



to grow in two bodies

POEMS BY A COLLECTION

CURATED BY JAY KOPHY

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Poems by a collection of creatives

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Cover art and design: Jade Novelist

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Foreword

When Jay Kophy, the brilliant mind that curated this collection, asked me to review it – I was beyond excited. Sure, it took me more than a minute to finish my review because, like all writers I know, I procrastinated till the ‘perfect’ time. But eventually I reviewed it. And one of my first comments in the Twitter conversation that ensued was “This is great work! But it’s missing a foreword.” To which he replied “Yes. Actually, I was hoping you’d write that.”

And then the anxiety kicked in.

Google told me forewords are written by already published writers to introduce other writers. But how do you introduce someone when you’ve barely been introduced yourself? How do you do justice to this introduction, when the work you’re about to introduce left such a big impression on you that you read it every day for three days straight?

In my opinion, people generally skip the foreword of a book and head straight to the first page of the main deal. I, for one, love forewords. They tell you exactly how another writer views what you’re about to read. And, if there’s anyone whose opinion on the quality of the contents of a book you can trust, it’s someone who writes for a living.

I write for a living. Which is why I ask you to trust me when I say ‘to grow in two bodies’ is a singular (because I’ve never seen anything like this) collection of poetry and short stories by African writers that focus on the angst of self-discovery along with other different, nuanced themes. This collection is important now, more than ever. It presents the hope that, as writers, our work will find homes; and not just float in the recesses of the internet, or stay hidden in whatever journal we choose to write in. Jay Kophy reached out to people who would have otherwise never

considered being part of an anthology, and they in turn gave their best to satisfy our need to read something beautiful. And satisfy they did.

I hope this marks the beginning of more content from each writer. I'd love to see more anthologies from African writers that make me want to ask; "Hey, this is great stuff...do you want me to write a foreword for this?"

Because I think I'm getting the hang of this.

Fui Can-Tamakloe

when flowers speak. it is evidence that even dirt can carry beauty

from me to this body

Jay Kophy

I am swimming in salt water and honey.
I am breaking myself into memories
so my breath will not sound like the voice
of an unanswered prayer.

and I am tired. not of the memories.
but of the breaking. I am tired
of having to break my face into a smile.
when all I want is to mend it
into a canvas carrying the night sky.
whenever I look into the mirror
and see a flower. that is dripping nectar
into an ocean of nectar. instead of a body.

I am tired of having to break my heart
into cities where they bury gardens and plant
dead bodies. of having to drink my name
on days when it tastes so sour in my mouth.
and wear it on days when my skin feels too
ashamed. to hold the scars.

from me to this body.

whoever calls you home. even if you
are breaking. understands you.
because home will always feel like a language
the tongue can carry. no matter how tired it is.

Smiling in your face

Ayirebuah

I'm smiling. Looking absolutely happy.

But my feet hurt

My shoes are covered in dirt

A few seconds ago, my left foot bumped into the foot of the desk, so I'm upset.

I'm laughing. Looking absolutely happy.

But my back aches

My shirt is stained with cake

A few hours ago, I tripped and fell for goodness sake.

I'm giggling. Looking absolutely happy.

But I'm feeling distraught

Only because my thighs hurt from the squats

A few hours ago, I burnt my hand on the teapot.

I'm cheesing. Looking absolutely happy.

But I'm pretty bummed out okay?

My love life's DOA

A few hours ago, he said let's remain FRIENDS.

I'm smiling in your face

But sometimes I feel like a big disgrace

I know that's just silly

So that's why I smile

I guess I don't want you to feel badly.

Let me just smile...in your face.

Beautiful Flower

Poetryimpulse

It's a fleeting life you have
Beautiful flower
Yet you bloom so much
You give fragrance much
You give nectar much

It's a beautiful life you have
Beautiful flower
Yet you live it so well
Oh! That I may be as you are

A Rehearsal

Tryphena Yeboah

I want to be remembered fully.

A body cut open where the heart is more than
an organ, more than a beating. A dance, a graceful movement
of something that has seen trauma and has overcome.

As full as my mother's hands-
a rehearsal of life- carry, break and mend.
Scarred and scarred but we never learn.
Weave a thread through the lips of every man
I kissed. My mother says if men are taught
the silence of women, their mouths will flood.
Imagine every man I've been with
walking away with a tongue of waves.
Now wouldn't you run.

I want to be remembered as a child's memory
of a bible verse.
I and my father are - a war between myself.
A mouth stuffed with a tribute.
A belly that doesn't quite digest truth.
How do we make the tragic we've been through
stop at the wounds.
In my home, when the fire started and my father would tell me to run,
I'd ask "where to?"
Sometimes his eyes said would you rather burn to ash than be safe
Sometimes his eyes said safe is where I'm with you, even in the flames

I want to be remembered for the giving.
Mouth wide- not taking but pouring.
I find out underneath this body are more bodies
and tell me my legs don't take off running
at the sight of a knife.
My throat closes into a fist but I do not scream.
Which is to say I do not fight the surgery of softness.

I stretch my skin thin like a map and walk over
this city of light.

Is it possible that you slice into my flesh
and I do not bleed because maybe I am a
a sharp object familiar with cutting.

And now what if the knife becomes the scar
and my hand, the healing.

I touch it lightly and the covenant seals us.

Hallelujah,

here comes reconciliation,

here comes life.

Nuances of Oxygen

Poetyk Pynx

Drown, underwater, mirror

Pause, Crawl, heartbeats

We have always been alpha swimmers,
conceived with the innate ability to swim and breathe
under water but we forgot how to swim when we were born into a world full of air.
We found other use for our lungs, learnt how to open our eyes
and grasp on to hope, light, love and thumbs without being taught how to.
Then life happened.
we got swallowed up by the rivers we've all been afraid to swim; our greatest fears.
The one separating us from who we are and who we want to be.
That be when we kai say wanna inner tillapia krakye powers never die.
The swimming experience we get am ky3r,
We only forgot about it because we were too obsessed with breathing.
Existing as a human is an outburst of the will to live.

