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WE ARE DEATHLESS

An Afropoetry Anthology

WE ARE DEATHLESS:

AN AFROPOETRY ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Wale Ayinla and Kanyinsola Olorunnisola



About the Series

Afropoetry is a series of themed anthologies by black writers. Every installment takes on a new theme and new guest editors. Subsequent editions might be print-only or a combination of print and digital formats. This is the first instalment. The publication rights for the series belong in perpetuity to SPRINNG.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>About the Series</u>	3
<u>Foreword</u>	7
<u>Editors' Note</u>	10
<u>I Hear the Monkeys Love to Dance Too - Kanyinsola Olorunnisola</u>	12
<u>The Staunch Slouch - Inua Ellams</u>	13
<u>National Anthem - Inua Ellams</u>	14
<u>1970 - Onuoha Munachiso</u>	15
<u>Ghost of the Sea...Ashore - Ojo Olumide Emmanuel</u>	16
<u>Trauma - Shirley Jones Luke</u>	18
<u>We Cry with Our Fists - Shirley Jones Luke</u>	19
<u>transhistorical for the x in gxrl - Aurielle Marie</u>	20
<u>pantoum for aiyana & not a single hashtag - Aurielle Marie</u>	25
<u>shedding spades - Aurielle Marie</u>	27
<u>Invitation - Wale Ayinla</u>	29
<u>Your Skin is Your Sin, Boy - Adeola Juwon</u>	31
<u>Portraits on the Oceans Wall - Olátúndé Àyínlá</u>	33
<u>Black-Brunette-Brown-Boy Walks On A Narrow Pathway Where Miracles Are Broken Glasses And Faded</u>	
<u>Songs - Shitta Faruq Adémólá</u>	34
<u>here, we (are supposed to) live - Yvonne Neziyanya</u>	35
<u>Regenerate - Joseph Hope</u>	36
<u>Siege - Kabura Zakama</u>	37
<u>Unseen and Unheard - Blessing Izuchukwu</u>	39

<u>A Black Man's Freedom Poem to His Child - Ayomide 'Wes Oriolowo</u>	40
<u>These Things You Have Learnt - Orji Glomygia</u>	41
<u>Text Dada & the Crew & Let's Have...Like the Sickest Nigerian Night-Out Ever</u>	
<u>- Kanyinsola Olorunnisola</u>	43
<u>black monday - Goodenough Mashego</u>	44
<u>Portrait of Meaning as a Horseman - Obáfẹmi Thanni</u>	50
<u>first homecoming - Praise Osawaru</u>	52
<u>Undying - Timi Sanni</u>	53
<u>a kì í kú - Semilore Kilaso</u>	54
<u>A Broken Part of Me Cannot Be Whole Again - Ololade Akinlabi</u>	56
<u>freedom is free - Daniella Ndubuisi-Ike</u>	57
<u>The 100th Poem - Tukur Loba Ridwan</u>	60
<u>The Ordinary Truth - Chiagoziem C. Jideofor</u>	62
<u>On a Typical Day - Chiagoziem C. Jideofor</u>	63
<u>Black Excellence - Pamilerin Jacob</u>	64
<u>Communion - Pamilerin Jacob</u>	65
<u>Soldier / Ants - Inua Ellams</u>	66
<u>Contributors' Bios</u>	67

Foreword

The hallmark of the Baroque aesthetic was its emphasis on and the intensity of the present moment captured on the canvas. There is so much tension, energy, passion, as well as the manipulation of the angle of light and the contrast between shadow and lighting, called the *chiaroscuro*. This is in a sharp contrast (excuse the pun) with the earlier Renaissance art movement where emphasis was on the action before or the action beyond—a sort of transfiguration or prefiguration. So why am I talking about Europe’s art history instead of diving into the heart of this beautiful anthology that is worlds apart, Afrocentric even? In Onuoha Munachiso’s poem, *1970*, we are easily deceived by the title, primed to muse on an aftermath, a transfiguration, that is, of the end of the Nigerian Civil War.

I have an unwritten rule for prefacing that one ought to subdue the impulse of paying too much attention to the early poems in the anthology or journal at the expense of others. The opening poems already have the advantage of position. But it is often onerous to determine the intention of both the artists and editors in an anthology. In this case, the opening poems can be the compass to point us towards that intention or agenda, especially where the title of the project might be too general. Munachiso’s *1970* instantly lures us into an aftermath, the calm-after-the-storm, almost reminiscent of the reductive rhetoric of Yakubu Gowon’s “*no victor, no vanquished*.” The first line goes “you have just put to bed”. The poem immediately does the Baroque thing, focusing the lens on specific moments, using vivid image, and animating us instantly like “a dancing mural of delight” (Muhammad Ali at the Ringside 1985, Wole Soyinka). Thus, in the aftermath of a birth, “screams / were lullabies”.

One way of deflating the Baroque argument is that even these tense moments are captured in the past (the prefiguration), not just the historically-past as we may know it as readers, but also because the speaker catalogues them in the past tense. The speaker says “your child did not come / when guns shed their bullet”, “Boys fought their battles with / guns”, “bomber sirens were alarms” and so on. But towards the end of the poem, we find a sense of the present (tense). “Behind enemy lines / Hope explodes”. The tension dissipates again towards the aftermath “only in the cool grey of the evening do we find / peace”; teaching us a “stillness the water cannot mirror” as in Semilore Kilaso’s poem, *a kīĩ kũĩ*; rooted in such a rest that resists earlier agitations, “a rest from orchestrating massacre”. This inconsistency within the poem is not a blemish on its aesthetic or power of affect but rather a confirmation of the psyche of the artistic process, one that is weighted by control and chaos. The poet insists. The poem resists. And between them is the language that spectates and participates, charged with tension that enthralls us.

This has helped to train my curiosity on how to read this anthology. One should be suspicious of categories because they can exclude even as they try to include. This anthology is inclusive and expressive in matters of theme, style, range, and sensibilities but also cohesive. This cohesion is a victory of the editors' creativity. In Ojo Olumide Emmanuel's *Ghosts of the Sea... Ashore*, we start to grapple with migration, something else entirely. It starts, "let the count begin" as if instructing the woman in Munachiso's 1970 during her childbirth like a midwife saying "push, push". I like the anaphora of "this count" throughout the poem as if the invocation has not materialized yet and we just have to flip the pages when we are done with the poem.

The speaker presents the images of dead migrants, "who met wreckage / in search of peace", whose prayers are "dashed out by storms". The language itself is rich with the contrast between reality and the subterranean as the "ghosts pick(ing) new bodies / for another voyage / to the land they seek / beyond the sea". Many things are happening here at once. We experience a surrealistic imagery that is in touch with the reality of the trauma of displacement. We also experience a reincarnation of the 'akudaaya' in Yoruba 'mythology' where ghosts migrate to find new bodies. And we also see the spiritual journey of the soul on its way to heaven.

Most of the poems in this anthology are outward-looking. In a time of "ultra-confessional" poetry, I find this both out of time and intriguing. Where the poems look inward, they are very powerful as in Shirley Jones Luke's *Trauma* where "a black bullseye / marks the spot where the surgeon had cut into my black body". The poem immediately takes to another plane that transcends the speaker "I". *Trauma* is stylistically different from other poems as it uses the caesura and white spaces on the page, representing the violence and violation of the black body until "i(t) breaks down" at the end. Adeola Juwon's *Your Skin is Your Sin, Boy* immediately follows Luke's cue as the boy "wear(ing) the / face of night". There is an ambiguity that leans towards a beautiful ambivalence in the opening lines. Is the night's (face) being effaced "worn" by the boy? Is the night an object of the black power? Or does he just wear the face of the night as in complexion?

The ambivalence repeats itself as fear starts "pumping in his heart", pumping as in empowerment. Fear as life. And not life as fear. The cruelty comes clean as the boy starts "jogging to / his death" and comes "under a knee". The anthology is an excellence in structure, a masterclass on how to organize your first book. The migration trope is never a monolith, very expansive in breadth. In Olatundé Àyínlá's *Portraits on the Ocean's Wall*, we experience the horror of a forced migration and displacement that is different from Emmanuel's poem, (almost reminiscent of the Transatlantic slave trade) where "two hundred humans (were) thrown overboard / like confiscated goods".

