

ERIATA ORIBHABOR POETRY PRIZE 2018

I BURN INCENSE BEFORE I SLEEP



TOP 20 POEMS OF EOPP 2018

Edited by:

ADEDAYO ADEYEMI AGARAU
KUKOGHO IRUESIRI SAMSON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	vii
ABOUT THE ERIATA ORIBHABOR POETRY PRIZE (EOPP)	viii
ABOUT THE SPONSOR: ERIATA ORIBHABOR.....	ix
EOPP 2018 JUDGES' PROFILE	x
ABOUT EOPP 2018 WINNER: CHINUA EZENWA- OHAETO	xi
EOPP 2018 HONOUR ROLL	xii
I BURN INCENSES BEFORE SLEEP	13
Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto, WINNER EOPP 2018 ..	13
THE SOUND OF RAINBOW'	15
Dipe Jolaade, 1st Runner-UP, EOPP 2018	15
A PATRIOT'S REQUIEM OR AN IMMIGRANT'S TESTAMENT	17
Nome, Emeka Patrick, 2nd Runner-UP, EOPP 2018.....	17
APPLICATION FOR SURVIVAL.....	19
STRIPPING A RIVER ITS NAME	21
MY MIND – A PLANTATION OF HOPE	23
NOW & THEN	24
THE VERB FLEE	26
IF ONLY	27

Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize 2018

//ERROR 404//.....	29
TO WAZOBIA, WITH LOVE.....	31
MY HAIR REGIMEN.....	33
THE TRUTH IN A BLANK PAGE.....	34
GIFT OF THE JUNGLE	36
THIS IS NIGERIA	37
THE RIVERS BETWEEN.....	42
BOTTLED COUNTRY	44
STRIPPING A RIVER ITS NAME	46
ILLEGITIMATE CHILD.....	48_Toc4334953

INTRODUCTION

I am pleased to introduce *I BURN INCENSE BEFORE SLEEP*, the first ever chapbook of the Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize (EOPP). This chapbook, titled after the winning poem, has a lot to say about Nigeria— her people, cultures, experiences, hopes, and aspirations, in line with the Prize's themes: Unity, Truth, Justice, Change and Sustainable Development in society. You will enjoy reading it.

When we began the EOPP in 2012, it was to bring attention to Nigerian poetry and reward young Nigerian poets. I daresay we have achieved this aim. We can still do more for the development of young Nigerian writers who are the future of the industry.

After seven years of organizing what has become the leading platform for the discovery, encouragement, and celebration of poets in Nigeria, I believe this is a good time to be innovative. This is why we decided to publish a chapbook (free for download) for every edition of the Prize and reward more poets, by serving their writings to wider audiences.

Many thanks go to the sponsor prize, Eriata Oribhabor, the co-judges of this edition – Adedayo Agarau and Oyindamola Shoola – and all those who sent in their entries... and to you're the reader. Gracias!

— Kukogho Iruesiri Samson, *March 2019*

ABOUT THE ERIATA ORIBHABOR POETRY PRIZE (EOPP)

The ERIATA ORIBHABOR POETRY PRIZE (EOPP) is an annual literary prize instituted in November 2012 by Words Rhymes & Rhythm (WRR) in partnership with prominent Nigerian poet, essayist, editor, social commentator Sir Eriata Oribhabor.

EOPP came about to give the much-needed attention Nigerian poetry deserved to and encourage young Nigerian poets to use poetry as a tool for social change. The Prize finds its purpose in the belief that poetry and the arts are agents of social change that must routinely encouraged.

In the words of Sir Eriata, the EOPP is a special reward mechanism for young Nigerian poets. Over the years, the contest has become the leading platform for the discovery, encouragement, and celebration of poets in Nigeria.

Past winners of the Prize include
Nwakanma Chika (2012), Madu Chisom Kingdavid (2013), Darlington Ekene Ogugua (2014), Ajise Vincent (2015), Frank Eze (2016), Mesioye Johnson (2017) and Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2018).



ABOUT THE SPONSOR: ERIATA ORIBHABOR

Eriata Oribhabor is a poet, essayist, editor, social commentator, a former Chairman, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Abuja, CEO/Publisher at *Something For Everybody Ventures* (SFEV), and President of Poets In Nigeria (PIN) Initiative.

A renowned Nigerian literary promoter, Oribhabor has authored several books including *Beautiful Poisons*, *Crossroads* and *The Rubicon*, *Eriata on Marble*, *Shifting Rides of Poetikness*, *Random Thoughts on Poetry*, *Walking Truths* and *That Beautiful Picture*.