Jump, fly, believe.

Reflection, out of time, oxygen.

The Repetitive reoccurring nature of our daily routines
trivializes the grandness of everything that we call little blessings.
Like sleeping, like waking up.
Like clear blue skies, living, being loved, being called by our names,
the voices of our love ones and the sound of laughter.
Like breathing, like living.
No wonder the concept of death and an afterlife fascinates us so much.
E check all the things we dey forget be the things wey we do am plenty times
E check like all the things we dey find hard to do be the things
wey we do am plenty times make the value lef wanna eye top.
We only remember to look at the sail when it gets windy.
Existing as a human is a juxtaposition of scars and déjà vus.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

You never truly value freedom,
till you are trapped underwater as your lungs cave in from
taking in too much tears, too much darkness, too much emptiness,
too much despair with a dash of futile struggles to break the ice
and your chest begins to feel tight.

Love me a scar

Slimo

i

It's fair to think I don't care for you
like I used to. But what do you expect me
to do when after all the care and cover ups,
you chose to leave me.

Dear wound, I will treat you well, you can
choose to go or stay. But be my scar.

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You get under my skin so often
yet I just can't get rid of you.

You don't mind us being seen together
but I do, because they always ask how I got you.

All you bring is regret,
but you're the reminder that keeps me in check

Dear scars, don't leave me like a wound does.
Stay with me...

Fruits

Kofi Amed

What a cameo in the hot harmattan eve!
Sweet soursop scents marinated with the haze
And all the other ones impassed in my qui vive.

Words became satisfying minting juice,
Black with currents ,mingled bittersweet after
Soft like lush ripe and delicious in undying truth.

But In this colorful world of pines and apples,
With the sour and the dapples between the toil
We will weather the rains and dry foggy nights.

In all laughter and of youthful lovers delight,
Not of science of apples falling for clues
Nor of religion with the doom preceding the bite.

But with all hope. hope from a trampled rose,
Earnestly rooting for the hazelnuts
Swinging between the canes of sugars and beats.

As it touches the ground like a whispered prayer,
With heaven's own sacramental wine
Wholesome and pristine.

Five centimeters beneath the dangling papayas,
under a starry night gaze with splendor
Can you see how vividly the moonlight scrawls the pomegranate.

Beneath moist soils with seeded holes!
Hold your grounds your sprouting melon
So here's to your juice you amazing tangelo
Hold your grounds with bunches of love.

Two in one

M'afua Awo Twumwaah

You do not know what happens when a woman looks from the inside
and sees her reflection between the teeth of a man

When you have drawn the curtains and have seen yourself become
something so small to be swallowed you must shrink back

Not everything that lies behind closed doors must be knocked open.
A woman is never who she tells you she is

Please never believe us. Look carefully. Find the teeth marks hidden under her breasts
She has found she can live in two bodies, name them differently and not be conflicted.

Do you know what happens when a woman looks from the inside
and sees her reflection between the teeth of a man?

At sun down, I've seen mother melt like shea, rub ourselves with hers
And tell us *I may not always be this*
But please remember the ritual.

My caterpillar becomes the wind

Maame Gyamaa Owusu Boakye

I opened my hands a bit to grant this beautiful thing a little air to breathe
Just the right size not to make it fly out or suffocate in my little hands
It was so beautiful I did not want it to go
I wanted to keep it forever
It's colors striped like that of a Zebra's
But in blue and black
I stuck my eyes into the hole my hands had created
And I swear it smiled at me
I looked behind me as I heard Mother shout my name, saying it was time to let go
I didn't want this beautiful thing out of my hands or sight
But I knew I could not keep it forever
He was not mine to keep
Heartbroken, I opened my hands to let it free
I promise, it winked as it left
Another life, my love, I thought as I watched its wings move in a beautiful tune
I was never going to love anyone as much as I loved him
But I was ready to let go and let light heal this scar I was left with
It will only get better
I thought as I slipped my hand into my mother's.

Feeling the Rain

Sena Frost

PROLOGUE

*I'm supposed to write something about rain
I haven't figured out what exactly to say
Well here goes nothing*

PART ONE

It's so cold everywhere.
I hate it when it rains in the middle of the afternoon.
It means more traffic.
Crazy driving all because everyone wants to get home to be under the sheets
Like they don't turn up the air conditioning in their offices
Perpetually cool. But alas
We'll never know who's watching the ceiling
Or who is having an affair
Because it rained in the middle of the afternoon.

PART TWO

I love playing in the rain
Because when you kick the ball on the grass it keeps rolling
You can do dribbling to goal easily
It is nice to step in the mud
People fall down a lot so it is funny
Mama doesn't like it when I play in the rain
She beats me when she catches me
It is nice when she baths me with hot water after I play in the rain

PART THREE

I'm tired
I just want it to rain so I don't go to work
I hope a tree falls in the middle of the road
I wish my boyfriend would come and visit me
So I can have him inside me
So our warm bodies can coil together
When it rains and gets cold

EPILOGUE

Rain washes all things
It takes familiarity away from a dog's world of smell
It is a wet wonder for children
A reprieve for the employee
A national disaster flooding away lives
It is an excuse to have sex
Rain is the eternal state of one's mind
We want rain for different reasons
But rain goes where it will
Giving mothers cause to worry
And employers a reason to cut salaries
All the while
It pours and cascades in the paths born before time.

Wade in my water

Akvsua

Follow me into a secret place
Where empires thrive
Where kingdoms fall
Hush, make haste,
nightfall looms
and this puzzle must be solved.

Into the murky waters,
I beckon you
Wade deeper,
till you are soaked
through and through.