Again, we come across the sort of logic behind the anthology, which is a restless cohesion as Kabura Zakama's *Siege* threads between geographical Sahara to a psycho-mythical Atlantis, toiling to be transfixed in place. In Thanni's *Portrait of meaning as a horseman*, "words are never by themselves".

Praise Osawaru's *first homecoming* immediately heeds the warning of the speaker's mother in Thanni's poem, "if you leave, you will never return" as "the bus vomits him into the city of Benin, where he traces his lineage", tracing back towards the Homeric legend where Achilles repeats his mother's warning that if he holds out there and lays siege to Troy, his journey home is gone. While structuralism may be out of literary fashion, one must commend the editors for exploiting one of its relics. The organization and cohesion of the poems in this anthology is impressive. The poems speak to one another and listen to one another. Individually, they are brilliant and I feel fortunate to have had a first... or second crack (I am not sure of my position as a voyeur) at the poems before you, dear readers. You can take pleasure in the fact that my eyes cannot wear off its essence, and when the pathos in some of the poems grips you, as when we read Ayomide 'Wes Oriolowo's *A Black man's Freedom poem to his child* where "gravity will not be the only force / pulling you towards the ground" or Goodenough Mashego's *black Monday* which talks about Namibian massacre, do not resist the tears from your eyes for even the water cannot, as Joseph Hope writes in *Regenerate*, "wash this off". Despite the emotional journey here, there is a sort of reclamation of the black body that embodies this anthology as a whole as Timi Sanni writes in *Undying* that "Every black man can breathe / we're sons of ɣ̃ng̃ / we even breathe fire in our fury". I find it poetic that Tukur Ridwan's *The 100th Poem* comes toward the end of the anthology as the speaker writes "I intend to keep it 100" as if to say we are nearing the end. I leave each of these poets to the mercy of your empathy and imagination.

O-Jeremiah Agbaakin

Oxford, Mississippi.

Editors' Note

Like all things wonderful and magnificent, it started small, insignificant to the wandering eye. The seeds of the sycamore that is this collection were planted during my first viewing of “Deathless”, a power music video by the French-Cuban twin act, Ibeyi. Though fleeting by the nature of the music video format, it was a visual experience that I knew, even in that moment, would be unforgettable. Singing about the resilience of black people and our likelihood to multiply even as the (white) world has tried to devalue our being, the video features the sisters literally giving birth to each other, their natural resemblance deepening the metaphor of the singers as a singular entity rebirthing itself.

I started to nurse the idea of a singular anthology of black people (in Africa, the Americas, Europe and everywhere else) coming together with their diverse experiences to blend into a singular entity asserting its voice, its time-tested ability to withstand every single missile thrown its way. I pitched the idea to Wale Ayinla, a friend and poet whose talent and breadth of knowledge I have come to respect. He agreed immediately and, the moment he came onboard, it became a full-fledged project.

With writing from South Africa, Nigeria, England, the United States, the United Arab Emirates and many other parts of the world, we are presenting a chorus of voices which relate to their black identities in different ways and document that relationship according to their unique experiences. Where Tukur Loba Ridwan laments over the torture the black body feels in a world stifled by whiteness “how many more bullets on Malcolm’s chest? / how many more skins should Michael shed / to wash away his melanin for your self-esteem / to glow like his sheen of Jerry curls in the 80s?” or Shirley Jones Luke paints a valid and necessary image of black body horror, “a black bullseye marks the spot where the surgeon had cut into my black body cutting out the cancer cutting into my black body implodes”, they are not offering a singular, definitive narrative of the black experience. Other moments in the anthology give room to conceive of blackness as beyond tragedy. Timi Sanni expresses the almost-mythical resilience of his people: “But today / I walk across the sands / of this new world / like a god /singing praises / to elédumarè / there is no death for me here”. Pamilerin Jacob is enchanted by visions of black excellence when he writes: “I could distill light / from my blood, & build a cathedral”.

These poems, read together in this light, seek to reignite and pay tribute to the glorious Black Arts Movement of the great sixties and seventies. They remind one of deeply urgent and meditative poems that defined the past century of black poetry: Kamau Brathwaite’s *Soweto*, Wole Soyinka’s *Telephone Conversation*, Nikki Giovanni’s *Ego Tripping*, Sonia Sanchez’s *Catch the Fire*, Lucille Clifton’s *won’t you celebrate with me*. It is a mix of well-established literary figures like Inua Ellams and Aurielle Marie as well as incredible-but yet-to-be-celebrated talent.

We are proud to present you this collection, but of course, we claim no credit for the utter brilliance of the works in this book. The poets have a lot to say, and we are merely the channel through which they are telling their stories to the world. This is not about giving voice to the voiceless; these poets have voices. They have *always* had their own voices. And they are speaking. Screaming. To the rooftops. It is on you, our dear reader, to listen.

Kanyinsola Olorunnisola and Wale Ayinla

I Hear the Monkeys Love to Dance Too

Kanyinsola Olorunnisola

after Kayo Chingonyi

If you play Oumou Sangaré at the perfect *hour*,
just before midnight, you can feel your flesh turn
& writhe in its own fire, as the mad, mad moon
tilts on its axis. Glory be to the reckless treasures
of old Daddy Showkey cassette tapes buried underneath
highlands of scratched, street-bought CDs: Usher's *Confessions*,
Salawa Abeni's *Greatest Hits*, the putrid funk of a forgotten child—

—hood making a comeback. Call it nostalgia,
call it 90s kids rockin' & jivin' to the music that kept
them inside their bodies. Accomplices in our own
abduction, we all nurse a deep loneliness
until a Wizkid hit turns the floor to quicksand.

Now, shit gets crazy: a hip-hop club tricks us into dancing
kakilambe. Masterkraft morphs into Mamady Keïta
morphing into Black Coffee. Maphumulo never lets us down,
plays the sickest collection: everything from Burna Boy to Van McCoy,
from Brenda Fassie to Sister Nancy. I hear we monkeys love to worship.
Praise be to Allah. Bless Jehovah. Exalt the precious name of Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

For my politics, I surrender to this image: a half-bitten lip,
a sweaty collar, hips wide enough to hold the night's memory,
a fuji record playing on loop till we all forget the world outside of our selves.

The Staunch Slouch

Inua Ellams

An afternoon indoors but for sunbeams flecking
the audience of relative /, it could be any evening
any century before 'Nigeria' was coined to group
the villages / the hundreds of thousands of families
gathered where the wind is low / the rumbling forest
paused for the passing Griot / Storyteller / PopStar
of the time / My uncle tells a joke in this tradition
risen before the hushed cluster of us / An American
Businessman / he says / thumbs tucked in his belt
stomach puffed out and you can picture so perfect
the TexasOil / GunToting / WarOnTerror / NewMoney
Rich who counts out 5,000 in cash and throws it
in the coffin of a deceased colleague / a Ghanaian
uncle add / us / laughing / The English Businessman
not to be outdone / uncle says / stiffening his top lip
his nose pinched and you can picture so perfect
the Old Etonian / ForQueenAndCountry / OldMoney
Rich who counts out 5,000 in cash and throws it
in the coffin of the recently deceased / Both regard
the Nigerian / uncle says / relaxing now to his Casual
Slouch / AfroBeat / HalfDancing / RoughMoneyRich
The Nigerian shakes his head at the new world order
shrugs at the old / writes a cheque for 15 / throws it
in the coffin / gathers the cash and leaves to applause
rolling laughter / the CrazyTrickster / MoneySwindler
FastTalking / SlipperyPalmed / Stereotype / Everything

National Anthem

Inua Ellams

The mango seed
/ you hid in the left corner
under the grand piano
in the back room of the house
in which you were born
on the corner of Joy Avenue
in a warm suburb overlooking
a highway's traffic
chugging north toward the airport
for long distant flights over
choppy waters / sail boats / yachts
and ocean liners now silhouettes
in the picturesque sunset
where you land and taxi out
to cold snow-slushed streets
of grey neighbourhoods
and slim buildings
creaking with metal stairs
and small apartments tight
as veins you want to pry open
on the damp bedroom floor
in the right corner
where the keyboard tinkles out
our national anthem /
will still grow when you return