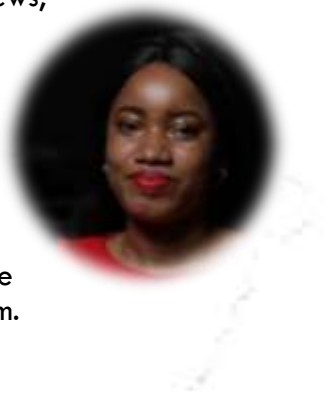
In concert with members of Poets in Nigeria Initiative, he organizes several literary initiatives events within and outside Nigeria, chief of which include Festival Poetry Calabar; Nigerian Students Poetry Prize and ArtHub Lagos, Food Poetry Prize.

His literary activism which has earned him the title of 'MERCHANT OF POETRY'. He encourages young writers to develop their potentials towards achieving their dreams and enjoys discussions on topical issues, traveling, tours and adventures.



EOPP 2018 JUDGES' PROFILE

Oyindamola Shoola is a writer, author, the Co-founder and CEO of Springg Literary Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting Nigerian writers. By providing opportunities such as contests, an online creative-writing mentorship program, giveaways, interviews, book reviews and more, the [Springg Literary Movement](#) has reached over 500 Nigerian writers and supported their success. Her books include *Heartbeat*, *To Bee a Honey* and *The Silence We Eat*. She blogs at: www.shoolaoyin.com.



Adedayo Agarau, Author of [For Boys Who Went](#), is a documentary photographer and poet. He explores the concept of godhood, boyhood, distance, and absence. His works have been featured on Gaze Mag, Allegro, Obra Artifact, Constellate, Jalada Africa, Geometry, 8poems, BarnHouse, Barren Magazine and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Asylum Chapel*, is forthcoming from Pen and Anvil Press, Boston. He is on twitter as [@adedayo_agarau](#). His poem, *Stones*, made the shortlist of Babishai Niwe Poetry Prize in 2018.



ABOUT EOPP 2018 WINNER:
CHINUA EZENWA-OHAETO

CHINUA EZENWA-OHAETO is a multiple award winning Nigerian writer from Owerri-Nkworji in Nkwerre, Imo state.

He has won the Association of Nigerian Author's Literary Award for Mazariyya Ana Teen Poetry Prize, 2009; Speak to the Heart Inc. Poetry Competition, 2016. He became a runner-up in Etisalat Prize for Literature, Flash fiction, 2014. He won the Castello di Duino Poesia Prize for an unpublished poem, 2018 which took him to Italy. He is the recipient of New Hampshire Institute of Art's 2018 Writing Award, and New Hampshire Institute of Art's 2018 scholarship to MFA Program.

Some of his works have appeared in Lunar Review, AFREADA, Raffish Magazine, Kalahari Review, Palette, Knicknackery, Praxismagazine, Bakwa Magazine, Strange Horizons, One, Ake Review and Crannòg magazine.



EOPP 2018 HONOUR ROLL

Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto

Dipe Jolaade

Nome, Emeka Patrick

Hussani Abdulrahim

Mbanefo Chibuike

Oyekunle Ifeoluwa Peter

Emmanuel Isidore Udoma

Mazpa Ejikem

Bayowa Ayomide Micheal

Adegoke Adeola

Goodness Olanrewaju Ayoola

Ekene May

Jeje Oluwasola Ayanfeolorun

Cephas U.T. John

Akunna James-Ibe

John Chizoba Vincent

Betiku Ayokunle Samuel

Philip Chijioke Abonyi

Mbanefo Chibuike

Omotoyosi Salami

I BURN INCENSES BEFORE SLEEP

CHINUA EZENWA-OHAETO, WINNER EOPP 2018

—after reading *Rasaq*

Here you become afraid of the radios & televisions.
You do not want to be swallowed by their voices.
You do not want to be held by names dropping from their
bellies.

Hauwa, she grew a garden, and harvested blasted bones.
Abiodun, she went to the market
and her breath faded in the smoke. Onyejeno, he saw a
friend off near Okpokwu and
was burned alive. Sochimma, she held a school of flowers
and was pulsed through knives.

Ehi'zogie, his brother's body was placed into a lighted tire
for kissing a boy.

Ebuka, Olisa's friend, drowned with the mangled bodies
sprouting at his backyard.

Onoriode, she admired the moon and was nailed down
into a burlap for godheads.

Odimegwu, he stepped out for a stroll and caught a halo of
blood around his neck.

There are many strings around here.

So many winding roads; so many broken things.

Broken laughter. Broken nights.

Broken rivers. Broken lives.

Here, manifestoes have no eyes or ears, and no pleasure
and dreams they claim.

My father, his mouth opens the loudest at 9: for fucksake,
just imagine!

My mother dives for our ears, she doesn't want us to
overhear, fucking thieves!

they hold elections with armed forces and fight terrorism
with prayers.

Last week, a man left a house and vanished at the
waterfront. The week before

last week, a village was razed down by bright edges of
machetes, and Ak-47s.

Say this is what you get for living in this place, for walking a
country.

Here, you become afraid of everything every day.