Immerse into me, into this, into us

Sink into the unknown,
for this you must
Trust as I drown you further,
stay still do not thrust.

In melanin you were formed,
in melanin you are reborn.

Warmth

Akua Tsetsewaa Yawson

It is with us from the second we make our first cry.
While we struggle to breathe and find our bearing.
It finds us in the form of our mother's bosom
and the sweet yet foreign taste of her breasts.
While we struggle to grasp the concept of a new place,
with foreign faces and foreign sounds,
it finds us once more in a hug or a voice, in coo's and ah's
from the lips of those who hold us close.
*It never leaves us, this trepid feeling,
it'll never leave us, this thing called warmth.*

It is in us and in them, the people we select to take part
in our lives. It's present as a vortex of emotions,
comforting yet terrifying, painful yet amusing,
all at the same time. And when we meet that one person
who speaks a lingua only our heart comprehends.
it engulfs our entire being in delight, fear and love, all at once.
And when that lingua stops being so fluent,
the feeling creeps back in, taking over every fibre of our being
with feelings of hurt, uncertainty and sometimes, relief.
*It never leaves us, this trepid feeling,
it'll never leave us, this feeling called warmth.*

We are looking back, our lives unrolling and rewinding,
with plot twists we've become all too familiar with.
Every decision and missed opportunity fills our heart
with an all too familiar feeling, taking up a plethora of roles
from fulfilment to regret; from love to hatred.
Looking ahead we smile, not because our days were the most colorful,
but because we're ready to embrace the final version of this feeling,
knowing we survived all its other representations.
*It never leaves us, this trepid feeling,
it'll never leave us, this sensation called warmth.*

Your glow

Otema Yirenkyi

My arms are weak. My hands are tired and
it's a wonder how I'm able to write this.
My legs are weary from walking around-
From searching. I'm still gathering strength.
My sandals are tearing and the bow at the top tore off.
My eyes are almost red and bloodshot
and a kick at my feet or a push at the shoulder would force me to the ground.
But I have to write you this:

Last week I saw a house upon a hill
it was so peaceful. I wanted to get closer.
And claim some of the calmness it exuded but I couldn't.
So I walked right on. It reminded me of you; Of the exterior you keep.
It reminded me of the you that the world sees
It reminded me of the you that is so calm.
But you know why I couldn't get close?
I was afraid.
I was afraid the house would explode once I got too close.
I was afraid the roof would blow off and
the grass roots would pull out
I was afraid that the house could be you.
You know how you scream when you're frustrated?
How you pull out your hair in exasperation?
In need of answers that never satisfy?
I hate seeing how you blow off when
you remember how cruel the world is
When sharp words scratch your shea buttered skin
I hate to see you curse the world and all that is in it
Because they fail to appreciate the beauty of your heart
I hate how I can never get close
When the world pushes you in a box with the keys tossed out

The world may not deserve your heart
The world might be blurred by the guilt and greed
But the world cannot touch you
The world may not feel the tenderness of your soul
And it cannot compare to your God given gift
The world does not have a hold on you
The world does not have a hold on you
You see, like Pam said, you're a bowl of sunshine
A Venus to be beheld
A herald of your smile is an indication of joy, of happiness never felt
You touch without stretching forth
Because your genuineness easily reaches all.

When you're stuck, and someone on the outside tells you
it's gonna be ok, I know you hear it.
But it's hard to believe. I understand exactly how that feels.
I also understand that you're capable
You can dance in your sorrows and turn them to joy

You don't understand! You are EVERYTHING.
You deserve as much happiness as the universe gives
Your heart is full of light. You are the sun on earth.
Your shimmer is inevitable
Just as the sun slowly fights the clouds to shine its rays,
The glow in your eyes pierces souls to appreciate your beauty
Don't fight the world for space to glisten
You are a burst of light on a gloomy day

Moonlight

Samuel K. Atsi

Dear self,
you know how scared I am
under this auspice of what
everyone else calls life and home.

do you care I borrow your heartbeat to continue?
you know I'm one of those who lose their way
trying to find a path in their heart where peace must reign.

For the prayers & the faith
I carry each day hoping to survive like a pauper
I seal my plea to god(s) & weep because darkness knows me
like the sun knows the morning.

echoes of cruel satire
sink me deep in oceans of lack & want
while its tide arouses the shame of its regrets in me.

Melancholy etches on my mind being in this melee & I often
get ruined trying to be in-between.
Maybe who you are is a metaphor of who I am
& anytime people enjoy me but not you,
you try to unfold me into you, but all I know is to live you right wrongly

Shattered sometimes by these miseries,
i coil & live in the toils all alone.

I'm just a popular diarist & the kind who's failed to revere
being you every day as you wished.
I've never lived exactly who you are—
no in-betweens too & who you are sometimes
makes me want to split reality as I deny I even exist.

moments like these seemed my time had come
& I was dead & oblivious—
wandering & looking for a healing that could bring me home

I've been a really bad image for living short of who you truly are—
the comforting sorrows & lies
I bring to your doorstep as toast for what I couldn't be & reflect
become a subterfuge I employ always just not to be you.

But, through this confusion,
through the pain, through the losses, through the million nights
in my own strange world—you're my home.
when this pseudo-living said— “you don't belong here”—
you said— “come back home”,
saving me from the spell of being misidentified
you draw me into you & I into you when despair & darkness whisper near
& the sun seems void of its strength.

your words are soft & beautiful
so I always fall into your voluptuous warmth.
you've grace like the sun & your heart is wide like the universe

where the inspiration that still the turbulent waters in my soul linger,
a kind verve of yours shine on me & through me,
& I hear your voice say:

“Please,
Please,
let peace be still,
wash
down
every dirt of grief.”