1970

Onuoha Munachiso

You have just put to bed. Birth pangs retreat
into happiness. Your child did not come when
guns shed their bullets. Boys fought battles with
pieces of a half yellow sun. Aircrafts unfurled
frustrations of trauma on our heads. We bled
out the prayers of our mothers. A genocide of
boyish dreams. Terror had the face of naked
fathers. Bomber sirens were alarms, & screams
were lullabies. Our mouths were prisoners of
hunger. We gathered loss like treasures. My
brother stepped on a mine. Behind enemy lines,
children & hope explode. Pieces of flesh around
the field asking: What is the cure for horror?
Only in the cool grey of evening do we find
peace. A rest from orchestrating massacre. Small
victories, cool winds heavy with troths of a better
tomorrow. You have just put to bed, savor this
piece of victory.

let the count begin here.
for those who fled home
into uncertainties
let their cadavers
be number'd as those
who fled a history into
another written
on water.

let the count begin here.
of those who met wreckage
in search of peace
packaged in bottles of light.
let their quest
find solace in the parting
notes we stick to our hearts
after their departure.

let the count begin here.
of ghosts picking new bodies
for another voyage
to the land they seek
beyond the sea
where doors open to
receive their wearied bones
& stream in their eyes.

let the count begin here.
of closed borders

horrified hope & false-started

wishes, prayers dashed-out by storms.

let this war-torn, sea-drowned

bodies find stars haunting

them with comfort.

Trauma

Shirley Jones Luke

My black body suffers suffering from mental breakdowns several times a day a black bullseye marks the spot where the surgeon had cut into my black body cutting out the cancer cutting into my black body implodes no one can see my implosions every day my mind shifts from several implosions a black body damaged every time every day. from one trauma to the next endless shifting my mind shifting my black body shifts my mind implodes imploding my black body breaks down breaking down

my mind into pieces my mind scattering across my skull carries shrapnel from my mind into my black body causing my implosions no one sees my black body's darkness becoming blacker a black body out of sync sinks my blackened mind dark thoughts out of control my dark mind controlling my shifting body imploding my mind traumatized

my black body traumatic cancer is traumatic my mind worries about cancer returning return my black body to me stop imploding from drugs to fight the cancer in my black body shifting from side effects my mind impacted on every side

effecting my black body reacts my mind is heat heating my black body boils from trauma of drugs boiling my black body sweats sweating out the drugs my mind racing with worries my black body worries about my mind causing more trauma internally externally eternally my black body is beautiful no one can see my implosions every day I break down

We Cry with Our Fists

Shirley Jones Luke

Although society wants us wanting in order to see us humiliated we're viewed as slim slips of womanhood only desired for our dark flesh provided that we do not put up a struggle do not scream do not fight back that is not who Black women are We birthed history despite scars on our bodies outlining our pain we women of the continent did not bow willingly to the emotional & mental punishment placed upon us we were not blind to abuse all our people suffered shackled like cattle joined by our resilience our past is the truth our present is the reality our future to be determined though too many of us have kept quiet about our shame their silence is a crime of the way we were treated still treated as we witness white fears & white tears appeal to the society's consciousness & winning as we frown & shout to Heaven but continue to dream of other places other spaces who would see our worth our worthiness we have been so fucked by this world which continues to fuck over our black bodies viewed as disposable classifying & dividing us into high class low class ghetto bitches hood chicks assumed & known we are wrecked by dreams deferred dreams derailed dreams dragged through stereotypical mud a dirty reality we want to surrender but instead with our fists we

v.

i too/ have wasted my magic
escaping the focus
of white male insecurity
like a liar i've called it
supremacy/ it makes me no more
a fool than it makes them god
what's in a name?

i was still born and limp
at my birth/ labored
from this jaw
comes a new sound/ womxn
in lieu of bitch

gxrl/ an entendre

untethered from the gut/ of men
vii.

as far as births are
concerned/ first there was Phillis
then other griots followed
like a bloodlet/ another one there
climbing through the window
of an ivory tower/ more of them
afterward/ in darker
and darker droves

i am of a riot/ bastard tongue/ born
writhing in the *both/and* practically
illegible in multiplicity/ where two or more
are gathered it is my mouth
sneering/ into the margin's margin
i write hungrily/ a mastication

once/ i read of a writer
named Dove/ and envisioned myself
flying/ then a gxrl like me/ Lovelace
i rename myself a bound book
somewhere/ a library weeps with sudden
pages of shocking Black flesh
a white man told me this literacy
was a failure/ and perhaps it was [his.]

iii.

if i wasn't here
if i had not survived
this country/ what
would white women have
to create themselves with
i find antithesis to be a powerful origin
[see here/ i am not a monster
i have no fangs/ have killed no one
nor prayed into the mouths of men]

a white woman ain't me
and so must be her smallest self
which is to say i am/ that i am
you is/ whatever i've left to rot
which of us becomes the fable
if the other disappears?

viii.

whereas the *i* can only attest
and x consents to none of it
each violence assigned
at birth/ the genital matter bloodied into a name
what's in a name?
i witness/ i is complicit and so allows
x into the soil/ sows possibility and mud
i chew

i swallow

and become

gxrl [here!] [here!] [here!]

i.

god ain't no different than *gxrl*

marrow of stars alive in our hands

magical/ terrified/ sovereign

our names our own/ finally

iron-soiled/ brimming

with the curse of silt/ what's in them

conjurers or architects?

gxrl as in/ a whole world

made flesh of our dark/ flesh

we call it rootwork/ this building

each new break

wielding a god body

vi.

i like simple violence

cesura into fiction

and x the Black

rhetorical/ christ conjuring

[does the author consider this art
catastrophe or crucifixion]

not to say i am god/ but to imply

i been left/ to fester in the sun

like a sore for a city

folk gather at my palms to view
they own holes/ wounds to mark
where myths entered/ where disgust made exit
hole in our skulls perhaps imagined/ body
whittled into petit metaphor
cast in bronze/ wrapped in barbed
teeth/ pocket body
barely even a name to hold
the flesh to bone yet/ holy

ii.

they pulled me from my almighty mother
and the doctors couldn't find my face
smacked their palms against my bloody
flesh to see which end

of me made the most noise
followed the cord that tethered
my mother to me and discovered a neck
strangled/ nutrient dense leather

gargled and gargoyled i fought/ for air
and so yes/ my birth was not
unlike a lynching

my mother weeping/
my mother surrounded
by men readying their knives harvest parts of me
if ever i gave up the struggle
hours-long was this fight for life my little heart blistering
into bloom. the story hasn't changed

iv.

what i mean is this/ country

is mine if only because
from my mouth i spit its loam
and unspin a noose/ i won't exploit my name
the only metaphor i was given
instead/ i hunt/ for x/ for vicious
edges/ and build myself a muse

yes/ i earned this country
i owe it nothing
with my infinite infant hand
i manipulated/ death sentences
into a single compound-complex one

out the umbilical/ i bled/ a life worth writing
down/ and in a century's time there will be another
word created still for subversion tactics in/ an unaming

the alternative alchemy/ a Black gxr's first breath.

look!

There go a Black gxrl
body still tethered
to her head

There go a Black gxrl, shirt still dry
no river of marrow or tears
following her up the block
no bile from her head

Can we call her into form? not a river of marrow and small tears
of sweaty fabric, but manna and honeysuckle
from her skull no bile, but beatniks
in bloom. Can we celebrate the child on this side of the grass?

her sweat fabric, honeyed and unmanned
the gxrl young, a fresh world of gardenia
bloom-ing. Can't we celebrate? The child's on this side of the grass!
Open the window and usher in a new god! A breeze

gardenia-young, the gxrl a world made fresh.
in her hands piano keys, sticks of cinnamon gum,
a window into the new. God, an usher opening
a psalm, free to be the thing she was truly made of:
piano keys. In her hands, cinnamon sticks like guns
in the wrong light. Never mind that. Today she lives.
A thing to be freed. Made of psalms, and truly
holy. The gxrl will turn flowers into wine. Spills herself no more

wrong. And today, she lives. Never mind the light
offering summer halo. it is a myth, that we die, anyway. We too
holy. No more spills, no more flowers. From wine, gxrl churns herself a will.