Yet, every night I burn incenses before sleep,

hoping that each dawn will someday

bring a new smile here: where people will grow to age;

where people can stay and fit in; where love will flower
and bloom

and where peace and unity will grow for people in here to
stay as one.



THE SOUND OF RAINBOW

DIPE JOLAADE, 1ST RUNNER-UP, EOPP 2018

sometimes when my body molts away
from salvation i fold myself
into brown letters- grandpa is a loosened
memory; of sand, gravel, silver tiles &
roses and the only way he's in our heart
is the tales displayed on the news
"injured soldiers, slaved citizens & colonized community"

abami eda plays on the radio

My deduction's never wrong.
I say we're the remains of a forgotten
massacred, masking scars & pains as a
forlorn- a spook in chains of deserted dreams,
as lifeless dust- fading history and I say
Luther's dream has bent to this limelight.

& at times, the etymology of broken bottles
makes a tumescence hole in our hearts.
say a man's hope is enveloped in a white A3
with blood as the label "we'd loved to but..."
he drank into the night, drain is the new home
as it is that hell to his body found
its origin at home.

And most times, chasing after shadows seems
to be the way to grip our brother's collar,
Knit our sisters into pinkish rainbow dreams
& wobble their eyes into household moon;
watching as we lace our hands with magic, say:
-the rainbow is a beautiful poem in seven lines
-the thede's foundation is a rigid statue

-the paroxysm of happiness is contactable
-& holding on is strength itself.

Glossary

Thede - A nation

*Abami Eda - Extraordinary being (in reference to
Fela Anikulapo)*

Dipe Jola is a teenage Nigerian writer and ardent lover of art and literature who enjoys reading and writing poems. Jola's writings have been featured in a numbers of anthologies. According to her, darkness is light to hidden rainbows. She lives in Lagos from where she writes.



A PATRIOT'S REQUIEM OR AN IMMIGRANT'S TESTAMENT

NOME, EMEKA PATRICK, 2ND RUNNER-UP, EOPP 2018

I am sure, God, I grow in the space between my country &
my dreams.

At the embassy, an older woman asks why my name
sounds like God's,
says Emeka unfurls like A maker when tried on a foreigner's
tongue when I tell her I am a Nigerian she stills –the
surprised eyes of a cub
pulled out of a zoo. I wear my country like a prayer, I try it
on twice
like my father's militia coat. Good God, I am Nigeria most
honest prayer.

I mean in my room I trace the map back to Africa, to
Nigeria, to the
land where my people wake up with the sun in their bones.

I cry wolf
for Hauwa Liman, for my grandmothers who died in the
war, for the
heroes who held the flag close to their bodies even when
they were
drowning. In my dreams, I wake up to women with
amethyst eyes on a
shore where the world glitters godly, to fathers teaching
their children
the songs of victory. I'm standing in a land that once called
my fathers
a monkey, proud monkeys. In the pre-colonial days, our
fathers stood
over the bodies of white trespassers, my history lecturer
once said.
Nightly, I dream of a land of rainbows & greens, where
truth is silver,

justice is golden, where we hold hands but not to mourn
the dead.

God, I'm not black, I nigerian my skin into beauty, into the
night's hopes.

Lord, I want this country like an old widow wants her only
surviving son.

I want this nation, my loyal dream, my beautiful maim, my
fairest hope.

Nigeria, my forefather's loyal love, proudest warthog,
meekest stillness

where we stand on the shore, as a people, sweating with
protest, prayers

waiting for God's hands to touch anything –anything –& in
the distance

the children chase fireflies, a bird hums: dis naija, great
people, great nation.

Nome, Emeka Patrick is a Nigerian writer studying English Language and Literature at the University of Benin (UNIBEN), Nigeria. In 2018, he was awarded the 40th Festus Iyayi Award for Excellence (Poetry). His works have been published or forthcoming in Gaze journal, Beloit poetry journal, FLAPPER HOUSE, Crannóg magazine, Mud Season Review, Barnhouse journal and elsewhere.



APPLICATION FOR SURVIVAL

HUSSANI ABDULRAHIM

To Whom It May Concern:

You who made a man's face splendid beneath a talcum of
bullets
& a boy embalmed memories in lonely lungs
after a home turned lighthouse in the dark

You who showed us to the fallen edges of dimmed dreams
turned green-white-green from grace to grass
and triggered frustration
and a broken man gifted his body to flames

You who wrapped a boy's fingers around a gun
slipped a bullet into his father's chest
You who turned a city into a fortress of vultures
when a blast sang louder than voices of worshippers

You who have swallowed whales
but blessed us with bones & ballot boxes
and wrapped happiness in monstrous clouds
chained us underwater
that we must not grace the sun's resplendence

You who stole our girls
and turned them into salt and despair
and made us desert our homes
made peace ostentatious, while we
grope and grope in the alley of homelessness & hunger

