

THE JOE USHIE PRIZE ANTHOLOGY VOL. 1 (2026)

"The poems in this anthology display impressive breadth in voice and theme, spanning myth, politics, intimacy, and ecological consciousness. They demonstrate not only linguistic control but a capacity to fuse cultural reflection with personal or collective emotion. Several pieces experiment boldly with form and idiom, demonstrating the vitality of contemporary African poetics."

- Dr Mathias Orhero, Louisiana State University

"This collection is enriched by poems that are creative and thoughtful in the themes they depict and the ideologies they espouse. The poems can be read as poetic performances on life and art, comprising the existential dance of the postcolonial, rhythmic personal songs, musings on social scenes and their sins, as well as the discordant echoes of our disfigured physical and cultural landscapes. In sum, The Joe Ushie Poetry Prize Anthology is a crystal of poetic gems - a constellation of verbal stars."

- Dr. Eyoah Etim, Akwa Ibom State University

"Herein are exciting examples of contemporary Nigerian poetry in its diversity of style and subject. From free verse to sonnet, and covering themes of politics, love, spirituality, and family, this anthology represents a snapshot of Nigerian poetry's present and future, one that is locally rooted but accessible to an international audience. This is an auspicious start to what will surely become an important institution going forward."

- Dr. Asha Jeffers, Dalhousie University

"People have different ways of describing what they consider to be good poetry. This suggests that when readers meet good poetry, they know so. The Joe Ushie Poetry Prize Anthology Vol. 1 (2026) is an example of what qualifies as good poetry. Different poems from different contributors/poets tell different tales, but with one subject matter: a call for a better world. To focus on their revolutionary temper alone is to turn a blind eye to the delicate stylistic choices that foreground the poems' subject and reveal their authors' creative use of English in a diverse yet eye-catching manner. These are poems you will enjoy."

- Prof. Rome Aboh, University of Calabar

"... a collection of voices of astonishing boldness and unusual maturity... despite their occasional idealist affectation, these voices will soon be hailed as a significant new force in our contemporary reposal. And I welcome them heartily into the family compound."

- Prof. Femi Osofisan, University of Ibadan

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Edited by

Rome Aboh

Asha Jeffers

Mathias Orhero

**The Joe Ushie Poetry Prize Anthology
(Vol. 1, 2026)**

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Asha Jeffers
Mathias Iro Orhero

The Joe Ushie Poetry Prize Anthology (Vol. 1, 2026) Edited by Rome Aboh, Asha Jeffers and Mathias Iroero Orhero

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Acknowledgment

It is with profound joy and sheer awe that I pen down this acknowledgment. When I first proposed the idea of instituting a poetry prize in honour of Professor Joseph Ushie to my friends, it seemed unachievable. We didn't know where to start or who to talk to. All we had was a burning desire to honour our teacher and mentor, whose works continue to provide necessary guardrails for our own creative and critical endeavours, and whose fatherly disposition still challenges us to be better versions of ourselves. An honour of this magnitude was long overdue, so we took a foray into the world of the unknown. And just like that, the Joe Ushie Poetry Prize was born!

To infuse more life into the prize, we also set up the Joe Ushie Literature Foundation as a supervising administrative structure. But beyond managing the poetry prize, the foundation has broader goals, including creating awareness about mother tongue endangerment, revitalising humanities education, and resuscitating the moribund reading culture in our region. Our next initiatives - Project 10,000 and Club 100 Project - will better demonstrate these dimensions of the foundation. But back to the poetry prize.

We called for entries in March 2025, and a whopping four hundred plus poets responded, turning in more than one thousand entries. It is to these entrants that we owe the first bout of gratitude. On behalf of all of us at the Joe Ushie Literature Foundation, I would like to say a huge thank you to all those who entrusted us with their beautiful pieces. We do not take this lightly.

Going further, I would love to very specially thank the three inaugural prize judges - Prof. Rome Aboh (University of Calabar), Dr Asha Jeffers (Dalhousie University) and Dr Mathias Irero Orhero (Louisiana State University) - for accepting such a grueling task and for executing it with

clinical precision, whittling the eligible entries down to a longlist of thirty, then to a shortlist of ten, and eventually to three finalists. Working on two continents across three timezones is no easy task. We are forever in your debt.

This anthology is a compendium of the longlisted poems, and the project saw the light of day because of the generous consent of the longlistees. We owe them many thanks. I must state, however, that the anthology is short of three poems, making a total of twenty-seven entries instead of the originally planned thirty. This is due to the fact that one poet didn't consent to the publication of their work. Of course, we had to respect their wishes. Incidentally, this was the only female writer on the longlist, and all of her three entries were independently selected for the longlist by the judges. Nonetheless, we are grateful to the longlistees.

It would amount to gross misconduct if I didn't say thank you to my team. As I mentioned in the first paragraph, the Joe Ushie Poetry Prize began as an idea which enjoyed the favorable disposition of my closest friends. Emmanuel Mfon Udeme (a fellow alumnus of the English Department and founder of CodeX) built our website and brooded on the idea till it hatched into what you now have in your hands. Norbert Ekpenyong (an alumnus of the Philosophy Department and founder of Skybird Poetry) took particular charge of media and publicity, so that our ideas would be seen and heard on the marketplace of the internet, and not just end up in a decrepit corner as many ideas often do. Joseph Effiong (another alumnus of the English Department and founder of Gendream IT Solutions) insisted that our tech expressions would be of the highest standard. And Richard Stephen, who was our class rep in university, was there whenever we had difficult questions. I am grateful to all of them.