Rises from the concrete, her arms full of clove. Her mother's yard a throne.

Anyway, the myth is that we die. We too, summer offering. Halos
like birds on our shoulders. The gxrl, gardenia, and we planted her
full of clove and her mother. She raises a throne from the concrete, a yard of arms.

The gxrl, a god king. The gxrl, a map of good. The gxrl, a thing worth trending, after all. Just
look!

there's an old wives' tale

'bout pouring honey into wounds

fun fact: the old wife ain't a wife at all, but a fish.

the tale is exactly that, misspelled.

i understand the temptation

to fill our ache with the tender sweet

ness of a sugar salve.

i get not wanting to call

a spade, itself

or a wife, a fish.

an anchor: you lost your baby on a wednesday thick with moss.

it was an accident. you set her aside to clear

your head & suddenly she decided it was best she leave.

somehow the sun

gon' rise on the truth

of the matter and won't no soil

syrup nor bee's toil make the going

any less of a sadness

meanwhile: you circled the hands of your love with saffron

yet he did not come home. you cried your daughter's name into

the mouth of a pike and still, the water yielded no child.

it may be that the truth is a trick of the light

broken on the face

of a sharp well. unless the wound is the lesson...

& then ain't no bee's toil

gon' do you any good, anyhow.

alternatively: everyone talks too loud

in the hallway outside the waiting room. he never

asked you to keep it. you can't ask him to stay.

the whole thing ain't but a scaly bit of folklore.

the whole thing skips beneath water.

Invitation

Wale Ayinla

1.

In the year of goings, I sleep
in the belly of a storm, and my body
is remade into a thing death cannot touch.

My eyes are the exact shape of a floating
moon, two orphaned siblings snatched
by a hungry sparrow.

To say whose I am, or to say who I belong
to. This anxiety has shredded me apart,
not even a root to make my tree blossom.

2.

The ground says every step we take
is a journey to the grave. Who determines
the end of waters?

I keep the memory of my most tender lover
in a forest of skulls: mountains around us
like retribution as we fill the room with lights of our bodies.

We do not know the way out of our bodies.
Our wounds are dressed as a sky trimmed
by an inexperienced apprentice.

3.

I can tell you that I am not afraid
of the dark, but who will walk me back
into the mouth of prayer when sleep deserts me?
I sing of this madness, the petition
from the furniture of language, the voice
of my ancestors ferrying me into vague imaginations.

I was once alive, until death touched me—not mine,
but of a world in which all that is dead could speak,
and ghosts were just children hiding behind their mother's wrapper.

4.

At the announcement of O's death,
I shimmer the holes of my wound into a bandage,
spiraling a thick arm around my belly.

There is how death calls you into something
bigger than yourself, a stretch of the skyline

that holds nothing but a familiar desperation.

He didn't know how he looked in the arms of death,
blood gushing from his neck where he was stabbed,
like an oasis finding where to outdo itself.

5.

I, too, have eaten part of the body of Christ,
tell me how it feels not to be hungry of another's body.
How to bridle my tongue against the world's excesses.

I will always be the one whose wildness is untamed,
the one untouched by the finger of God's wrath.
I am a road, an access into spaces. I break and fold.

Today I dream of a castle of bones, the skull made as a door.
There is a stranger in my head, hands the size of a fork,
stretching my brain into elastic bands.

6.

The wild dogs in my belly lay ravenous
at the feet of their master, articulating loudly
to the point of apprehension.

They growl, each scream winged
against the outside of the belly. An arrow
shot, a distraction made of slithering sounds.

I am hiding my grief in the guise of a diet plan.
I eat when the body dreads its own meat,
when its water jangles the throat, and it groans.

7.

It hurts to mourn someone the way a mirror
is a witness, an altar that widens your loneliness.
All through, the animal remains. Unharmmed.

I push a wooden door in one of my dreams,
and my father's shadow divides. This is the moment
where I strain the dark owls of his scattered light.

Not the hue that catches the night, and the smell
of rotten tomatoes from a basket, the harvest
crawls up on me. Summoning.

Your Skin is Your Sin, Boy

Adeola Juwon

boy wearing the
face of night,
fear pumping in
his heart, hairs
coiling at the
face of light.
boy jogging to
his death— his
skin, a testament
of death, racial
profiling, fear. boy
under a kneel—
george floyded to
death, boy in
the park, bullets
running into his
melanin frame, boy
wriggling his body
on asphalt, the
earth sings a
dirge and his
soul gives to
it. boy whose
skin is sin,
boy whose body
breaks under the
rod of oppression,
whose body attracts
hate like shit
attracts flies. boy

vomited from home
like dysentery,
boy unsafe in
foreign lands, hunted
boy running the
streets like a
gauntlet. boy, firefly
in a sandstorm.
boy wearing the
face of night,
your skin is
your sin, boy.

This poem begins with a dirge
Symphonies of souls once lost
Two hundred humans thrown overboard
Like confiscated goods
Their bodies crashed into the frosty sea
Masked, bound and abducted –
from the corridors of their home
Corroded eyes couldn't fetch sleep
Their black skin plummeted
and settled between the ocean's feet
Their tongues bellowed in distress
as fear grapples their drowning spirit
Their cries polluted the wind;
Swirling across the clouds
Their demise spread like venom
Unhurriedly sealed in words of mouth
Their stories became synonyms for massacre
Their history became an epileptic distortion of sermons
A book of empty passages
This poem has now become a dirge
And this dirge isn't mine neither is it yours
It belongs to a generation lost at sea
Their bodies became a floating cemetery
Tied to an homeless wave
Breaking memories into pieces of thoughts
They became potraits on the oceans wall

Black-Brunette-Brown-Boy Walks On A Narrow Pathway Where Miracles Are Broken
Glasses And Faded Songs

Shitta Faruq Adémólá

for George Floyd

i can't breathe... i do not know how to define
happiness on a tree.
when a bird flies across beautiful winds,
it has wings the colour
of glass shards,
a beak like a wall moulded into coarse graffitis.

it does not know how to break songs anymore.
because, here, the black line in my
mother's love poems does not sing again
like *blues*.

in the chest of my neck,
a black bird is the rough voice of crippled
songs,
it is my sister's pride defiled like the fall of
hopes in America.
it is the brutalities of the war journeys my eyes have seen
it is the pain i carry around my skin like the stench of a mad man's nose.

till today, it is the //breath// I cannot //breathe//, the //breath//

I cannot //breathe//, the //breath// I cannot //breathe//,
the //breath// I cannot //breathe//, the b r e a.....

here, we (are supposed to) live

Yvonne Nezianya

our coffee legs reach forward with
every two beats our hearts make
but it seems as though time remains
unmoved, unblinking, still.

an effect of lungs expunged of smoke
and ears left to hear earth's music and
not the buzzing of dilapidated buses
that convey *over-woke* minds.

here, food is eaten from brown pots
that carry our ancestors'; scars as
calligraphy. our bodies are fuelled by
the immortality found in palm wine.

here, our names do not leave your tongues
with a stutter for everyone
was baptised in the incantations of the
land hence, our spirits sync.

here, our sorrows escape our hearts as
grey heads feed us wisdom through moon-
light tales as the cocks crow, screaming
love in our ears once the night disappears.

here, a place that should be
if we had refused to trade culture
for promises made to our great-grandparents,
promises our grandchildren may not live to see.

Regenerate

Joseph Hope

We didn't lose our skin, did we?

Didn't it regenerate?

We can't die, it seems

like skin we always regenerate.

And water can't wash this off,

this color we wear from birth.

And we will remain as we are, glittering like gems

without a price tag;

we are priceless, and like a tree

we'll sprout again every time we are cut down.

- *for Benjamin Zephaniah*

From the Sahara to Atlantis, We toil,
Men with rolled-up sleeves
women with babies on their backs,
And the thunder roars.

In their tripodal coven,
the chief caresses an overflowing belly
as senators drool, honourables fawn
and the learned doff their wigs,
all bound in the worship of the jutebag.

And we toil,
men with rolled up sleeves
women with babies on their backs,
And the thunder roars.

At the crack of midweek,
cabinet gods encircle our wealth
and tame the fate of millions.