You who said love must best be known
in reverse, and women must not learn

the pronunciation of desire
save the music of silence and solitude

You who keep demanding ridiculous ransomes
that we may embrace the musk of devastation
while you keep unearthing our pain
lacerate our scars and make the bleeding brand new

You who play politricks with our lives and education
you who turned roads to potholes of death
you who say we must squat in unkempt hospitals
and battle mosquitoes without pills and syringes

We humbly request that the sunsets left in us
still yearn for safe spaces and air



STRIPPING A RIVER ITS NAME

MBANEFO CHIBUIKE

The picture of an eagle holds a boy in a trance
how his father buried his strength in a bird:
this place teaches him to strip a river its name
and embed it in a boy running into fire
not in his brittle black skin, calling the bird
by its known name, but in his magic dreams
walking between flames into a place of solitude:
remember when the moon played with the elders
to reveal darkness under your mother's breast,
when darkness began in a closed mouth
spreading into the picture of a bird with broken wings -
your body continues this way, asking for the sound of
water
to hold magic in its hands and let go of this wrecking heat.
Your body rejects the fact that the rainbow holds colours
of people who awaken fire in the bones of young boys
because they've been listening to the booming music
how boys embrace colours and become complete.
Togetherness is boys giving their voices to the unnamed
river -
and making a home out of its floods,
you wipe this darkness off your eyes and it turns
into a river-bird healing from self-inflicted lynchings.
This river hears of a boy's magic and searches for its name -
flipping through the pages of his future
it calls the wind, to hold spaces for broken wings
conforming to the new faces of a running water.
To be fair to this body of water is to ask of its origin
so you can rename it according to its path -
you'd want to call it Niger because its mouth
kissed a people and turned their rottenness to green -
but you do not know if this water wishes to return

to the grounds to bear the weight of a lost name.
You call them the sons of an unnamed river -
singing ideas into waters, as celebrations or something
in honour of a god, who you'd later ask its colour
because darkness isn't a visitor to the blind -
the river flows alone until throats seek for water
and know the taste of resurrected bodies.
Revival begins with boys refusing to sleep in the skin of a
river
even if their bodies are now collections of events
and the stripped name voyaging their skin into a burst
to walk the people into desires that breathe new
expectations -
rainbow is the only hope of a riverbird
to hide the waters in its feathers
till familiar voices call for a new name.



MY MIND – A PLANTATION OF HOPE

OYEKUNLE IFEOLUWA PETER

Last year, my brother made a first class-
today, he rolls weed and wields a cutlass
because this country is hell without flames
and we are all living with one leg raised.
a school is another name for cave of lies;
I mean a trap our leaders set on our paths-
but if ASUU is a synonym for strike,
that explains why the government is dead.

My childhood friend is a senator's son-
last night, he killed a man under the daylight sun.
I heard the case has been closed as "hit and run"
but the constable's pocket is filled with naira notes,
my country is a stream where justice has been drowned
and the only change we see is corruption changing hands-
but here I'll stay not because I am stuck
but because my mind is a plantation of hope.

& I'm learning to find hope in broken dreams
because that is what my country taught me to do,
a tribe is another name for ignorance;
so we can't find love from another tribe-
to disagree with parents is to wage war,
I mean those who chant "peace and unity" with pride.
& yet we portray lies on our currency notes
so why won't the Igbos seek another home?

NOW & THEN

EMMANUEL ISIDORE UDOMA

Before the westerners' arrival, we were
a cluster of stars around the moon,
marching silently to the unknown.

Ours was a worship, on each market day,
to a particular god whose nurture,
like a mother's soothing palm,
showers blissful seasons.

We watched crescent moons become full,
nights cripples hungered for walk.
Children gathered in open fields,
listening to mothers tell tales of our past,
their voices pitched in tidal waves that washed eyes wet.

Our fathers hunted games, tilled farms, built barns
large enough to feed families, friends and foes.
For sharing of kolanut wasn't out of a brother's greed or
penury
but, because we knew that knitting together our little circles
made foes become friends, and friends kinsmen.

The arrival of the westerners put a knife
across things that held us together
annulling market days,
replacing them with weekdays
named after alien gods.

Our little niches have been dissolved
like salt kissing moisture. Now, is a mixture
of grains and stones, of diverse people and tongues.

Our understanding, as a people, is gradually lost
in the shadows of nationhood
where commonwealth meant to repair bad infrastructures
repairs the pockets of power-drunk men.

We were like a bundle of broom, bound together.
Now, we are individual sticks trying to sweep our mess.
Once glued by love and fraternity, now
torn apart by hate and greed.



THE VERB FLEE

MAZPA EJIEM

*[Three young boys caught and burnt to death in
Aba for theft on Saturday, August 18, 2018]*

I have seen God in many queer places:
in a host of angry looking tongues of fire;
in the belly of smoke rising up the atmosphere;
In a boy's eyes, whispering "help me! help me!"
until his voice is drowned by rugged violence
and he becomes a shipwreck full of grief.