I wouldn't fail to thank the University of Uyo for believing in this vision from Day One, and offering us a platform to launch our ideas. We are all particularly grateful to the immediate past Vice Chancellor, Prof. Ndaeyo

Udo, who okayed this project and provided the resources we requested to make the award ceremony realisable. The Tuskers Republic is living up to its name by welcoming ideas from its alumni and supporting the same as much as possible.

Finally, I would like to specially appreciate Prof. Joe Ushie himself for teaching us, mentoring us, loving us and lending us the raw material of his noble name to build our own reputations. We are indeed very grateful. As we present this collection, we honor the legacy of Joe Ushie and reaffirm our commitment to nurturing literary excellence. We thank everyone who believed in this project and contributed to its success.

Johnson Nte'ne
Cegep Heritage College
Gatineau, Canada
Chairman
The Joe Ushie Literature Foundation

Foreword

In 2025, the Joe Ushie Literature Foundation, an initiative in honour of the acclaimed Nigerian poet and academic, Professor Joseph Akawu Ushie, announced the institution of a new Poetry Prize for Nigerian writers.

With the promise of a mouth-watering cash award of \$500, the response generated by the announcement was, not surprisingly, sumptuous. Some 400 poets responded, resulting in a bumper crop of more than a 1000 poems! It is from this harvest of enthusiastic submissions that the Award Committee prepared a preliminary longlist, from which a selection was subsequently culled for this inaugural volume.

The volume, entitled *The Joe Ushie Poetry Prize Anthology, Vol. 1 (2026)*, is, as the reader will discover for himself, a collection of voices of astonishing boldness and unusual maturity. Right from the first poem to the last, each of these works bursts forth on the page with an assertive assurance, a calm but emphatic call for attention, and a distinctive melodic voice—attributes that are not normally found in the work of newcomers. These are supposed to be budding youngsters, at a sensitive stage of parturition, but they speak already like masters, with impressive poise and authority, evident in their confident command of language and locution, their mastery of gesture and idiom, metaphor and diction. It is a collection therefore worthy of celebration.

Indeed, one can almost imagine the agonies these poems must have been enduring in the solitude of incubation, when, having been so beautifully honed and crafted, they had to wait, hidden and unheard, yearning for efflorescence, craving an outlet. Which is where, inevitably, we return to the vexed and much-debated topic of patronage in the arts.

As I have argued before on several platforms, it is neither healthy nor ultimately enriching for any artist to target literary prizes as the sole or main incentive for his creativity. But at the same time, in our kind of environment where the habit of reading and purchasing books is still uncommon, the artist who turns his back on prizes may well sign a pact with suicide. Prizes serve as a necessary, munificent catalyst in the promotion of our culture, and their donors cannot be too idolized. Just see what we would have lost for instance, from the evidence of this collection, without the challenge of the Ushie Prize! I honestly cannot salute enough the generosity of the founding patrons that have allowed us to know these new Talents.

I would like to end this short contribution, then, by congratulating all the poets included here. Unfortunately, it will not be appropriate, at this stage of the competition, when the winner has not been announced, to single out any of the poems for praise or close analysis; hence I will resist the temptation. All I will say therefore is how delighted I have been to read the poems. I wager that, despite their occasional idealist affectation, these voices will soon be hailed as a significant new force in our contemporary repertory. And I welcome them heartily into the family compound.

FEMIOSOFISAN [*aka OKINBALAUNKO*]

*Scholar, Poet, Playwright, Emeritus Professor of Theatre Arts,
University of Ibadan, &
Chairman, ANA Board of Trustees.*
Ibadan, January, 2026.

Dedication

Dedicated to the legacy of Joe Ushie

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“Sisyphus”

Eliongema Udofia

I am my mother's second son, if you count only the living.
Fourth, if you summon the dead. And the truth is, I am
not much of a good son: I refuse to roam the labyrinth
of familial scars, to kneel dejected at the feet of my
misfortunes; nor do I partake in communions
of grief, where my father's absence is broken as bread
and my mother's tears, wine. I laugh over what some would
genuinely weep for. Tell me—whose fault is it that I was
conceived into the chaos of a shipwreck, into this
disarray of crushed rose petals and fractured vows?
Once, mid-sermon, I raced out of a chapel, because the
preacher's words were a hammer against my cardboard
heart. He kept thanking the Father. And what father
have I to worship? All my life, I have dreamt of waking
to find him sitting cross-legged in the parlour, reading
from a newspaper. Instead, every day, I wake to my mother's
piercing sobs in the dark cage of her room. Hope, I tell you,
is a lousy thing—how brief the duration of its bliss.
To shield her from memories of him, I wear a mask
over my face. I am both the father and the begotten son.
I am all my mother has left—what my father has left
to torture her. I am sand and sandstorm, rain and floodwater.
I am the hand bending an exclamation into a question
mark. Each night I try to shut my eyes; they appear before me
bearing mouthfuls of regret—my father and his niece.
My father on his knees. If you must know,
I am not all muscle and tendon. Behind this grinning
face, a boy hungers for parental love. Call me son,
and I swear I'll crumble right here before your feet.
The bright birds in me long to chirrup. There are succulent

parts of me I shield from the light. In the darkness of my room, I muffle my cries in the silkiness of a pillow, a wet patch growing into a city of ruins. I, too, deserve the softness of this world—to be unladen of the burden I have carried the entirety of my life. I, Sisyphus, with the boulder-weight of a father's name. Take this cup from me, dear Lord; I never once lamented thirst.

