Passage*, *The Malahat Review*, *Chestnut Review*, *Orion Magazine*, *Colorado Review*, and *North American Review*. He has been nominated for the Best of the Net, the Pushcart Prize, and the 2026 Caine Prize for African Writing. He is the winner of the 2025 African Writers Award for Poetry and Poetry Archive Now! Wordview, a finalist for the 2025 Adinkra Poetry Prize, and the runner-up for the 2026 Cambridge Poetry Prize. An Obsidian Foundation Fellow, he was featured in the Obsidian Foundation Showcase with The Poetry Society.

**Fatima Elbadri** is a Sudanese-American writer and translator. Her work can be found in *Rowayat*, *The Marbled Sigh*, *Kalahari Review*, *African Writer*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Dune*, and elsewhere

**Hana Meron** is an Ethiopian-American storyteller based in Albuquerque, NM. Her work has appeared in *EcoTheo Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Transition*, and *20.35 Africa*. She has received poetry fellowships from the Hurston/Wright Foundation, VONA, and The Watering Hole and was a 2023 finalist for the Cave Canem Starshine & Clay Fellowship. Hana holds a B.A. *cum laude* from Harvard University and a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry from Pacific University Oregon.

**Jarred Thompson** is a queer colored man living and writing from Johannesburg, South Africa. His most notable publications include fiction and poetry in *FIYAH*, *The Johannesburg Review of Books*, *Prairie Schooner* (forthcoming), *Omenana African Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Fireside*

*Literary Magazine* and an academic research article in *The Journal of African Cinema* (forthcoming) among others. He has been shortlisted for various prizes, some of these include Frontier's Global Poetry Prize (Africa region), the Sunday Times Fiction Award (2024), the K. Sello Duiker Memorial Award by the South African Literary Association (2024) and was a finalist for the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science Awards in the Best Emerging Author Category. He has gone on to win the inaugural Afritondo Short Story Prize, The University of Johannesburg debut fiction prize (2024), and the Short.Sharp.Stories Prize (2024). His debut novel, "The Institute for Creative Dying" (2023), was listed as Brittle Paper's most notable novels for 2023. He teaches literary and cultural studies at the University of Pretoria.

**Joemario Umana**, Swan XVII, is a Nigerian creative writer and performance poet who considers himself a wildflower. A Fellow of the SprinNG Writing Fellowship (2023), he is the winner of the Gbemisola Adeoti Prize for Poetry (2026), third place in the October Project Prize for Poetry (2026), co-winner of the Folorunsho Editor Poetry Prize (2025) and the second-place winner of the Rhonda Gail Williford Poetry Prize (2025). His works have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Chestnut Review*, *Orange Blossom Review*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *LOLWE*, *Strange Horizons*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Ubwali Lit*, *ONE ART Journal*, *Akpata Magazine*, *Poetry Sango-Ota*, *Poetry Column–NND*, *trampset*, and elsewhere. He made it into the finalist pool of the Brooklyn Poets Fellowship (2026) and was shortlisted for the Evaristo Prize for Poetry (2026), the Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Prize (2026), the Kayode Aderinokun Poetry Prize, and the Akachi Chukwuemeka Prize for Literature (2025). He currently serves as Poetry Editor at *Akpata Magazine* and *Ekondo Review*. When life gives him breathing space, he sees movies, anime and roam the streets of Twitter as @JoemarioU38615.

**Kataru Yahya** is a Ghanaian writer and medical sonographer. She is the author of the novel *Home Is a Silhouette*. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *Ta Adesa*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Disappointed Housewife*, *Mouthful of Salt*, *The Hemlock Journal* and elsewhere. You can find her on social media @kforkataru.

**Mario Melo** is an Angolan-American poet living in Washington, D.C. They received a Master of Arts in English & Literary Studies from the University of Denver. Mario's poetry can be found in the *Hill Rag*, the anthology *Capital Love* (WWPH), and a forthcoming anthology from *20.35 Africa*.

**Nana Afadua Ofori-Atta** is writer and poet from Takoradi. Her writing has appeared in *Fusion Fragment*, *A Long House*, *Omenana Magazine*, *Lolwe*, *Tales & Feathers*, *the Ex-Puritan* and elsewhere. She can be found on twitter @afaduawrites.

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