I swear I do not know how it works,
but in this town, to kill just any man,
learn to roll your tongue into an O, & scream Ole!
or Homo! or anything else that draws hate
from the blood of passers-by and watch
as a body becomes a city of lost wars.

Let me tell you, here, people carry justice
in the hardness of idle stones & heavy sticks
& inside the conflagrating chemistry
of scarce petrol and worn-out tyres.
Here, you are guilty until proven otherwise,
because words and life don't mean a thing.

I do not know how living things twist their bodies
into spaces that hold only fire and blood & still breathe.
My body does not understand how I got here,
but I swear, I will carve out wings from my bones
& fly into the crevices of strange city walls,
Because sometimes, freedom can mean the verb, flee.

IF ONLY

BAYOWA, AYOMIDE MICHEAL

If only love could be
that front slab
of gossip[s] dissolving
on your tongue, or
the large weeviled wrapper
rolling around your falling fruits and waist
before you leave your children no lessons notes
& report to daily dooms
that remind you that you're a river,
& you meet with dusk's sunlight;
who warned you already
of burning your skin, your feet.
Is it love you spittle of your son's face
when he wakes to watch the news
of how the cattle you rear goes beyond your armpit
to drink souls in moos?
& he curses you for being too careless
for revealing your bum as twerks, at the village square,
to a piece of unheard destructive-music
& promises never to bring such a lady home, to you, as his
wife.
If only you swear too
by the iron, cross and moon &
dust your shoes,
wash your white thoroughly, polish your black,
scamper your synthetic grey hair for dandruff[s]
& learn better ways of squirming & polluting
any garment with an open sore,
faith would be woven
into your skullcap
as you unfurl each morn,
noon, twilight.

It's faith whose
hand holds back
your hair while you're
sick of oozing bloody sweats,
burying your children with your hands, in your scars.
& tomorrow you love
any man ready
to toss his tongue,
& enticing wares into your valley
beyond your collarbone, & sell in advance payments,
& never give you your change.

No one will teach you how to carve love
on your babies like wooden figurines,
with your breath
weaving their throats.
No one will tell you-
a healthy temple is justice's asylum.
Last days will call you
doubly while you've got
one hand on your note,
and you'll consider
balance before payment.

//ERROR 404//

ADEGOKE ADEOLA

You opened an app, a browser
Chrome smells of your search history
and before you tweet,
the bird on the window mocked you
and you logged off ...

You opened an app, and it's colourful
Recent searches of rape videos,
The after effects and possibly,
sample of victims who finally had ropes around their neck
pops up

You couldn't put your head up,
How strong people like Maureen
came to the internet to rescue their lives
You're a victim too, but unlike them,
Your story is wobbled or how,
How do someone who has 'man' 'hood'
dangling between two legs rant around?

You read how people like Tukur
maimed the spirit of self-annihilation
The noises of Facebook walls didn't help in any way,
Whenever you look in the mirror,
You see wreckage, you see a lifeless boy
You stutter during conversations
and prefer sketching birds indoor

When you finally decided, what's right?
You opened an app, a browser
The one that smells of your search history, chrome!
You ignored all popping messages

and directly typed some weird words,
"Ten best ways to die"
You clicked the enter button
and the search engine hisses,
"Error 404"



TO WAZOBIA, WITH LOVE

GOODNESS OLANREWAJU AYOOLA

Dear Compatriots,

To revive these dead melodies stuck to our
Blistered palates, we would never ask again how is it our
Business to watch our farmstead invaded by aliens.

We would rise from our stagnant eclipse — a renaissance;
And repair the rips of our nobility;
We would find strength and exhume our city from the
marshes of flaws.

We would not blind ourselves and bury our heads
Long into ignorant nights and lazy liturgies
And watch our glory drown into the greediness of villains.

We would plant greenness into forsaken grounds
And dare again the heights dwarfing the giant in us
We would stop to buttress into the past and disturb the

Sleep of fallen heroes; brothers we lost
To senseless wars;
We would climb the horizon of hope and throw

Our eyes beyond this marginalisation; beyond
These derricks that have desolated
Our homes and flayed us of the joy of motherhood.

We would make garlands of togetherness
And need no hands to incite the trigger or
Morbidity in deadly cells to stuff our market with
massacres.

We would need no more martyrs for the grips of
ignorance,
And an end to the celebration that comes with a Pyrrhic
victory
We would recook the taste of the news; the white in our

Greenness — immaculate;
We would not relax the effort of mercy.
And justice, blunt. The fragrance of corruption

Would no more permeate the treasury enough for all.
The spirit of our fathers would bear again the offerings of
Chivalry —

And hapless sons would fortress the sun of hope
Between their teeth; rejuvenated;
And a future bright. Diversities

Would be no more disasters,
Like beads on a string, we would
Adorn our necks with a fusion of our differences,

And lose our sleep never again!