“Garden Of Wonder”
Alfred Olaiya

Say you're in a garden,
wandering, wondering
how colour on the skin of day
wears out like laughter off a widow's face.
You see butterflies flutter by & watch rainbows
drape from their wilting wings—gradually,
sadly.

A river throws a cold knock at your feet;
you dip your index finger into it & spiral
fond memories into records plunged on loop.
Reminiscence swirls underneath like grains of sand.
You gather a handful in your palm, squeeze it with relish,
then blow it away like darkness at the arrival of dawn.
Say this is how you learn to paint the faces of sweet songs
with kisses before they melt down your throat into vestigial globules—
that farewell hug by the railway station, that family dinner on a warm
night;
that face laid on the pillow beside you, that birthday party
with whetted fiends at the bottom of every liquor cup.
That chameleon imprisoned
in the mirror of your eyes,
shifting through itinerant attires.
Say this is how you understand why the day loses its colour
at the entrance of this poem; how you are one of
those butterflies, shedding moments from your body,
carrying new ones,
shedding off...
carrying new ones, shedding off. Say this is how you learn
to savour the wine
in their brief weight.

“Yelewata”

Marvellous Mmesomachi Igwe

Scrolling on Twitter you meet the girl.

Young and lithe—

she would be the same age as your sister.

The background is rural,

and where there should be the blossom

of a smile, nothing grew.

All the history in that piercing stare. This

was before you read the caption.

Before the apple, and the swift, sharp bite.

The world was still spinning.

Even as the herdsmen descended. Even as

they reduced the village to a pile

of ashes and bones. And what can I say?

Have we forgotten that

in every version of the myth the country

always remained the monster?

In my naivety I have expected something

good. Have stood before

the sweep of the machete and expected

everything but a wound.

For the ones who engorge themselves
on our blood to actually care.

The irony, the painful irony. Look at
the girl. Look at the moment

her dreams caught fire. Her helplessness
as it crawled through her flesh.

Do not close your eyes. We have to be
branded to be unable

to forget. Remember the silence of the
governor. How even

the state has laid hands in the slaughter.
We are all warm

and wet with our blood. And the world
is still spinning.

“Dawn”

Ferdinand Emmanuel Somtochukwu

The sky coming into light
is proof of new beginnings.

See how the night lifts
its hands in surrender.

I tell you, at the door
of your sorrow,

the hinges remain—
unclosed, still waiting.

Like night yielding
to the promise of day,

like morning opening
its arms to the sky.

The birds rise into light,
unweared by yesterday.

Like them, you are no longer
held by your plight.

Something in you turns
toward the sun's light.

Something quiet reminds you
of your becoming.

“Nothing More”

Utibe Hanson

The night is the mind of King Leopold
—historical offender, made guiltless by
the colour of his sin

I have held my heart to the storm
in search of a lost bearing, but the
tracks lead always to a cliff
I devolve, grief to grief, ash to ash
and swept downhill by the wind—
not with a matched hunger of
the egrets to speckle the space with
flair but fog

It is an unbearable condition of being
to be tethered to sound, but cannot sing,
cannot laugh, and cannot find a language
for your voice

It does not vex me that everyone
has a recommendation for me,
it vexes me that they aren't me

Against the currents of an eclipse,
I wade through the length of an oath
to script my way into a new covenant

I have joined myself to poetry,
leave me alone.

“The House That Ate Its Children”

Adeoso Samuel Omotayo

We were born in a house that coughs in its sleep,
its roof bleeding rust, its walls whispering warnings.
Here, silence is inherited—
a legacy of locked lips and lacerated hopes passed down.

The door hinges let out creaks with testimonies ignored,
every step a prayer unanswered.
Light knocks, but the windows are shut tight with laws
that favor only shadows.

In this house,
the doorbell is an echo, not a voice.
Its sound does not seek truth
but obeys the weight of pockets.

One steals bread and is fed as prey;
another dines on embezzlement,
drinks laws dry,
and hangs portraits in the courtrooms he bought.

The roof does not leak on the rich.
The wind avoids all their sins.
Their files fall through
cracks built precisely for that purpose.

But the children they bruise against verdicts
they never understood.
Before they learned to write the English language,
they served sentences written in silence.

Some enter this house at twelve,
leave as ghosts at twenty-two,
with names dissolved in bureaucracy,
bodies stitched by neglect.

Here, justice wears a blindfold
stitched by the guilty; it sees only gold, not grief.