I hold this sacredness as life
in my heart for this moment & the future I deserve.

truly you're you, both in rain & shine
& this is the moment of a dream come true.

Spieëls

Sena Cobblah

I was never taught to look. Back
In case I catch my own reflection
The spitting image up against the rack.
My face beyond a frown
To deeply terrified mystery filled eyes

In another's eyes. The bleeding does not stop
The wounds do not heal. Every itch is ravenous
With this broken glass I have to scratch

Scratch the surface
Left a pale shadow of what used to be
We smile and act like everything is okay
With friends we play by day
All the while sucking each other's essence as fleas
And get stuck in the cycle of lying with smiles on our faces

On their faces I look at what I could be
All the reflections show me the worst parts of myself
In this mirror. that cars sheen. *En my foon se skerm.*

The world finally got to me
finally reached and grabbed me.
By the balls. I don't know this person.
dark circles and a body barely alive,
I cannot go anywhere because my sallow skin,
and hollow bones carry no weight.
Lest I be blown away, and for the birds I be bait.

This life. I look. I look at life dragging me
Through gorse and salt
Its jagged edges biting into the skin I barely have
Skin rigged with white lines and a web of wrinkles

Give me a mirror that is mine.

Roots

ābrantipā

Letter to the free
from the souls that hung from the tree,
that sung to the heed
of those that breathe on their knees,
from those picked cotton and tea
and fought to release those who ought to be free;

Distinguished free folk,

Against those who sought to impede
our sort and brothers in need,
we have fought and died indeed.

We, roots of the crop made by generations of field neggas ask this:
What fruit have you bore?

I had no reply
I had given up my black for white,
as though I had exchanged the dark for light.

They told me "black must be made white for white is the only beautiful"
They asked me "how can you remain black and expect to be viewed equal"
"so listen, accept and be dutiful."

Hence, I conceded deficiency in myself,
traded my freedom to become their help,
gave up myself to acquire their wealth,
and adorned their pelt to define myself.

Now all that remains is 'wilting'
in the name of modernism, of progress, of growth.

and how will this tree grow without roots?
how will any tree grow, without roots?

Lumière

Eyram Bassah

The phone rings and the room grows cold;
I see you flinch a little
each ring a noose tightening
Around your neck
I understand what you do.
I understand your fear;
You judge yourself so harshly,
to prevent anyone from telling you that
you're not enough;
that you are not deserving.
But love, if you can't see it in yourself,
no one else would.
No one can show you
what you cannot see.

You've sat in darkness for so long
Let the sun in.
Let it swallow the darkness
You must know that you're enough;
that you're deserving.
No one can show royalty his throne
except he finds it
Himself.

The Hostel

Nanya Kooper

Monday marked the hundredth and second day since Nedu was missing. The number of days kept shrieking in my head resembling sounds the *Iyalogi* made when she came offering *ogi* to the neighborhood. On day ninety-one, there was a foretaste of hope that he might have been found by one of the male prostitutes around Ojota but it was only a false alarm, a waste of time. On this day, I heaped upon myself fresh blame for his disappearance. The last time I saw him played unceasingly like a flashback that just would not know when to stop till I finally came to terms with the fact that I probably should have done more. That night he had a client to go see and was elated for reasons unknown. He asked me to tag along as this client was a very big one who would pay us handsomely even if I did not join them in their adventure. I declined and with each decline he became more tenacious but I was not up to it. I had spent the previous night with a client of mine who had spent half of our time together deciding whether to use the sex toys he just got or not. Becoming a tag partner tonight was not in my plans.

‘I will tag along next time bro. Tonight I no fit. No vex.’

‘No wahala na.’ he said with a hint of sarcasm rolling off his tongue. ‘Na me go enjoy this one alone. No come ask me for money o cos I no go give you. You dey hear me so?’ And with that, he left our flat never to return.

As I continued to evoke all our memories at 4am, a phone call came in disrupting my hurting. I rushed to the table to pick it up. The identification of the caller was unknown. My body let out a temporal shiver. An unknown caller at 4am? Could it be? As I picked up the phone, my concentration spiked. It was unexplainable.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello. Ugo. This is Francis.’

Francis? I had not spoken to him in weeks. I was glad he called but I was startled as well since it was only just a few minutes past the hour of four. For a few minutes, he seemed to be gasping for air - puffing out a series of short breaths to gain control of his speech. I sensed already the arrival of terrible news.

‘Francis, is everything alright?’

‘I know we have not spoken in a bit but I had to call because both of you were close...He would have wanted me to call only you.’

My eyebrows squished together for a moment.

‘It’s Nedu. Nedu is dead.’

Nedu and I had met at the hostel that was owned by my Uncle Sonny Okocha which was a hub for male prostitutes. Just like me, he was picked up from the village, promised a better life by my uncle who vowed to enrol him in a technical school where he would train and become a master shoe maker but he found himself satisfying the sexual needs of men. Before my arrival to Lagos, Father had handed me to Uncle Sonny without a second thought, believing that it was time for me to go make a name for myself and take care of the family. Mother was against this of course. She believed ‘a child would be vulnerable to the jaws of evil if that child was not at home’. Father waved off her superstitions. She had forgotten that when an Igbo man’s mind was made up, there was no turning back. It was Lagos or nothing he said. Uncle Sonny surprisingly showed delight and no hesitation in taking me in after all, what was the point of family if we did not help one another on the day we needed it? I had originally believed I would be an apprentice in his business or head to the University for Studies as a civil engineer however when I was led to a room in a hotel with a man waiting for me, naked with a stick similar to the ones the guards used to chase thieves from the *Obi*’s plantain farm in my village and a smile that was ready to devour my innocence, my dreams had to take a detour.

With Nedu, life was bearable in the hostel. We did everything together except being demanded by clients at the same time. He believed if that happened, one of us would have to fake some sort of sickness while the other attended to the client. I found that hysterical whilst spending hours in the night praying to Mother’s *Chi* or any deity who cared to listen to not let it happen.