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MY HAIR REGIMEN

EKENE MAY

Daily - Moisturize with water mixed with ori, olive, castor,
coconut oil and leave-in conditioner
like the victims of insurgency we remember in our prayers,
we do not know their names, but we pray for peace,
and anoint our heads so we do not become victims too,

Weekly- Mask with Aloe Vera and Co-Wash
we find time to go over to the camps,
volunteer as teachers or environmentalists,
clean up their spaces and teach them how to do it too,

Monthly - Mask with Aloe Vera, wash with shampoo and
deep condition
we make the trash-picking bigger,
hold a musical concert,
we go bearing gifts, we take pictures,
the world must see the condition they are in,
it is a steep hole,
how do they survive?

Every minute - I pull and pluck my rich black hair
the way they pull them, pluck them from their roots,
and when they seem a little grown,
they take them out again, like my little curls,
my hair is rich and has a regimen that I strictly adhere to,

'With the way you pull your hair, you might have alopecia
soon' my mother said.

My country has alopecia, but does not know it,
I do.

THE TRUTH IN A BLANK PAGE

JEJE OLUWASOLA AYANFEOLORUN

At first I knew fire resided with cloud of flames inside the
incursion of a raging sea when a child remained a fraction
of what was never whole,
like what shrinks and rehearses with the ambience – a
divorced smell is collected by your nostrils,
because most times darkness is a name of what does not
exist; it is just light fatiguing and fainting into a place we'd
never know,
because a heart houses corrosive costumes – like fading
algae & stained stones & words falling from a shivering
sheet & drops of cold sweat & a wall of deafening
dormancy & a smell of ammonia,
& the paragraph God waves to the earth – like sonorous
questions bouncing back from the sky,
because a child is throwing hands to his stars; why lines are
falling on rough edges?
because a child is an emoticon of an unraveled seed seeking
soil somewhere amidst the integrity of the sun on a bald
land,
At times I grieve into wild songs with lyrics dropping off an
altered calendar like the rage of scalding volcanoes at an
unverified velocity gracing my body in shots,
When a girl is neglected in the wind to wrestle with water
in the desert,
She breathes the storm heavily to break further into
whatever life spills.
It is the tale of a virgin moon tucked between incursions of
darkness & sour sauce;
of a boy lashed with the ignorance of his father,
& his life sits in his mouth and his future is a blockage in his
excretory gland,

Boy says this is the holiness of the devil and the odiousness
of God,
because he is new & fallen & trapped in a bin.
He is the street rays engulfed by dirty clouds beaming
through your sight,
He is the beauty of hell & sagging hopes.
A child somewhere is a picture in the ocean floating on
drops in his eyes and fiery vapors from your own body
when you gape with sighs on your face,
like a burden gasping amidst you when you hum a melody
of silence with your heart burnt and your head hitting
breeze behind – making melancholic music.
On the street of Lagos, I have seen boys and girls hanging
onto cold night with the caress of dirt inscribing names on
their foreheads like a dusty map that shows the path into a
misty cave.
It is a way of saying tomorrow doesn't exist, Nigeria is lame
and today is quenched too – only flames can trod the path
of an unhoneed wind.
I have seen boys becoming men at dawn like life emitting
radioactive turbulence on withering muscles, flabby and
lanky like the ones in the suburbs of Kaduna given out to
toil and moil – the witty snare of life.
I have seen hopes hung onto the bricks of a tearing wall like
a future forged into rags & rags weaved into what makes
the ground grand.
I have seen what removes a piece of peace from my body
like a river drowning itself,
& of men clothed in dark colors of conflicting ignorance,
like the father of the child under the smile of a bridge at
Berger begging for his belly's sake,
tell him what matters most is the story that lies in a blank
page like the one he sees not in the chapter of a child.

GIFT OF THE JUNGLE

CEPHAS U.T. JOHN

My sister's head is a half-eaten carcass
fermenting on her six-year old neck under
the sweat of a pastor's running tongue.

His frame clothes her black with its shadow
As she mourns the death of an innocence
in a dock where she stands trial for the sin of seduction.

The Monalisa sitting on the wall looks like shaved Jesus-
a watchful witness whose unseen tongue can't save.

The corners of My uncle's sag under the nuances of self-
pity.
He said earlier that a man's waist is not a prisoner of
control and blood-
Not when a girl child is the warden.

His bent head is propped under pillars
I and my sister share shapes with.
He doesn't look like he will make that date with
Trauma that waits at a table full of entitlements.

I am
a pot of boiling
acid,

But I spit wings unto the anger spinning inside my balled
fists,
For knives are weapons with real shapes to fill up fists.