We are allowed to speak only in metaphors
because plain truth is dangerous.
We whisper because our words are evidence.
We survive in silence
because we learned in blood that speaking up
draws the wrong kind of attention.

And so, like pirates of pain, we bury our rage
beneath our tongues like gold no explorer must find.
We do not die from injustice.
We rot, slowly, under its silence.

“Transgressors”

Adesiyan Oluwapelumi

Forgive me for the sins I have washed away in the brook,
in the bathwater that will not escape me.

I have watched the pond bloom with toxic algae.
I ask: what God can fumigate my decay?
What monsoon can pour her cauldron over my arid lands?

Even breathing has become a brutal play-act.
I am a drowning man, yet I thirst.

Who inflated my lungs with water
and called it air?

They say sobriety is a remedy,
the door to my salvation—yet ever useless,
like an unlearned lesson.

Do not speak to me of abstinence
if you have not understood the irradiance of lust.

Hidden in the dim light of my room,
I touch myself in worship,
in glossolalia, in the religion of hands.

My body opens, trepid, blustery, raging,
like the storm before Christ's halting voice.

I want to be holy,
but there is no opposite without God.

The Tempter disguises himself in many forms,
yet is known by none.

My mind is a temple
where I have resisted God's innominate presence.

I tell Him I no longer taste the salt of repentance.
I pitch Him as a manhole where everything
enters and leaves like a door.

Is this not the beginning of every transgression—
how the snake slithered into Eve
because she was porous?

*God, are you here with me in the drowning,
pushing out the water?*

I want to be fulfilled again,
but there are places in the body we only fill
by emptying.

“The Loss of God”

Ariyo Feranmi

It is hard to tell when exactly my mother's eyes grew tired of watching
God;

if her disbelief came in small doses, trickling in like blood through a
nicked venule,

or if it came in torrents—a gust of water thumping through a crack
in the wall of a dam, dissolving a small town nearby in one night.

It might have been sometime

between when she repeated litanies into meaninglessness

and when pages of holy books were forced through her lips.

It might have been something about the figurines of the saints before
which she worshiped—

the Virgin, especially, her blessed hands trapped in stony wait.

You see, if a virgin-birth is what it takes to become blessed among all
women;

if this is the best that is offered,

then of course it is enough reason to surrender belief.

It is hard to tell if my mother's apostasy came from reading

Chekhov or watching a gnostic dissect John's Apocryphon on YouTube
at night.

Or if it is because she can no longer stomach the exquisite terror of
pretending

to adore yet another person who took so much from her and never even
bothered to explain why.

It is hard to know if her faith is dead or just in crisis;
if she is still waiting, for a sign or some grand revelation:

a burning, not-burning bush in the wilderness, wet fleece on dry
ground, or the converse;

a miracle the scale of *Lazarus—come forth!* Come forth!

“Tough Love: Memories”

Chijioke Michael Enechi

I run her hands in mine.

A cold feeling—I tighten my hold
to feel her pulse beat slower than time.

I am left helpless, as it may soon grow cold.

If tears were all it took to heal,
my sun would have shone yesterday.
Still, the moon shone and has gone today,
as the darkness draws in for the kill.

A whisper, a kiss, under cathedral lights,
as memories of when our love was born flood my sight.
The night when we were naked, but unashamed,
exposing our bodies beneath our Creator's gaze.

Beep! The monitor pulls me back
as those jagged lines grow thinner with every glance.
Our little angel said the monitor was crazy—
if only she knew. No, she could never embrace it.

The moon was full, the night was clear,
that hour when her tiny cries gave me a new fear.
For I now had two angels holding my heart:
you, my first; our little angel, my last.

I read your letter: “...your last should be your first.”
Forever you are my first; I will cherish the thirst—
longing for a love soon held in heaven's arms.
Rest, my beloved; our Savior's love offers no harm

Silence, the monitor's line goes flat

“Endangered Specie”

Jewo Oghenetega

in my father's house there are many things.
some more alive than others:
a skeleton of dried bones, a cupboard of decayed wood
filled with unshed tears; heirlooms
of wistful wishes.

home is whatever the hell we say it is.
sometimes it is the missing smile in our soundless laughter.
sometimes it is a temple of unfulfilled prophecies—
a potter's wheel curving our lives into destiny,
the clay of fate brittle to the touch of refinement.
hours fold into days, and days morph into weeks—as the tongues of fire
engulf us, forging boys into stone, or men—if you insist.

it is once again the season of rainfall, and on days like this
we build mud artworks and play in a compound
of vomit-colored walls,
with the neighboring children, who unlike us still have mothers.

here, the sky is a coal-black tapestry of dreams,
with stars strung along like beads,
stained by the ash of supplications that never reached heaven.

a pocket in time and space,
punctuated by a gigantic curve of smoky-white cloud
like the eyebrow of God. here,
faith is an endangered specie—
not the substance of things hoped for.

the last time we saw a full moon
the infirmity had not yet come. the scent of seasoning
and firewood on mom's embroidered fabric
was still present tense.

before the beginning. before she was nonambulatory.
before she could only feed on semifluid.
her smile was the first thing we buried,
I swear—
before the end came.

our vocal cords fold inwards, as we try to remember the
sound of her laughter— earfuls of delight sweeter than
the chorus of songbirds worshipping.

the nights got darker, as the stars
disintegrated with time, and we learnt new ways
to keep our wounds silent.

we hide her memory in our hearts,
in between imaginary gardens of dew-drenched lilies
and multicolored nightingales.
each new moon, like a ritual, we light her favorite lantern
and in reverential silence, before the flickering flame,
we pronounce her name into fire.

this is how we remember,
how we unlearn the science of grief—
this creed of mourning.
this is how the light returns, fractal
by fractal to my father's house.