On my twenty third birthday, Nedu surprised me with an item he meticulously wrapped in tissue paper and tossed in my direction. In it was a cupcake. A sudden coldness hit the core of my belly as to how he had found one for we were not allowed to see such rare things in the hostel let alone eat them.

‘Where did you get this Nedu?’ we had only started calling him Nedu when a previous client, a white man had called requesting for him but he could not say his name Chinedu as it should be said.

‘I would like to have Nedu for the night’ was what the client said. The receptionist assured him there was no one called Nedu and in return, he attempted to pronounce Chinedu which was a failed endeavour. By then, Uncle Sonny already had an idea of who the client wanted. When the others heard the name, it stuck and even though he hated it; arguing that it was not the name his father bestowed on him, he knew he could do nothing about it. Here in the hostel, any humour we could find was worth the treasure hunt.

‘Relax man. Na my white mumu I collect from. He dey always make sure say I chop the things wey him chef dey always make for am so I come carry like one or two say make my guy chop too. Relax. Make you enjoy ya baiday.’

Chinedu had always been like that. He did not care if my uncle banned us from such treats for they had power to reduce our ‘performance’ with the clients. Today this one cupcake was not going to hurt and he was right.

‘Thank you’, I said, gulping the treat in one fell swoop for even though I was thankful Nedu got this and I for a change was not prepared to be on Uncle Sonny’s caning routine.

‘One day we will leave this place and when it’s your birthday, I will get you a gift with a party to celebrate.’ I said.

‘I no go mind o but this place wey we dey no bad. We fit be money men. When we manage comot, we go start our own business. I no dey in any rush. I dey enjoy am die.’

Nedu had told me once he was satisfied about not leaving. He never thought it was going to happen so why bother pursuing the idea anyway? Life had given him lemons, the least he could do was make lemonades. I could not blame him for this ideology he had conjured up for it was also the same mentality a lot of the men around us shared including me. We were already accustomed to this particular activity, it was already a habit, a way of life and now for some, an addiction shaped to become their reality. Still, I was never comfortable with the idea of sleeping with men. Some days I cursed my body and the day I was born while at the same time I found myself coming in contact with a deep gratified feeling of a job well done whenever a client uttered contentment. Truth be told, it was somewhat the only relief I could get. I was certain that if someday I left the hostel, it was going to be the end. I would leave the life and look forward to making a new one yet I never asked if it was ready to leave me.

Freedom came when news of Uncle Sonny’s death rocked the hostel. It turned out he was not only running the hostel at night; he was also an armed robber who had been on the police radar for the best part of a year. The operation had gone south and he was gunned down. The police had identified him and were aware that he owned a couple of businesses in Lagos including the hostel which they were sure was a place housing robbers. A police informant painstakingly informed the receptionist who informed us to leave the hostel instantly unless we were prepared to spend the rest of our lives in *Kirikiri*. The other prostitutes who already had a place to go wasted no second in gathering their belongings and fled. Nedu and I could not tell if this was real or just another fantasy. We were free yet it seemed untrue. Were we going to be hunted down? Did the police know what we really did? Our contemplation passed quickly when we heard the sirens from afar. That was our cue to leave the hostel once and for all.

Our legs found themselves at Yaba. With the little commission we made, we spent a few nights at a lodge to lay low just in case we were wanted before renting a mini flat a couple weeks later on Kufeji Street in Alagomeji. We knew this money we had was not sustaining enough. We needed a job, some sort of purpose. The only purpose we believed we had was sleeping with men. It was a skill that needed no classes or preparation. This was what we knew how to do best and we enjoyed it. One afternoon, Nedu returned with news that he had reached out to his white connect at a call centre (apparently, he made it a habit to keep the numbers of each client he came across) and our lives in the hostel began

again only this time no one was compelling us. We were able to fix the prices we wanted; if a new client was hungry for something different, we would charge extra to help endure the aftermaths of their ravenous appetites. I worried most times about our charges but Nedu put such to flight.

‘Nna. Dem get this money well well. Dem go pay cos na small change for dem. Make we just make sure say we do the thing wella and collect our money.’ Indeed, money was never a problem for these men. They just needed someone to control, someone who would satisfy their desires for a few hours and we were more than happy to.

Here I was, seven am on a Monday morning in the bathroom preparing to head to the hospital in Maryland that Francis had given me descriptions of. I was going to see Nedu lifeless. I was not going there to hear him speak. All those months he went missing, I blamed him till I no longer had the strength to. At that point, shame enveloped me every night leaving sour tastes that cloaked my mouth, spending every night crawled up on the floor weeping for everything and everyone I could remember, everyone I had left down. Even though his disappearance took away the speck that shadowed my eyes, I still found myself searching for him earnestly as I began the hard and necessary walk to recovery.

Francis was on the night shift when Nedu’s body was brought in. He told me he was murdered by some gang members who found out he was ‘servicing’ other men rather than their *Oga* and were not happy about it. Returning to hotel where his client was, the gang members who had been following him organised an ambush when he was clear in sight. Stabbing him over and over again, they took an eye, sliced his tongue and left his body on a street close to the hospital. He knew this after the police had managed to capture one of them who wasted no time in confessing. In a bid to save his life he was brought to the hospital where Francis worked in only to die on arrival. Similar to us, Francis was a prostitute but when the hostel was about to be stormed, he returned to his family, cleaned his act and went back to nursing school. We had met once at an eatery in Yaba. I had just returned from class at Yabatech, where I enrolled for my Diploma in Civil Engineering to get something to eat when I felt a tap on my back while I queued and there was Francis. We spent a few minutes together, chatting about how life had been doing us a favour since we left the hostel. He said he still had nightmares about it. He was seeing a therapist to help him be better. He suggested I see one as well. I did not think it was necessary though I still saw the first man I slept with tormenting my dreams every now and then. I had told him about Nedu’s disappearance. We exchanged numbers and promised to call if anything came up.