And we toil,
men with rolled up sleeves
women with babies on their backs,
And the thunder roars.

In the clutches of greed
practitioners of lies gather, And

cause the rain clouds to scatter.

And we toil,
men with rolled up sleeves
women with babies on their backs,
And the thunder roars.

As the rumble of hunger
masks the futility of anger,
we die in our hearts, Long
before they dump our bodies.

Unseen and Unheard

Blessing Izuchukwu

The African scent rises to the sky
Mingled with sweat and toils and hope
They can perceive it when they met us
But they refuse to acknowledge us.

We stand before them but we are not seen
We cry out but we are not heard
They think it's shadows they are beholding
Because our skin looks like charcoal.

Our dark skin doesn't mean our souls are dark
It doesn't mean our ways are dark
Neither does it mean our understanding is dark
It only means we have more melanin than they do.

Our Africanism is our colour
Don't look down on us because of it
Don't turn a deaf ear to our pleas
We are humans and we have rights too.

Yes, they have got technology and can manipulate machines
But we labour with our hands, toiling mother nature
Hope is not lost, Africa will arise
And take its place among the kings of the world.

A Black Man's Freedom Poem to His Child

Ayomide 'Wes Oriolowo

To wear this colour as a skin
Is a mantle you never really earn.
Your mind never truly understands what it means
to be so close, in complexion, to the soil.
How gravity will not be the only force
Pulling you towards the ground.

This culture
Might seem a little too loud- we learnt the sound
of chains before they broke. We learnt
different ways of holding the soil in our skin
and when the sun grew tired of seeing our faces,
we lent our bodies to the ground.

But do you not wonder
how Sango survived their big grammars?
How Orunmila maneuvered himself
Through their pile of books.
gods as resilient
as the skins of their oracles

your body is not their garden, you see,
something to grow good music out of.
Your rhythm is thick and blunt
For when their metals might return.
Remember, you are the soil
And your skin was made only for water.

These Things You Have Learnt

Orji Glomygia

how to hide pain in silent songs
and scars that still bleed on cold mornings
paint it on your lips

how to hold tomorrow in your palms
then let it smash
like an egg on a rock
it's not yours to keep

how to create energy at your core
allow it seep out through your pores
your people do not possess such power

how to force oil down your curly strands so they don't break
just like you haven't
or better still,
how to be called beautiful; turn bone straight.
how to arch your back
like a reverse-camel or maybe a dog
make no sound and eat your lot

how to draw chocolate from the depths of your skin
lick it off your fingers with a prayer on your lip
dance in the abomination that is you
and seek retribution for the sin of what you are

how to exorcise your mind of the demons you harbor
unlearn everything you've learnt
chase the ends of the earth

say amen.

Text Dada & the Crew & Let's Have...Like the Sickest Nigerian Night-Out Ever

Kanyinsola Olorunnisola

after Nadra Mabrouk

Let's start with this: the fresh glaze of skewered meat over smoldering coal, jollof-rice bright & red as grandma's outdoor kitchen, flour balls dipped in milk & salt & American excess, the feast to temper the night's inevitable hunger. Wizkid on the Bluetooth speaker, homies get hooked on their own drip: ankara fit, silver-washed nails, dreads soft as wool, kohl-lined eyes staring back in the bathroom mirror. Dada pulls up in his convertible, hollering in that glorious mix of Yoruba & pidgin English. The crew heads downtown. We are unruly in this club. Imported dance moves. Wine flowing like Darego's gallant gowns. Accents thick & black & sweet as molasses. Halima's mecca-gold teeth. Your nose-ring. Dedun's tribal marks. Selfies to flex on the 'gram. Beauty marks inherited from uncles & aunts whose faces we only remember through our own. We are the only remnants of home each other will ever have. Hey, don't let them get to you, brother. You look sicker than this beat, brother, you feel me? Later this night, five-o may stop you on the road, ask you to prove that you deserve to be here. But for now, in this moment, you are here, you feel me? We are all here & look how divine we are in this light.

black monday

Goodenough Mashego

can we declare a black monday
draw shades close curtains fly flags at half mast
remember each blood that gets shed is another dent on humanity
when we kill one we kill all where did we lose our sanity
we're echoes of a wounded past we need *muthi*¹ to fix us
mandela poisoned our minds thought the past was behind us

can we declare a black monday
for namibian peasants massacred at cassinga
bombs rained like yankee napalm incinerating vietnamese
thousands died like palestinians under israeli white phosphorus
refugees bombed out of shelters just before breaking bread
while pik botha peddled the story of a terrorist camp
deep in the heart of angola ain't no place to hide
we stood yelling 'we shall overcome!'
charred bodies with torn limbs sing 'aluta continua!'
can we drown the silence in a chorus
that no single General was called to answer a question

can we declare a black monday
for my grandfather who cried tears of blood when they took his land
when they took the livestock & broke apart his clan
he lost himself on the way to a barren existence
never found his way home until the day he came dying
became a stranger to his kids
who became strangers to their kids
while the cycle continues no one mourns our loss
father grows apart from kids wonder what society we building

can we declare another black monday
wear mourning garbs fly black Daesh flags
for thousands of syrians killed when two powers shadow-boxed
while the referee overlooked steroids served between rounds
in a bout of two jumbos only the grass suffers

can we declare a black monday
for the mother who got raped by two dogs in a white man's house
mongrel trained to chow darkies for that's equal to mating with a bitch
assaulted for being poor
who the hundred car Boer convoy never knew her name
for she's a glitch in a matrix
a special effect that faded
a tracer bullet at midday
a single drop in an ocean
she has a name & a surname
she has rights like farmers
she has no rights unlike farmers

can we declare another black monday
for 10 million congolese killed by leopold II
a genocide buried under the rubble of history
no reparations no process just another negro that died
like an army boot on a column of ants
smog suffocating a colony of bees
families wiped like chalkboards to rewrite history
questions 'bout a belgian ethnic cleansing remain a mystery
ten million souls sacrificed to a vampiric god
they speak french like it's virtue when it's a crown of thorns
congolese! congolese! where art thy pride my people

can we declare another black monday
for miners killed by capital at Lonmin in marikana
blood gushing hope fading ain't no CR17 soul-searching
ain't no feelings of remorse capital ain't got no conscience
it devours humans
makes sacrifices of humans
impales humans on crosses make a dash to the bank
let's have this monday to remember those who died for platinum
whose stories of hunger pangs were buried by judge farlan
their families wait to this festive, 'daddy ain't coming home'

can we declare another black monday
for the baby shot behind her mother's back mistook for a baboon
when they're dark & they're plumb babies look like baboons
courts see darkness when black babies gasp for air 'fore they drop
craving oxygen
they live on oxygen
without oxygen
black babies shiver & die
when she got shot she died quicker lost blood & oxygen

can we declare another black monday
for the child traumatised while having lunch at Spur
who'll suffer PTSD every time she's served a rump steak
when she passes a Spur
it all comes flooding back
she fights thoughts of hunger for it scares her to eat
Spur said the culprit should never eat at Spur
they said the culprit is our kin we'll all boycott your Spur
Spur said we're sorry didn't know the victim was black
they said next time you talk shit we'll ban (burn down) your Spur

can we declare another black monday
for every time steve hofmeyr tweets
every time donald trump speaks
every time a mother weeps
they represent not our strength but our weakest moment
we are at our best not when we tweet
often silence is better than a speech
we need lotion to rub on shoulders of mothers when they weep
pellets to silence the blue bird when it tweets
silence for it can be traded for gold
gold which we step in the earth's belly to dig

let us declare another black monday
for andries tatane martyred for demanding water to drink
killed by zuma's storm troopers
after zuma promised him water to drink
andries waited in vain for his glass of water
as zuma cracked his mocking laugh with every bullet fired
'give that man some water before he dies of thirst'
andries died of thirst before they finished him off

let us declare another black monday
for the man forced inside a coffin in a Boer slapstick
they laughed hard like we did at ET's fall from grace
when his black horse couldn't stand his anti-black rhetoric
thrown in the air 'fore he fell exposing green undies
they thought a sequel could be staged inside a brown coffin
film the pain play it back during a Boere orkes
in the name of ET in memory of treunicht
in celebration of every genocide ever committed against blacks
to remind themselves how it feels to bury people's dreams alive

can we declare another black monday
for reeva steenkamp who died for they thought she was black
five shots through a locked door for *kaffirs kan nie maklik sterf*²
they are the hard nut you crack with a five pound hammer
they say 'black don't crack'
you need a Glock to stop 'em
you need collateral named reeva for him to cry us a river
& common sense to prevail
act up in court win an Oscar
we need a black monday to remember reeva died like a Christ

can we declare another black monday
for khwezi who walked alone to an early grave
every step she took to her tomb left petals of blood
she had no guard of honour
women were buckling their belts
satisfied they orgied her hope
in concert with misogynists for she was the other
she never thought of uBaba as a man with a dick
thought of uBaba as uMalume her kith & kin
khwezi had no companions in her final hour as women played Pilate