THIS IS NIGERIA

AKUNNA JAMES-IBE

Look at what we've become,
a thorn glorified by withering petals,
Shebi there was a time palm oil used to flow past our
shores to paint the entire world red,
and our groundnut pyramids towered above the northern
clouds like the shoulders of haughty gods?
wasn't there a time wealth used to sit cross-legged in our
mines?
and didn't our naira once walk hand in hand with dollar
notes?

What happened when the womb of our soil began to bear
oil to glaze our fortunes?
and how did such a blessing turn degenerate?
we let its crudeness flood the land like the tantrums of an
over-pampered child,
it strangled our farmlands,
it soiled our hands so that our cutlasses and hoes slipped off
our digits,
our mines got clogged,
our pyramids skidded on the slippery paths the oil created,
they fell to the ground - humiliated gods,
the labours of our heroes past became memories in the
fading print of history texts.

Look at what we've become,
the giant carcass of Africa,
there was a time we stood taller than a hundred NEPA
masts stacked on their tips,
and the nations about us sought the greener pastures
growing out from under our armpits,
we were like a rainbow made flesh,

the enchantment of many a tourist,
two hundred and fifty different tribes glowing with exotic
colours beneath the sheath of a green and white flag,
Bukola playing in the sand with Chukwudi and Hauwa,
Pastor Daniel discussing politics with the Alfa across the
road,
and everyone's tongue glossed with the same colour of
spittle.

Then corruption came charging from places above and
below,
with a sling fashioned from greed and a smooth pebble
picked from the depths of injustice,
it took a shot and it didn't miss,
Nigeria fell to the ground, a humiliated giant.
Buzzards feasted,
Government plundered,
Poverty festered,
Education crumbled,
Health whimpered,
Bombs blasted,
Knives slaughtered,
People died,
Children cried.
Government shrugged.
Wahala erupted.
Bukola and Chukwudi refused to play with Hauwa because
she was Hausa,
and Chukwudi soon followed suit because he was Biafran,
Ah!
The motto riding beneath our coat of arms got involved in
a car crash.

Kai.

How did we get here,

on this cold hard floor?

No.

How did we even remain here,
with over 17 million talented Nigerians running around?

Aren't we tired of what we have become?

Can't we remember what we were?

Can't we imagine what we could have been?

Can't we picture what we can be if everyone tried in their
capacity, with love, to hurl this giant of the ground?



THIS IS HOW YOU SMELL IN THE AFTERNOON

JOHN CHIZOBA VINCENT

Like the scent of my lover's ghost,
a girl's hair fell out from her head yesterday
& God could not pick it until she got swallowed.
This is me donating a bandage to poetry
to ease pains from those people insane,
this is me donating blood to lineage dirge,
to commemorate the agony of your dance.
Mother said the only great place to dance is between the
legs of fighters in the battlefield.

I will bury you in the glistening edge of my pen
For the sake of words and hyping of blood.
I know the scent of my lover's body in the morning when
red roses withstand legs
waiting to get murdered in the afternoon.
Let me put you through this call & hear god
tell you this is how you smell in the afternoon,
like African poverty and their sinful desires,
like African corruption and their election.

This is how you smell in the afternoon before
the kiss from the sun unmasked your feelings,
like the pages of Nigerian jolted sorrows.
Soonest, salty sultan embraces will have
your welcome in the palm of morning moon.
I won't shine some light to your thoughts,
but I will make the windful words to quench
the tales in your beaming lustful mouth
and the galaxies of stars shall gather to say amen to this
rhetorical questions in your mouth.

This is me harvesting words like baits,

I know your smell when you want to hurt me,
I know your smell just like Nigerian politicians.
I know your odour when you are obsessed with
the only prophecy in my head to the world.
Store your saliva in my prayerful pocket
I'll sill silly girl into the dumb dungeon
hunting the same smell that got burnt raising your kind;
this is how you smell in the afternoon



THE RIVERS BETWEEN

BETIKU AYOKUNLE SAMUEL

When tales of eagles are told
under shadowed moons (vestiges of light
enshrouded in sack clothes),
they must begin with tales of disparate
breeds of eagles born of different earths;
like the genesis of two alien rivers
journeying from the north to the south,
detached in the destinies of their springs.

The moonlight tales must reveal
proud eagles perched on monoliths--
monuments of crumbled legacies
engraved with epitaphs of beginnings
which were, and are no more;
beginnings are trodden under the conceit
of eagles detached by the disparity of origins,
reflected by the two rivers between...

But tales are not complete without songs,
and dirges are songs—mournful cries
of eaglets lost in a forest of deranged eagles,
elegies of crimson-blotted dreams
heralded by the deafening sound of thunder,
threnodies of eagles slain in the combat of bulls,
and the anguish of those who loathe their nest.