Knowing how Nedu and I were friends, he didn’t waver, placing a call to me as he believed I was the only connection Nedu had in Lagos. Indeed I was. Tears flooded my eyes as trembles drummed on my cheeks. The hostel could not leave him and he could not leave it. I wish he had returned to me safe and sound or at least I would see him alive at the hospital so I could hear his story of he escaped, how he was able to survive all these months. Despair swam around me. Yet my mouth made no sound.

And then there's me

TMA

I avert my eyes from the mirror so hastily, you'd think I owed my reflection money
When God said "love thy neighbor", He wasn't talking about me
I wear confidence like a paper mache mask
The smile feels just as plastic
Ducking cameras like talkative relatives at every function

My Sunday school teacher said we're all just spirit's living in a body
Most days I think I could have found a better crib
Compliments all taste like deceit
Kind words fly over my head like crudely built paper planes
Of all the things I have grown to love, I have somehow managed to not include myself

These eyes, that are much too small to be on a head this big
This body I've failed to fashion into a home
Too fat or too skinny
Too dark or not dark enough
The magic eludes my melanin;
Beauty, my black

And I know I should be kinder to myself
Afford myself the courtesy I extend to everyone that isn't me

But God said "love thy neighbor"
He didn't say anything about me

Lost

J. F. Longdon

i think of my Grandmother a lot. her very existence
where she is now and how she is
spirit? angel? a being with the brightest aura?

‘ where do our loved ones go? ‘
the question pops in my mind again
‘ heaven ‘
came the usual answer
‘ but where do our loved ones go? ‘
came the usual follow-up question

do they feel our pain?
do they see everything clearly than before?
what was life like beyond the grave?
do they shake their heads at our iniquities?
and scream for us to do better?
or do their screams penetrate the walls of the Earth and we define ‘em as thunder?

i think of my Grandmother a lot
her body now completely one with the soil

‘ where are you now Nana? ‘
the question pops in my mind again
‘ heaven ‘
came the usual answer
‘ but where are you really? ‘
came the usual follow-up question

do you feel my pain?
did you smile at the birth of your grand-baby?
did you watch as he was placed in the belly of his Mommy?
do you know who would be placed in my belly?

I look at the soil one more time and think of my Grandma.
Is that all you are now?
Ashes? Ashes? Ashes.

The Lonely Wordsmith

Maud Hotor

I Sit Here, The Lonely Wordsmith...

Stringing words together, writing poems after poems after poems

Coloring the perfect picture of loneliness in radiant words

Painting my angels and demons

With every drop of ink bridged is the chasm between me and blank pages

A patchwork of my thoughts exposing my soul

My words dictate my wellbeing; my secret warrior supplying me with endorphins.

I Sit Here, The Lonely Wordsmith...

Writing poems after poems after poems

Writing a thousand words for you and maybe a thousand more

You are my muse; the cloud that swaddled my peak

and silenced my thunder when I tried to speak

The water sage to the mirage of my soul

I write lyrics and stanzas each night with the slightest thought of you

Poem for poem, line for stanza, I could carve history with quills writing in our blood

But Yet I Sit Here, The Lonely Wordsmith...

An empty soul assuring myself with empty words

Behind these words lay a little piece of heaven and a little piece of hell

I am like a pickle in a jar drowning in salty tears,

waiting for someone to want me and drag me out of this jar and take a bite

I am pieces and faults and scars and addictions

And a Lonely Wordsmith until the day I give up and become just another lost soul.

Salt

Edtargaryen

i have a theory that everyone has a body of water inside them
some people have ponds, others have rivers.
my lover is a waterfall.

but i,
i am the sea.
i am mercurial but tangible; turbulent but stoic.

this body is nothing but a conduit.

ask how i contain this dichotomy
and you will hear the story of the young boy
who stumbled on the bodies of his dreams
and fell into the void of his own mind

he lost himself in the nothingness
and the silence was deafening
until he remembered that
the cure for anything is salt water

so he cut his palms on the rocks
bled into the abyss to fill it with salt
and where the saline of his tears went
water followed.

i have learned to live with the roiling inside me
i know now to appreciate the gentle sway and tide
of the beast underneath my skin.

but try as i may, i can never forget
that like all seas return to the ocean,
i must one day be prepared to drown.

less than

Maayaa Acheampong

How do I feel?
small, but
Not in a good way.
I feel like everything that should be
big is tiny and everything that should be
small is huge.
I feel like I am too much of everything
I was meant to shed,
too little of everything
I was meant to become.
But now here I am,
An ugly mismatch of things.
Chipped and broken,
Too far away from the beauty that I stretch
out my hands to reach.
Stunted.
Wrong
Warped.
A distortion of what I am meant to be.
A reflection in a cracked mirror.
I have always been less;
thought that meant there was room to grow.
I was meant to bloom
but all I do is wilt.

Blood

Mwintuur Patrick

sour velvet poured out
dripping from wrist to tub
slowly snaking its way towards the drain.
Sadness causes pain
this was a different kind of sadness
a different kind of pain
one that seeped deep into the soul
one that required
a different form of cleansing.
the red flowed faster now
perfectly covering my frame in a burgundy dress
and I let it all out
wallowing in my stigmata
Knowing that this crucifixion
would not end in forgiveness

As they buried my love

Kwaku kyereh

I watched, imagined—as grains of dirt
covered the coffin of my love—

It was exam time, I couldn't be there
for the woman whose name I bear

like a sheriff's badge. She wasn't well,
dad told me—but none knew that was

her going. As they buried my love—
I wept on a bed that's supposed to be mine

but would leave for someone else I don't
know in a couple of months coming—

just as my love was leaving & no one
knew who was coming.