Can we declare another black monday
for the daughter *ezilalini*³ who got forced into marriage
victim of culture so obsolete it's a red blot on white linen
excuse to masculate *iyishimani*⁴
initiation has failed if it produces not warriors
liquid tongue to sweet-talk a princess
they hide behind the façade of a failed custom
let's shed a tear for the interrupted angel
for her lost innocence. her stolen childhood

let's declare a black monday for every ill we stomach
for every black who died. for every black who can't breath

-ends-

Glossary:

muthi – Nguni for *traditional medicine*

Kaffirs kan nie maklik sterf – Offensive Afrikaans for *Blacks are hard to kill*

Ezilalini – IsiXhosa for *rural areas*

Iyishimani – Nguni for *a man who can't chat women*

I

In the tongue where the same breath knows and moulds

mọ mọ mọ

and is holy, words are never by themselves

Òwe lẹ̀şin oro

but gallop towards meaning

II

Wisdom listens to what the breath fails to carry.

Mother says, *come home*.

Says, *I fear if you leave, you will never return*.

The breath breaks at *return* *return to me whole*.

I fear you will change beyond my love for you.

Brother, looking in the mirror—

for himself—asks, *how do I look?*

And the breath holds *how much of me remains?*

How well have I disappeared? How convincing is what

I have shown you not to watch?

Watch my self-erasure; not the lead, obscured to draw back my breath,
my self, over the faithful canvas of returning.

first homecoming

Praise Osawaru

the bus vomits him into the city of Benin, where he traces his lineage

to a gathering of ruddy walls & brown roofs his grandparents call home.

in the surroundings, grasses run for miles, wild, & streets are unclad earth.

he's engulfed in tales of his parents' upbringing, of his ancestors

dating to the period of the Benin Kingdom, & his mind widens

with the knowledge of history, understanding of identity.

he modifies his tongue to verbalize *uwese* instead of thank you,

bends his body to the smackings of *shekere* & chants.

time stretches him from Favor into *Osarunmwense* in the space of weeks,

& when he's departing, *Ivie* snakes his neck, a symbol of nativity.

I raise a hundred hands to the sky / as a tribute / to this day
where a cop has tried / to seize my breath beneath his knees /
in vain for tomorrow / when this racist world will try
again to kill me / & fail / because in this alternate world / I
wear a skin that toughens / into steel each time a bullet lunges
at my body. In this world / there is no black man unfurling
into sinews and veins / on the sidewalk / the bloody signature
of a bullet on his back / there is no black man unscrambling
into numbers / statistics / hashtags / no domino effect reaching
across the cyberspace with videos after videos of deaths by the
hands of brutality / there is no one saying *I can't breathe*
beneath the knees / of a power-drunk cop / Every black man here
can breathe / we're sons of *ṣàngó* breathing fire in fury. See,
I know a day will come in another world / when God will put
a sickle in the hands of death / point to my body and say *in there*
is a soul ripe for harvesting. But today / I walk across the sands
of this new world / like a god /singing praises / to *elédùmarè* /
there is no death for me here.

1. *Ṣàngó* - A royal ancestor of Yoruba and third Alaafin of *Oyo* who was said to breathe fire.

2. *Elédùmarè* - Yoruba for God —the Lord of Creation.

“We are all Jesus. How many times have you died and risen? How many deaths have you conquered?” - **Tolu Daniels**

they have broken my voice box,
buried my body in a bag of wilted bones;
teaching me stillness the water cannot mirror.
they say silence is a vacuum dissolving everything,
even the emptiness of itself.
so my fingers remain numb, unable
to ink their (un)doings, and play
the monopoly of binary numbers spreading
lies in the sheet of foreign tabloids.

the other day, some brothers were gunned for
speaking against the gunning of other brothers.
The government still denies killing these youngins.
they say their mothers did not grieve— she did not
seek permission before burying her
dead son, so her son must be alive.
they mistook her decision not to be used for an hashtag
that verifies a cause that would be silenced
by the random crazy in days to come.

now, tell Adam to summon a congregation of black bodies
and sing for my spirit.
tell Isaac I have become the sacrificial lamb
waiting for the forces to accept me.
tell Jesus to tell himself that I have
died and risen— I carry my brother’s soul in my body.
tell Mary Magdalene to rub the cologne of death on my flesh,

for

I have risen and death cannot take me again.

A Broken Part of Me Cannot Be Whole Again

Ololade Akinlabi

what history cannot remember is not a subset of memory.
the wind takes a new bearing tonight
and silence descends at my doorstep.
enough of dreams dying halfway.
do you know that a grave is a demarcated memory?
& it is futile awaiting the return of wingless birds.
it's being days beside my mother's grave
still cannot hear her heartthrob.
god bears every name you christen him.
giving grief beautiful names means building
a booth of hope for a broken body to find home.
there is no healing for some wounds.
i mean to say, a broken part of me
cannot be whole again.

freedom is free

Daniella Ndubuisi-Ike

after the song by chicano batman

freedom is free

and birdlike,

untethered

from the doubts of

gravity

and fear,

irrefutable as the knowledge, that

a masquerade tree will stand

in honor of its roots

and a fatigued sun will only ever find repose

westward

hopelessness, on the other hand,

is in a comic way contagious -

it moves without interruption and spreads relentlessly

smearing everything in its path.

bloodied coups, and presidents identical to the

cockroach survivors of a nuclear bomb

- how reluctant they are to burn

or at least leave bad enough alone.

this is the legacy of our forefathers

- utter ruins and dreams deferred

such that the Nigerian youth are intimate with

the hopeless circumstances

that have followed us across decades.

in this way, our backs are more likely to know

the hollow shape

of generational burdens

like greed and distrust

and irremediable anger.

despite this,

maybe even because of it,

we stretch

eternally outwards,

arms linked over the entirety of our land

like bodies of water in sacred union

we come together and move

only to the rhythm of the rivers

Niger and Benue

which is to say we love only for the good of our land

which is to say we act only for the liberation of our people.

how the rivers touch

and make their way

into deltas

-finding oneness

with the Atlantic -

lets me know

there is always a chance,

to escape the rugged legacy of our forefathers -

to thrive in spite of it.

but it only exists if we choose freedom

together

-birdlike

and untethered from the doubts of

gravity

or fear

or death.

The 100th Poem

Tukur Loba Ridwan

this is the hundredth poem in my drafts
& I intend to keep it 100, for a century
that witnessed our rise like sunshine
across a hill of nights— a hundred years
of our timeline on an atlas of humanity
when our masquerade of godhood
was unveiled & celebrated. or what more
should Martin Luther King & Rosa Parks do
for us to be heard like Fela's incessant
rhythm of torture on the skin of despots?
how many more medals should Jesse Owens
wear as an ornament of triumph?
how many more bullets on Malcolm's chest?
how many more skins should Michael shed
to wash away his melanin for your self esteem
to glow like his sheen of Jerry curls in the 80s?
how many more Grammys for Sade, Whitney
& Beyonce? how many more Oscars
for Washington & Freeman? I could ask Soyinka
how best to write my tomorrow
to the Nobel Prize. this world is a sky
for every of our birds, & we have graced
the lines of our palms with giant strides.
how many more souls should a black Jesus
win for you? how many more by Kanye West
in the cathedral? how many more rhythms
for these blues do we have left?
how many songs to pop & lock to on a Motown vinyl?
how many more literature?

exorcise me of this poetry if you can,
because the spirits of my distant relatives
are not ready to be blown away
from my nostrils when I exhale.