“When My Man Returns Home From Sambisa”

Yohanna Daniel Singfuri

Before the Cold War, he fell in love like a star
In my arms. How he loved me—
How he never stopped. I felt like a leaf
In his arms, too. I whispered sacred songs
To keep his soul alive with romance's tingle.

He thought he would kiss the stars
While hugging the moon,
But fate was not kind to my soldier boy.
After the war, he returned home, scarred,
His sanity tangled in the forests
Of Sambisa.

He no longer remembers the taste of love;
He is afraid to touch the mounds
On my chest—they remind him
Of the granite that killed
The soldier beside him
Behind the enemy's line.

He is lonely in this mansion.
All he does is bury himself.
In my arms, he is
Afraid of good times,
Afraid to kiss the present.

He takes his hands off my country.
Oh—his palms
Become memory
On every part of my body.

When my man returns home
From Sambisa, he closes his eyes
To see the roads he left behind.
He is afraid to touch the love
I lay before him.

“There's a Black Hole Somewhere in My Body”

Akanni Festus Olaniyi

When I was but a blind poet, groping,
searching for the edge of the universe,

I found my body—
an accidental discovery.

Here's the matter: my body, too,
is in search of a poem for itself.

My body is a map of the universe.

The universe's history is abridged and packed
into my irides—two galaxies of their own.

Starlight of decay washes me of pain and guilt;
the blessings of decay and forgetting.

I don't know what the universe seeks redemption from,
but it bloats endlessly.

My body sometimes doesn't heal,

but hides sores like the space once occupied by fallen stars—
sores that percolate deep into layers and strata unreachable.

My body rehearses to itself, again and again,
how to turn insensate, till it is half-convicted.

I have written other bodies into poems,
those bodies I think occupy a role-place in history.

I wonder if I do too; I am yet to write my body into form.

Every time I forget how it feels to possess a form—

a form with a particular role in history, no matter how minute—
something reminds me of the black hole in my body,
sucking away things from my reach.

My footprints, like those of countless others before me, await erasure by the soft crashes of the lapping waves of time. Time, they say, has wings too, and is impatient.

“Collocation”

Utibe Hanson

I judge a word by the company it keeps—
If I find dark, I ask, At what point did the light go out?
The answer is first a forgetting
—a spiralling into fog, before eventual dissociation

A distance stretches and the journey
of fatigue comes to no end—
silence meets silence in masks
of wellness or nothingness when asked
how are you? or what is wrong?

It is a maze of shattered mirrors,
each splinter with its image
anchorless in the rupture

The weight is too much with the world,
so intrusive thoughts begin a game
of noose-knotting that makes
jumping into water peaceful from the hoop
Or through salvation in a cup,
the loneliness disappears and
you become dressed in your best shadow

“What the Wind Remembers About Tomorrow”
Christian Emecheta

We inherited tales graced
with the prayers of our forefathers,
each sentence a benediction passed down
through generations of lungs that refused to forget
how to worship,
even when songs were forbidden.
The atmosphere carried their desires
in its molecules of oxygen, seasoned
with everything they felt for us.

Some winds know our true calling—
they whisper secrets the earth told them
about roots that run deeper than oceans,
trees that remember when this land
was younger, wilder, more hospitable.
These winds carry messages from the unborn,
words written in the scroll of hope.

In the library of history, we read stories
written in star formations and bird flight.
The weather is in constant conversation
about what was; what might be.
Rain speaks in the old tongues, while the
sun translates for those who've forgotten.

There are storms that arrive not to destroy
but to retell what we thought we knew,
to scatter seeds that only grow in chaos.
These tempests are teachers;

they remind us that sometimes
the most beautiful things require
a little breaking first.
The air we breathe today
was breathed by prophets and rebels,
by children who grew up to change the world,
by mothers who sang wars to sleep.
This inheritance connects us all
to the voices that dared to speak truth
to a world that preferred our silence.

“We Marry Thunder to Delay the Rain”

Agbeye Oburumu

In the beginning, the gods arrived late—
they blamed the road, the rain, and a misfiring prophet
whose tongue got stuck in reverse.
By then, the goats had already voted,
the yam had taken an oath of silence,
and the king's shadow was eating itself behind the palace.

We built our constitution on a gourd of palm wine,
signed it with feathers dipped in snake spit.
Article One: All Citizens Must Hum While Walking.
Article Two: The Moon Is Subject to Taxation.
Article Three: Silence is Treason.

Our anthem? A chicken coughing in the dark.
Our currency? Cowrie shells and borrowed time.
Our national hero is a man who once outstared a lion
by pretending to be asleep.