I couldn't be there for my love. &
dirt is the only metaphor for her death.

Box

Elton Vanotoo

If the walls have ears must they eavesdrop all the time?
Can they hear my thoughts?
My mutterings?
If the walls have ears must that mean that they have legs too?
That they move?
Why then do I feel them closing in?
Boxing me in from the world outside
How am I to think outside of what lies beyond these borders
When these 4 corners have been my bounds all my life
How is it that I am to think outside
the box when its all I have known?
And if I can't
Will these walls grow mouths to laugh at my shortcomings?
Will they grow tongues to lash out at my insecurities?
Teeth to devour me whole?

Let it go

Winboda

If I keep pushing it down, will it stay dead?
The darkness in me can't see the light.
Or should I just let it rise?

If I keep pushing it away, will it still stay?
This feeling of emptiness is full of pain.
Or should I just pull it together?

If I keep this fire burning who will it hurt?
This heat is rising. How do I put it out?

I'm angry, I can't stand this heat I need to release...

I'm angry at myself for letting go.
I'm angry that you didn't catch me.
I'm angry I expected you to.
I'm angry I let you in and now I can't keep you out.
I'm angry she didn't love herself.
I'm angry she couldn't kick him out.
I'm angry she couldn't teach me to love myself.
I'm angry she stayed, whilst he held the door open.
She didn't know she was free. She still doesn't know she's free.

I'm angry he couldn't love her.
I'm angry this is just the tip of it all, I don't want to go deep.
I'm just trying to release.

This anger was never meant for me.
I need to be free.
This anger is not me.
I was born to be free.

Happy Birthday

Ibrahim Oga

How long will I smile with my lips and cheeks but not with my eyes? My eyes. Windows of my soul. They say thirties are the years of clarity, but these years aren't coming to me with maturity. They are coming to me with anxieties. These are the years of accepting who I am and my reality. The times to forge a pragmatic future from where I stand. Dreams and fantasies mustn't stand. There is no room for fragile and trivial things. Today is my thirty third. The future has begun and it is delicate.

To everyone with a party cone on their head, I am one of the strongest people they know. Fancy clothes, funny cones, colorful balloons, confetti, disco lights, and I imagine a cake without candles stashed somewhere, just to show me how much they care.

“You are our bedrock” Ukpo says.

“You're the wisest of us all” Ekpo says.

“Thank you for being there for me” Amina says.

They smile with their lips, cheeks, and eyes. Their eyes shine with genuine smile. I'd sense their adoration from a mile away. Their admiration is one of the sources of my anxieties. I fear they'll soon see the inadequacies in me. How long will they see the peace in me before they begin to see the chaos? Should I tell them victories don't bring me joy? Should I tell them defeats are what I feel I deserve? Should I tell them I fear I'll die alone? I fear it is my fault that none of my relationships lasted more than three months. That it is not because the right person for me hasn't come alone yet. I keep my distance. I am a good friend but a terrible partner. I am all inside. I don't let anyone in. Should I tell them I fear telling them about my anxieties because they'll stop admiring me? Or worst, they will down play my fears and unknowingly patronize me.

They sing a merry Happy Birthday song.

Umma pushes in a pyramid of cake. A wedding cake would be envious.

“Make sure there'll be enough cake for everyone”, I imagine her telling the caterer. “Make sure it is elegant. He loves everything to be perfect”.

I should tell her I don't love perfection, I only fear mistakes. I fear it will expose me as the fraud that I fear I am.

And look how perfect everything is. How wonderful. How elegant. Look how appreciative they are. Look at how peaceful they are. Look how much peace they've found with me. I know this should rightfully make me elated, but I don't feel it. All I can think about are the Pros and Cons I am stacking in my head as I cut the cake.

Pros and Cons of the worthiness of my existence. To be or not to be. The cute things don't get inside to where I truly reside. I see the bright and the dark future. I see features of peace and chaos. I only focus on the negatives. I shiver in the presence of strangers. I love people but their stares make me restless. I crave company but I fear their judgement.

I am a vessel of fear. Peaceful outside, chaotic inside. Look into my windows and you will see.

Regression to the mean

Aviella

Imagine a world with no balance

A wise man once said that choosing life was meaningless unless death was an option too

I used to be a very beautiful flower until my bloom was all of a sudden doomed by June

Assume that the sun's light stayed away from the moon's sight

Would your nights bright and bloom just alright?

My life's been everything but a perfect picture

Fractured pixels and unsolved riddles

I have seen dimples wrinkle in a twinkle of an eye and smiles faker than a utopian future

I am socially awkward , stereotypically I am stereo dumb

I have stopped succumbing to societies stereotypes

We exist in connection to our social ties said George , so then the reason I am non-existent may never get its closure

I would engage rather with the most primitive forms of nature!

I am at a place where every form of human interaction is perceived as a threat to my balance

I have worked so hard on my external peace, but Gangnir once said to me "Aboa bi b3ka wo aa na 3firi wontoma mu"

Well the honesty in that statement I found was rather ironic

Look I know betrayal like I know Day and know Night

But then also I am made aware , that choosing love is also meaningless unless hate and pain are all alternatives

And I dare tell you the worst form of betrayal is when I have done it to myself

The Yin and the Yen could probably always be the moral to any love story

The simplest ideology might just be that everything regresses to the mean

Or I guess there might be more than one way to what betrayal truly is!

Drinking the wilderness

Joyce James

I asked that you love me, bring me red roses and sun flowers.
I asked that you write me cute notes and messages expressing your feelings towards me.
I asked that you take me out to see the world,
a stroll by the beach,
with our hands clasped into each other.