To that living tin-can poet-*not in a house!*

-not stuck on an island!

The way a nomad from outside this sphere gathers life in broken bits and dines with condemnation after a long day of lining our roads with flies. Motion lurks in places too green, too exposed to light, too full of voices waiting to yell with their chlorophyll strength. Stoic like ants, they forage for what falls below the decibel, under the table where throats are cloaked with cobwebs and running cruelty as targets...

-everyone speaks with the curse of gesticulation.

frequency cuts our range and

flows dirtied intoxication

:the connoisseur to our gathered ignorance

**Poacher doing
the work of God**

i take your forgotten-
fire died out
steam high up in the skies
heavy heaving of a chest that emulates life
and death,
what comes with the demise of time?

these shadows offer a gallery show of recollecting

translucent life, and

people speak of an unseeable future where

every dying is continuity

**Craft hands making
the world smaller**

But continuity is a dry-shoe smell that disappears completely and you never know where the trail leads.

Prayers are not the only poetic things. The very first line of a blunt apology for a bully-teacher twenty years from now will reference lines like shooting canaries. The very first and initial anger was ordinary truth, a premature attempt at transmogrification

On a Typical Day

Chiagoziem C. Jideofor

i do not wake up to the thought of killing me or the plants next to my bed.

i notice-

- foil shrinks in the first minutes of dough being exposed to enclosed heat
 - the light bulb watches and says nothing
 - the bright sun too clairvoyant to note where the cut starts and ends
- and this timer waiting to announce yet another death

the door is usually latched so the first caller after 24 hours peeps through the key hole instead. i still have no suitable reason for why I am a blind mouse as weary as my casual voice over the phone.

i walk balancing each stride apart like a heart beats slow and fast. inside, a hell is dragging the length of my coat eager to leap out and claim this world. my heart leans a bit like cotton that drinks up misery, then crawls back satiated to perdition.

on a typical day, my footsteps are heavier because of the extra guilt.

Black Excellence

Pamilerin Jacob

I could distill light
from my blood, & build a cathedral

but I know, to you, I am nothing

but a crime
scene, waiting to mature,

wrists made for the silver
clasp of cuffs.

What is a black poet
but an activist, I'd heard you say

as you leaned over
a desk to sign off another
loan, another
treaty, another...

My statement of faith is simple:
if the pigeons don't give a fuck,
neither should I.

Communion

Pamilerin Jacob

So dark, here, in our bed. The loudmouthed train hard
at work, defrosting the evening silence. Dark, because
Nigeria is always dark. & it is ours — this prison
we were born into. Pointless now to wish away the anthem.

Your breath on my face, warm & harsh like a warning.

A dream spills into me, & wet with imagination, I collapse
the distance between us, latching unto you. *To be in love is to touch
with a lighter hand*, Brooks declared all those years ago. A misreading

of which would proscribe our communion, these fingers, blacker than mid-
-night.

...& *I saw the heavens open up to me*, I thought once to myself, as thighs
widened, legs flapping like twigs in a storm, the dark

soaking up our sweat, neighbours cursing under their breath, knowing,
truly, a revelation had been given to us. The walls thinner than nylon
gave away our music. Like a foot in a sock, two black bodies in partnership—

we defrosted silence like two hands, clapping,
clap
-ping.

Soldier / Ants

Inua Ellams

The rumour which came first as a drop off Hamza's lips / the same rumour half corroborated by Sope's big sister / half dismissed by the French teacher / who being Ghanaian could not be trusted / so turned that drop to a tide / of unquenchable truth that swelled and rocked inside us / the rumour was that the old joke who shuffled out of the horizon / into out parched playground on mid-afternoon Fridays / that thin moustache / bent over / heavily leaning on his walking stick / that twitching quiver of a man / had been a drill sergeant during the Biafran war / who warned his company of the unsafe territory / as they sloughed off their rifles to kick about a ball / in the elixir of their freedom / And he pushed on through the bush to check / macheteing away brambles / thorns / branches / and returned to find a field of corpses / his friends drawn and quartered into a pile of limbs / torsos already bloating in the harmattan heat / swarms of flies feasting on their flayed flesh / And the thing that held up the spine in him turned and left his body / his pulse dulled / Whatever else that fled from him crossing that battlefield / left only his voice intact / and this is why it comes so loud / like the ravaging sun itself / beating us into submission / LEFT / LEFT / LEFT / RIGHT / LEFT / our small bodies / short legs darkening / into a single file / like marching soldier ants / and in his mind / ordering our careless freedom / through that same bush / and out to the other side

Contributors' Bios

Award-winning poet, essayist, and cultural strategist **Aurielle Marie** (she/they) is a Black queer storyteller, a political organizer, and child of the Deep South by way of Atlanta. She received her bachelors in Social Justice Strategy and Hip-Hop Theory from the Evergreen State College, and is an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama in Creative Writing.

Wale Ayinla is a Nigerian poet, essayist, and editor. He is the author of *To Cast a Dream* (Jai-Alai Books, 2021), selected by Mahogany Browne for the 2020 Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize, and *Gone* (Kissing Dynamite Poetry Press, 2022). His works recently appeared on *Guernica*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Strange Horizon*, *North Dakota Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Rhino Poetry*, *Poet Lore*, and elsewhere. He is a staff reader for *Adroit Journal*. He has several Pushcart prize nominations and several Best of the Net and Best New Poets Award nominations, & in 2020, he was a finalist for numerous prizes which include the Jack Grapes Poetry Prize. His manuscript, *Sea Blues on Water Meridian* was a finalist for the inaugural CAAPP Book Prize and the 2020 Sillerman First Book Prize.

Pamilerin Jacob is a Nigerian poet & editor whose poems have appeared in *Barren Magazine*, *Agbowó*, *Palette Poetry*, *Lit Quarterly*, & elsewhere. He was the second runner-up for *Sevhage Poetry Prize 2019*; a member of *The UnSerious Collective*, *Founding Editor of EREMITE POETRY*, and *Poetry Ambassador (Nigeria) for The Global Poetics Project*. Author of the chapbook, *Gospels of Depression*, & two others, he is the curator of *PoetryColumn-NND*, a poetry column in *Nigerian NewsDirect*, a national newspaper; he loves doves.

Timi Sanni is a writer, editor and multidisciplinary artist from Nigeria. An NF2W scholar, his works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *Flypaper Lit*, *Rulerless Mag*, *X-R-A-Y Literary* and elsewhere. He is a reader for *CRAFT Literary* and *Liminal Transit Review*. He won the *SprinNG Poetry Contest 2020*, the *Fitrah Review Short Story Prize 2020*, and was the third-place winner of the *Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Prize 2021*. Find him on twitter @timisanni

Born in Nigeria in 1984, **Inua Ellams** is an internationally touring poet, playwright, performer, graphic artist & designer. He is an ambassador for the Ministry of Stories and his published books of poetry include *Candy Coated Unicorns and Converse All Stars*, *Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales*, *The Wire-Headed Heathen*, *#Afterhours* and *The Half-God of Rainfall* – an epic story in verse. His first play *The 14th Tale* was awarded a *Fringe First* at the *Edinburgh International Theatre Festival* and his fourth *Barber Shop Chronicles* sold out two runs at *England's National Theatre*. He recently completed his first full poetry collection *The Actual*, is currently touring An

Evening With An Immigrant and working on several commissions across stage and screen. He lives and works from London, where he founded the Midnight Run, a nocturnal urban excursion. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Onuoha Munachiso is a poet and a critic. He is a first year student of law at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. His poems appear or are forthcoming in Spoon-feed mag, and Invincible Quill Magazine.

Ojo Olumide Emmanuel is a Nigerian poet, playwright and book editor. His works have appeared and forthcoming at INNSAEI Journal, Feral, Quills, Poets in Nigeria (PIN), WRR, The Nigerian Review (TNR) and elsewhere. He is an Assistant Editor at The Nigerian Review (Teen/interview section). He was longlisted for the Poet in Nigeria Student Poetry Prize (2020) and he was shortlisted for the Arojah Student Playwriting Prize. He is an Alumnus of the SprinNG Writers Fellowship.