The elders meet on Wednesdays to forget the past.
They wear leopard skins and speak in riddles
only termites can decipher.
Their memories are wrapped in banana leaves,
stored in the mouths of calabashes,
and watered with ancestral spit.

We are a people who marry thunder to delay the rain.
We peel laughter from the bark of iroko trees.
Our prophets dance backwards into the future,
where every child is born with a briefcase and a receipt.

Here, even the rivers take bribes.

My uncle was appointed Minister of Empty Things.
He governs the space between questions and answers.
He wears three hats to confuse the ancestors.
He once arrested a mirror for reflecting the truth.

They say we are blessed—
that we sleep in coffins carved from mango wood,
that we bury our names to make room for new slogans.
Even the wind here campaigns during elections.
Even the dead attend press briefings.

At night, I sit with the village lunatic—
he speaks perfect French when no one is listening,
claims the earth is round but our country is folded
into the pocket of a hyena.

He told me,

“We are not mad. We are merely dreaming louder than the rest.”

“The Day the Sky Refused to Be Blue”

Paul Olayimika

Somewhere—an ossuary of vellum and ash,
where books exhale their own extinction
and the air murmurs the nomenclature of the forgotten—
rests an atlas:

spine in ruin,
folios adrift from gravity's tired insistence.

Here, the continents disarticulate:
Africa eddying toward Antarctica,
Asia in sly orbit, flirting with the lunar pull.

And on a morning indistinguishable from myth—
was it a hand, or merely the insistence of wind—
the atlas was opened.

The sky, perceiving, shuddered—
an unnoticed synapse between the atmosphere
and the paper's ancient breath.

It was the day the firmament misplaced its coordinates.

Beneath, the city stirred—
coffee brewing, alarms groaning,
pavements warming beneath half-laced shoes.

But the sky—the sky would not comply.
It staggered into the hour
draped in vestments of graphite, bruised ink,
casting off light like errant scripture.

It swathed itself
in a bolted brocade of stormclouds,
uttering a sound decipherable
only to the deep-rung memory of trees.

Then—folding its cerulean skin
into the precise geometry of an abandoned crane,
tucked onto a shelf of yesterdays.

The sun peeked—
a hesitant child behind velvet curtains,
then receded.

Signals faltered:
traffic lights blinked in arrhythmic dissent,
pigeons mislaid their choreographies.
Even time stumbled—watches slowed,
minutes thickened like syrup.

And below—

umbrellas, dark blossoms beneath a trembling sky;
voices tempered;
shopkeepers forgot their rehearsed greetings.

And beneath a sky that refused to be blue,
The theatre of the day, unscripted.

For even the heavens crave insurrection.
Even the sky may declare:
This day, I shall not perform.

“Republic of Rage and Roses”

Osieka Osinimu Alao

An inferno sits on our heads like a crown of flames,
licensed by the treaty of collective somnambulism.

A map chiselled out of a voidscape with blood
never ceases to riffle with clefts of crimson dreams.

But before the beginning, there was a beginning
whose language was strangulated by soulless hands;

now, every tongue is a flourishing fray,
spilling the echoes of incoherence.

We chased out the seafarers with whip-bearing masquerades
to purge our rivers of incongruous chants and chains,

but you know what they say of rivers that never yield
to the desires of men: they birth their own clan

of beings, half flesh, half fury, and usher them
into the coliseum on the water-backs of bondservants.

Here, the carved image is the iridescence of death,
borne on the acute applause of overfed sycophants.

Here, every bloodline is an endangered tapestry,
offering oblation at the bank of anarchy.

The beautiful thing about living here is that
we get to witness the many roses of death,

bearing the alluring scents of putrefaction,
bearing the rainbow colours of adorned graves.

Morbidity is home, reclining in the comfort of our laps
and the cuisine of our lapses, etching itself into our foreheads

as the motif of the times: there is nothing left to dread
for a race that cultivates a rose garden for its dead.

At this junction of bones, we are busy pointing fingers
when we should rather be cutting off all our arms,

so we are unable to bear guns against one another,
so we are unable to play god against one another.

Sometimes, the only way to grow is to be uprooted.
Sometimes, the only way to see is to be blind.

From the umbra of earth's core, we have been uprooted
like vile things banished from the sacred altars of the living.

Yet the only things that grow are the fleshy stems
of memories of madness, in this horticulture of hell.

In the beginning, let there be light—but we were born blind,
only opportune to the sore sight of the spirits of sadness.

Now, the market square screams in the silhouette
of silence, the language of every end.

In this poem, the masquerades have forgotten how to dance,
how to swirl and swerve till the moon leaps off the night sky

into the constricting chest of a dying child, so the soul
can be raptured into an Eden of undefiled light.

In this poem, the rosebud is not an insignia of romance,
but the tenderness with which breaths are snuffed out

like candles—slight and slender—burning graciously
in the foreknowledge of their temporality.

In the end, everything will die in the Republic,
except the spirit of its myth and music.

“Dirges of the Scorched Earth”

Chris Monday Anyigor

Rubbish heaps line the weary street—
They hum low dirges in the heat,
While every breath the city takes
Is laced with smoke that makes the lungs ache.