I asked that you occasionally remind me of how beautiful I am.
I asked that you talk about me to your friends, show the world how much you love me.
I asked that you surprise call me,

Tell me you are at my door,
Waiting for me with a cone of ice-cream and a single rose flower petal,
Night drive round in the city,
With our hands in the air,
Singing on top of our voices to our favorite song.

I asked that whenever I felt insecure about my body, you will be the first person to remind me of how beautiful I am.
I asked that on nights where I was afraid and uncertain about the future; you will remind me that you are with me.
I asked that you learn to get to know more about my body, what makes me comfortable, and please me accordingly.
I asked that you will be my strength, when I'm weak, my voice when I'm feeble.

I asked. But I guess they were too much to ask
or did I ask wrongly?

Forget me not

Jade Novelist

I want to show the faces of the people they chose to forget,
the me who still knew the value of a smile,
the me you made an ambassador for self-hate,
the me you taught to belittle myself so I could fit in.

I want to show the faces of the people they chose to forget,
the me who danced to the beat of a happy heart,
the me who dreamed of being more than a part of another's memory,
the me who held on to hope more than grudges.

I want to show the faces of the people they chose to forget,
the me who once had a desire to repair the broken pieces,
the me who saw the different shades to a rainbow,
the me who had plans.

I used to be someone before the voices took over,
I was someone I could recognize.

Fragmental memories

bhurbx D dzinam

Some nights I cry for the most important person in my life who became a stranger after seven stages in twelve months.

Yes, I've been in love once. In love with someone who was very insensitive to my emotional health.

Yet, nobody knew.

I'd have said this, the first of twelve months but let's just say I was delusional with the idea that, we were perfect.

Were we perfect...?

We could have been perfect. I'm just saying - "we could have been" but look what we turned out to be: strangers.

Do you see?

You let the person (me) who said;

They can't live without you. realize they can!

There is this park...never have I never kissed you.

You remember the chapel and the rain?

The sun that has a reason to shine and....

I fear I'm philophobic, yet.

Is that possible?

We use to be amour and amore, but now we are...

I can telepathically hear you say: say this already.

I can't, because these are fragmental memo...

Why does interest inevitably diminish after the start of a relationship?

We'll know, when we get there, but as for me.

I have fragmental memories of US.

Broken Bones

Eunique

She walks around broken to the bone
with a soul that's been damaged
by the actions of the people she held close; a painful lesson she learnt by habit.

Leaves her heart on her sleeve for no one
because she no longer believes in the magic of being wanted;
like a genie in a bottle that got broken
when the wishes stopped being honest

empty of love. empty of trust. with no hope of healing.
and the scars underneath her sleeves. remain a secret to the general public.

Tired of receiving love dressed in destruction
She chooses to make peace with the same demons
that keep her hostage in her own mind. that she constantly gets lost in

so every day when she wakes up in the morning
She swallows her own solitude like her blue pills in order to function

Ignoring the truth inside. and all her symptoms
She still remembers to wear her smile
like a self-made remedy born out of tradition
Whenever the world has its eyes on her.

she doesn't speak her mind anymore
because nobody really listens
no one understands the pain she feels
because it doesn't fit their description

so she walks around broken to the bone
alive, but not really living
but what nobody ever told her;
it is not her job. to be the perfect victim.

Yesterday and Me

Laud Evans

I reek of yesterday's today
A petrifying stench that halts my leap into tomorrow
I am stuck to history – my misery; my hiding place is there
The irony
Weaned, but a babe bound still, I choose not to sever the cord

For I fear to reconcile my beginnings
Because it would mean facing a future unforeseen
And I am yet not battle-tested for such a scene
Or maybe I am just not ready to be SEEN

The past is a prison, and I am inmates with insecurities
The past is a passenger
And I must make a stop in order to truly move
This I know

But it's not a story of resolution – yet,
And when that day comes, I cannot say
So till then, I will hide here
Let me hide here a little while longer

Leash

Kwesi Senyo

They used to hide in the dark watching every move I make.
But I can't see them anymore
I guess you took my fears away. But I'm afraid to admit it out loud
because they might hear and know you're the reason I'm not afraid to smile anymore.
They will know you're the reason for this confidence and come after you.

So let me hide you. for this season and the next.
Just until the winds and the snow tell me it's safe to reveal you to the world.
Let me hide you as fragments of my thoughts embedded in different memories.
Let me hide you in shards and keep you high up in the sky.
So that you'll shine on nights I stare at the night sky.
And when it's safe, I'll bring you outside.
I'll bring you home, hoping that your fears don't haunt me too.

But when they come after me, don't hide me.
Allow them to take me. So, I can learn from them.
learn why they overwhelm you.
learn why they make you feel so fragile when in fact you're very strong.
I'll stay and learn so that when I finally escape from them and return home,
I'll teach you how to overcome them.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Puleng Chabeli, Maama Adowa Paintsil, Fui Can-Tamakloe and Mable Amuron for reviewing this anthology to ensure that the quality present in each poem and short story never dissolved and for giving this book their blessing. Special thanks to Fui Can-Tamakloe for being able to put together such a complete foreword in a short period.

Thank you Jade Novelist for designing the cover art, for your vision, support and being available to help in the creation of this book.

Thank you Eugenia Fletcher Longdon for your overwhelming love, support and encouragement. This encouragement was the spark that fueled the desire to see this book (vision) come to life. And also thank you Poetyk Pryn timer for your support and encouragement, for giving me strength to continue when it was fading away.

Thank you to all the amazing writers who believed in me enough to participate in this project. Thank you for going through this journey with me and allowing the world hear your voice echo in this book. (To know more about the writers involved, please click on the link [here](#))

Thank you to everyone who has supported me in any way, for making me believe in myself and the necessity of poetry, for making it easier from the beginning till now, for giving me a reason to continue writing and for sharing every poem of mine with the world.

And finally. Thank you, reader. We made this for you.