Shirley Jones Luke is a poet and a writer. Ms. Luke lives in Boston, Mass. Shirley holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. Her work focuses on culture, family, and society. Ms. Luke attended conferences at Breadloaf, Marthas Vineyard, and Voices of Our Nation.

Adeola Juwon is a Nigerian poet and ghostwriter. His works have appeared in Kalahari Review, EroGospel, ArtMosterrific, African Writer and elsewhere. He is a poetry editor for Lion & Lilac magazine. He writes from his single room in Lagos, Nigeria.

Ọlátúndé Àyínlá is a talented writer, poet, and a blogger at *Yorubablog*. He lost his mother at age 5 and his father 12 years later. Having experienced hardship and survived depression in the past, he often describes himself as a “dark writer”. He has contributed to daily Nigerian newspaper columns. His first article, *Between the Dame of Lagos and the Dame of Abuja*, was published in the defunct Daily Independent Newspaper. His works have also been published as part of a global anthology, *Foraging*, which was created by *Globalagepoetry*, an Instagram poetry society. His debut book, *Beautiful Love Pond*; a poetry collection for love birds, was published in 2019 and was a nominee at the 2020 Author Academy Awards, Young Adult category. He currently resides in the United Arab Emirates and he is on Instagram as @brain7days

In his late teens, **Shitta Faruq Adémólá** is a Nigerian Poet, Writer, Graphics Artiste, Bag Maker and a budding French Linguist with poems and stories appearing or forthcoming in Kalahari Review, The Trouvaille Journal, Libretto Magazine, Parousia (Christian) Magazine, The Best Of Africa, African Writer, ARTmosterrific, Eboquills, Nanty Greens, Mad Swirl, Ngiga Review, A Country Of Broken Boys; Boys Are Not Stones Anthology, and elsewhere. His poem “Grief, Here, is a Song” was chosen by Adedayo Adeyemi Agarau, Author of Origin of Song for The New International Voice Series (Ice Floe Press) late September, 2020. He was also chosen by Jalada Africa for the 2020 Nostalgia Anthology where his editor will be Richard Ali, a Lawyer and Poet. He also won first place prize in the Shuzia Pen Protest Contest 2020. When he is not writing, he is either looking for fair ladies to admire, playing Scrabbles or listening to Simi’s voice. Say hi on Twitter @shittafaruqade1

Yvonne Nezianya is a Nigerian writer. Her short story, Wonders of Spirits, was shortlisted for the K and L Prize 2020. Her works have appeared and is forthcoming in Glass Poetry, The Roadrunner Review, Afritondo, Sub-Saharan Magazine, Praxis Magazine and elsewhere. Connect with her on Twitter @nezi_yvonne

Joseph Hope is a graduate of chemistry from Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria. His works are forthcoming or already published in Reckoning Press, Evening Street Press, Zoetic Press, New Verse News, Praxis Magazine, AfroPoetry, Gemini Spice Magazine, Spillwords, SprinNG, Writers Space Africa, Nthanda Magazine, 5th Chinua Achebe Anthology, Ariel Chart, Best “New” African Poets 2019 Anthology, and more. He’s a reader for reckoning press. He was a fellow in the 2021 SprinNG Writing Fellowship. He tweets @ItzJoe9 & IG: _hope_joseph

As a precocious introvert, **Kabura Zakama** started writing poetry at a tender age as a means of expressing himself. He now sees his poetry as a calling and is better known as a promoter of everything literature with a special focus on young writers and writing in indigenous languages. He is a member of the Abuja Literary Society, Association of Nigerian Authors and Abuja Writers Forum. Kabura Zakama is published in several anthologies and his collection of poems, *The Man Lived*, won the 1999 ANA Poetry Prize. He is currently working on a second collection, *Chant of the Angry*.

Blessing Izuchukwu is a Lagos-based Teacher and Writer. She is a fiction series writer with daily publications on her social media handles and website. Her writings are influenced by her strong belief for justice and moral living. She believes the pen is a powerful weapon for a better world. When she is not writing, she teaches Science to secondary school students.

Ayomide ‘Wes Oriolowo is a poet and essayist from Nigeria. His poem was longlisted for the Syncity NG’s ‘Poetry in Times of Corona’ 2020 Anthology. Some of his works are featured or forthcoming on like Praxis Mag, Kalahari Reviews, Odd Magazine, Feral Press, Mineral Lit Mag, The African Writers and elsewhere. On many days he enjoys his poetry and that of Pamilerin Jacob, Mahmoud Darwish and Rudy Francisco. You can send him a message @ ayo_soars or send a mail to ayomidewesoriolowo@gmail.com.

Orji Glomygia is a Nigerian girl of Igbo descent specifically from Abia state. She is a student of Plant Science and Biotechnology in the University Portharcourt, Nigeria. She is Christian. She began writing as a form of therapy. She loves books, ice-cream, making clothes and movies. She strongly believes that the world would be a much better place if we could all be less judgmental and spread a little more love.

Goodenough Mashego is an award-winning South African 360 Degrees artist with three volumes of poetry titled Journey With Me, Taste of My Vomit and Just Like Space Cookies to his name. He is also an essayist, filmmaker, theatre and radio scriptwriter, editor and short story writer. He is the 2016 winner of the National Heritage Council Voice of Heritage Prize. Mashego runs an indigenous music record label named Lepulana Musik and a podcast named VoxAzania

Praise Osawaru (he/him) is a writer and poet of Bini descent. A Best of the Net nominee, his works appear or are forthcoming in Glass Poetry, The Hellebore, Ice Floe Press, Kalahari Review, Kissing Dynamite, Roadrunner Review, and elsewhere. He’s a 2020 Jack Grapes Poetry Prize Finalist, Babishai 2020 Haiku Award and 2020 Nigerian Students Poetry Prize shortlistee, and a recipient of the NF2W Poetry Scholarship. He’s a prose reader for Chestnut Review and he’s on Instagram/Twitter @wordsmithpraise

Semilore Kilaso is a Nigerian poet who collects photographs of humans, architecture, wildlife, and landscape. When she is not playing Scrabble or reading books, she is reading lines from architectural drawings. Her works appear in Culturalweekly, Entropy, Disquiet Art, Rigorous and elsewhere. You can reach her on twitter @ooreola

Ololade Akinlabi hails from Ibadan, Nigeria. He was a nominee for Nigeria Writers Award 2017.

Daniella Ndubuisi-Ike is a Nigerian poet and dancer that is passionate about holding space for black women and nonbinary folk through her work. She goes to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and thoroughly enjoys making connections with soulful people.

Tukur Loba Ridwan writes from a coastal axis in Lagos Island. His poems have been published/Forthcoming in Cordite Poetry, Kalahari Review, The African Writers Review, EBOquills, Rising Phoenix, Libretto, Z Publishing Arizona - Best Emerging Poets 2019, Best New African Poets Anthology 2019, Nigiga Review, and elsewhere. He won the Brigitte Piorson Monthly Poetry Contest (March 2018) and shortlisted in few others. He explores existence: memories, identity, creation, lust, ruins and loss.

Kanyinsola Olorunnisola (he/him) is an experimental poet, essayist, and writer of fiction. His work is focused on black identities and the diverse ways in which his people navigate the world. He has been published in Al Jazeera, FIYAH, Popula, Jalada, Overland, Bakwa, Harvard University's Transition Magazine and elsewhere. He is currently working on a full-length poetry collection and a fantasy novel set in colonial Africa. He is an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama.

Chiagoziem Confidence Jideofor (She/Her) is a queer Nigerian mop-head poet and self-taught illustrator. She left an 8-5 job for a more alluring life as a writer in the Creative Writing MFA program at The University of Alabama. She still does not own a TV and shares her apartment with an imaginary cat.

Ọbáfẹmí Thanni is a genre-bending writer. His poetry was featured in July, 2021 by Kissing Dynamite Poetry and has been nominated for the 2021 Best of the Net Anthology. His works across poetry, fiction and non-fiction have appeared on Vagabond City Lit, perhappened mag, Ice Floe Press, Barren Magazine, World Institute on Disability, Oyster River Pages and elsewhere. He serves as a fiction reader at The Masters Review. He is currently making attempts at beauty while applying for a citizenship in Lucille.