Some moonlight tales end on dreary notes,
like a tale of the proud falling to his ruin;
but when two rivers fall from the north
(like the fall of the hostile ego of eagles),
it is not a tale of ruinous ends,
it is to meet in the south—

the conjoining of essence hitherto estranged,
a wellspring of life which all shall drink.

Then, questions are raised when tales end,
like the two rivers in unison asking "why?"
Why delay the present in the nostalgic throes of the past?
For the past is but a shadowed moon,
but the future, nay, the present is a rising day
whose rays are reflected by the kinship of rivers—
the union of west, east, north and south.



BOTTLED COUNTRY

PHILIP CHIJOKE ABONYI

Let's retire the green lines around us,
Let's merge our hearts with mortar of oneness,
Our hands have grown guns yawning at each other,
and our sharpened hearts embracing the dove we're
together.

Our tongues are chameleon with colour of betrayal,
And each time a brother dies with our spittles,
We put crocodile eyes in our eyes,
And our faces in comflauge of sympathy hides.

In black Maria our future goes to Golgotha,
even when his hand is clean in judicial center,
We fold guns in our help to a brother,
And tomorrow impeach him as armed robber.

Now how can we plant moon in our streets?
How can river Niger runs in our homes?
How can we paint our nation with eternal powder of
development?
When we show love with crisis,
And toast our glasses with perfect smiles of hatred.

Tell me how we can find our disposed good days?
Our perfect outfits tore by colonisation,
Our food that taste like fulfilled promises,
And dance that crushed with boat of British,
How can the epicotyl of our hopes epeal?
How can our aspirations grow root of realness
without clothing our hearts with change,
And breaking the bottle our country has fallen into like
cage.



STRIPPING A RIVER ITS NAME

MBANEFO CHIBUIKE

The picture of an eagle holds a boy in trance
how his father buried his strength in a bird -
this place teaches him to strip a river its name
and embed it in a boy running into fire
not in his brittle black skin, calling the bird
by its known name, but in his magic dreams
walking between flames into a place of solitude -
remember when the moon played with the elders
to reveal darkness under your mother's breast,
but the truth is, darkness began in a closed mouth
spreading into this picture of a bird with broken wings -
your body continues this way, asking for the sound of
water
to hold magic in its hands and let go of this wrecking heat.
Your body rejects the fact that the rainbow holds colours
of people who awaken fire in the bones of young boys
because they've been listening to the booming music
how boys embrace colours and become complete.
Togetherness is boys giving their voices to the unnamed
river -
and making a home out of its floods,
you wipe this darkness off your eyes and it turns
into a riverbird healing from self-inflicted lynchings.
This river hears of a boy's magic and searches for its name -
flipping through the pages of his future
it calls the wind, to hold spaces for broken wings
conforming to the new faces of a running water.
To be fair to this body of water is to ask it of its origin
so you can rename it according to its path -
you'd want to call it Niger, because its mouth
kissed a people and turned their rottenness into green
leaves -

but you do not know if this water wishes to return
to the grounds to bear the weight of a lost name.
You call them the sons of an unnamed river -
singing ideas into waters, as celebrations or something
in honour of a god, who you'd later ask its colour
because darkness isn't a visitor to the blind -
the river flows alone until throats seek for water
and know the taste of resurrected bodies.
Revival begins with boys refusing to sleep in the skin of a
river
even if their bodies are now collections of events
and the stripped name voyaging their skin into a burst
to walk the people into desires that breathe new
expectations -
rainbow is the only hope of a riverbird
to hide the waters in its feathers
till familiar voices call for a new name.



ILLEGITIMATE CHILD

OMOTOYOSI SALAMI

sometimes, whenever my mother gets mad at me
she sits on the floor, unties her head gear, disintegrates
herself
and becomes many stories
I pick one piece of her and read her scars:
when I got pregnant with you
my father and mother disowned me
and locked the youth server that poured his seed in me—
your father—up in the police station
when he came out, he fled the town without completing
his service.
I fling the piece but there is no use,
as it has already settled in my stomach.
I am a loose thing, other children
bring happiness and joy but I didn't
a child born out of wedlock
is only the shameful product of a man stealing what is not
(yet) his
from a wayward woman who lets him
shame is like cashew juice; something that stains you
and never comes off;
when I was only seven
a big man came to visit my mother in our house
before he came, she warned me sternly, pulling her ear—
be quiet. do not make a sound.
later that day, as I sat quietly in my room,
I saw a big rat come out of nowhere
I managed to keep my reaction to a squeal,
I heard his big man voice—who's that?—my mother
answered, "it's from the next house."
after he left,

my mother came to me. she pulled my ears and spanked
me so hard,
I sent a curse to my father wherever he was.
but that was when she was younger,
when she could still pull ears, when she still had big men
flocking after her. these days,
my mother just intentionally forgets me in the passage
leading to the home of god.
illegitimate children have no place here, the pastor says.



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