The bushes blaze in orange tongues;
Their ashes rise where prayers once hung.
Above, the eagles twist and glide
Like sirens in the sulphur tide—
They flirt with flame, they soar in dread,
Dark heralds of a world half-dead.

The bulldozers descend like gods,
Ripping roots with iron rods.
Their joyless cries—a metal moan—
Uproot the shade, reduce the known.

Ogoni weeps in poisoned rain,
Obo's breath is thick with pain.
Her children choke on unseen smears—
COPD, PAHs, and fears.
The oil, black blood, spills out and dries,
A stain where mangrove beauty dies.

The rivers whisper what they saw—
Finned corpses bloated in the draw.
The brine remembers every hand
That choked the life from sea and land.
The trees stood mute. The waters screamed.
But no one came. No saviours dreamed.

Rubies clinked in foreign vaults,
Bought with flesh and battered faults.
What price is paid in fame and gold
When home is lost and hearts grow cold?
They stab the earth—"She will forgive,"
They said. And still, she lets us live.
But what triumph can be found
In grinding Eden to the ground?
She held us once—her breath, our bread.
We plunder now. Soon, we'll be dead.

“D is for Delta”

Ifesinachi Nwadike

Once upon a boom, Delta thought it was oil—lo, it was blood.
Since the crude discovery under your waters,
Shell took it upon itself to give you BP,
and your city flares now, in flames, in angst, in oil;
and when it rains, it is acid—a token of returning gas.

Delta of the Big Heart, you give your oil to Abuja
and let your rebellious children bunker the rest.
She built herself a sweet city with your children's bones,
oil and blood. In return, she gave you NDDC
to tame the uproars from over-drilled creeks—
collateral insult for your receding greens,
the withdrawing fishes from your shorelines.

Ughelli waters are black with crude—crude waters,
crude waves, crude Delta, crude militants,
questioning the whereabouts of the derivation funds.
And while they spoke haphazardly in falsetto,
the appalled sharks replied in deep baritones,
their voices hoarse from crass crude consumptions.
And Delta burns as it flares—all for oil, all for crude.

All about Patani are marshlands *elfed* with crude abandon.
Shevroned of peace, Sapele drinks a different kind of water,
as the shell-shocked Warri is *agiped* into im-mobile *ash-lands*.
The unyielding farmlands of Abraka got drunk with spillages.
The oil was too much; Isoko had to choke.

Like a people suffering from mineral sins,
crude waves lash the Delta from shore to shore.
Greed-white-greed is the colour of the conspiracy
against the Delta by crude hunters of the oil grove.
And the River Nun still calls, but Delta is deafened
by gun duels between the militants and the crusaders of oil.

Since Clark and Okara, Delta has seen more men of song:
Ibiwari, Ushie, Ogbowei, Otiono, Yeibo, Nnimo, Ilagha, Onyema—
and the beat goes on. And Ibori's pockets run over,
and Lugard's ghost grows greener...
Let us go to Asaba, which lies behind the Delta,
facing the Niger. Let us play hide and seek in Igbuzo.
If you give me a cup of nkwụ ọcha in Ogwashi,
I'll rinse my thoughts. I, vagabond poet with a loud mouth.

“We Buried the Rain with Our Names Still in Our Mouth”

Agbeye Oburumu

The land once whispered in dialects of dew—
now it coughs black phlegm beneath the jacaranda.
We asked the tortoise for prophecy; he turned his back.
The yam does not swell in the belly of the soil;
it shrivels like a prayer returned unopened.

II.

Who fed fire to the god of rainfall?
Who taught the marula to forget its name?
There are oracles in the cracked gourds of the harmattan,
but no one listens—not even the wind,
who now wears plastic robes and speaks in asphalt tongues.

III.

My grandmother's stream has grown teeth.
It chews at the ankles of goats.
Its water, once soft as lullaby,
now smells of diesel, rust, and ancestral weeping.
The catfish are mutating—they grow legs and leave.

IV.

I saw a cow eat polythene and speak in Morse.
The vultures convene a senate on telephone wires.
They read extinction lists in alphabetical order,
and always, man begins the litany.
The forest coughs up its birds like bad memories.

V.

Even the termites have grown sceptical of architects.
Their mounds now collapse from within—
no outside hand, only the heat of regret.
The anthill has become a shrine for nothing.
The queen died with an egg in her throat.

VI.

Once, the trees kept secrets in their roots;
now they stand naked, scandalised.
The moon weeps from behind cloud-curtains,
ashamed of the choreography of bulldozers.
Even the night has become electric, artificial, unsure.

VII.

We gather to mourn beneath an LED sky.
We chant dirges for butterflies who lost their maps.
The gods are deleting us slowly—not with plagues,
but with forgetting.
For what is man who cannot name the tree he burned?

VIII.

And I—the poet, the witness, the last griot of chlorophyll—
dig into loam with my tongue, searching for syllables.
I write with ink fermented from cassava rot and thirst.
I sing into termite holes. I light torches from snail shells.
I wait for green to answer back, even faintly, even once.

[Untitled]

Simon Akpama

I never took love on a platter of gold;
it was against all I had been taught.
If it came at me so easily, it wasn't going to last.
If it looked like fairy tales, then it was not for me.
What's love without the chase for attention,
the effort to catch up with someone's fantasy—
a race with a trophy at the finish line?
The challenge to outdo other challengers:
if love wasn't a fight-or-flight affair,
if no one played hard to get,
it wasn't an affair to long for.
So even if love stood with me in the same room,
I wouldn't see what was right in front of me,
or I would use what was right in front of me
to chase Neverland. Now I know:
the definition of love handed to me
always had an eye defect—
either blind or long-sighted.

“Blood at the Gate: Elegy for Ezza Effium”

Chris Monday Anyigor

Father came naked, bleeding dust—
The heavens roared, the earth was crushed.
No boots, no shield, no sword, no song—
Just battered feet and sorrow's wrong.

Spears kissed his lips, tore through his palms;
He bowed before Uzu's sacred thorn.
At Aliobu's shrines, he loosed his cry,
A wail that tore the heart of sky.

His voice: Agbara's bitter breath,
A covenant carved with blades of death.
At Obasi's shrine, where cobras feast,
Father knelt—a broken priest.

Under a sky of boiling dreams,
He bathed in Grandmother's bitter streams.
Roots fumed in clay, wild herbs seared skin;
Garlics stung sweat, grief bled within.

He kissed the earth, he swore an oath:
“These cobras, hyenas, vultures both—
Shall crumble like okra in my fist,
And rot within the blood-red mist.”

At dawn, the hawk's iron claws unfurled—
It snatched Mother's chick and fled the world.
Father watched the thieving sky;
The hawk returned beneath his cry.

Gunfire gnawed through man and beast;
Plague coiled like rot in broken veins.
Bedbugs feasted on human remains,
Power grinned while hope was seized.

Ezza Effium weeps—
Through pyramid stones, through shattered streets.
Her trees are skeletons in moaning winds;
Her children drown where hope grows thin.

Playgrounds sink in seas of tears,
Flooded by a thousand years.
Father rose with bleeding brand—
A sword of blood, not made by hand.
Behind the Red Sea's choking flood,
He struck the cobras, spilled their blood—
The beasts who bit his flesh and name,
Who carved our souls with fang and flame.

“Asphalt Prayers”

Chris Monday Anyigor

At Douglas Street, where shadows crawl,
beneath the breath of ancient St. Paul,
the cries of the weary rise like flame—
each voice a burden, each face a name.
They kneel upon the asphalt's skin,
side by side, with sorrow pinned.

Along this road, they forge their bed,
where tires spit doom, and the future bled.
Despair wears hunger like a vest,
ribs press forward from hollowed chest.
Homeless hearts in silent fray
camp at the gates where angels stray.

Nature gives in ruthless grace—
rain anoints each hollowed face.
Sunbeams strike like tempered blades,
scorching sores where hope decays.
The harmattan, with phantom breath,
chills the bones in whispered death.

The street parades its passerby—
eyes that feed, yet never ask why.
The 'big men' glide in armored pride,
tinted truths where secrets hide.
Their tires hum psalms of disregard,
as children dream on broken yards.

A few frail hands extend, then fade,
dissolving like dew in morning shade.
The watchers moan through lips of stone,
as justice limps—flesh turned to bone.

“Something About Flowers”

Gerald Onyebuchi Ewa

I walk Ray every day to the park,
sit and watch the sunset and the children scampering around with
kites.

But today, I sip the silence like a cup of coffee.
Ray whines, lolls its tongue, and stares ahead.

Across from me is a tall, faded beach house—now a colonial relic.
Behind those walls once stood an exchange house for black flesh,
huge chains married to hands and feet. A man

runs to the sea to escape his captors, and returns as a body full of
water,
full of stories dwelling in sands—a name flushed out of history's loins.
Is it mercy when the flames kiss the sores off your back?

But what about the choir of scars singing for justice?
What's the cure for this language of erasure?
Perhaps man's greatest malady has been the gap
in his knowledge, the need to experiment with
every flower by the roadside,
to undress petals of time from every cracked mirror.

The flowers are singing about the dying sun,
about the holes in a dress.
What's this madness of invention,
of grenades eating the flesh of a city and licking clean its bones?
Every day I sit by my window and watch the world dance to the music
of its madness.
Forgive me, I am also guilty of silence.

Who cares about roses and tulips when the stomach is a church without a roof?

Rivers in Soku and Oyokotoro once reflected God's smiling face—
how quickly He turns His back on their tears, their mouths stuffed
with the ashes of their children.

Tell me, what song do birds sing when they drown?

Where do flowers go when they lose their home? Tell me.

“Lagos Never Sleeps”

Chimezie Umeoka

the Lagosian cityscape
is much like its people—
a megalopolis wearing
the condemned clothes of colonial history,
like all these black boys
dressed in safaris, wearing dust,
their eyes full of untapped dreams.

it is how everything burns and yet
preserves itself in the dampness of its ashes.
it is how the Cowrywise train dances
above the slum of Makoko, like all
these elites who have learned to
perch in bourgeois restaurants, as though
they are afraid of being in places where
the art of classism hangs as abattoir shadows.

the car passes along the Toll-gate,
and there is a lean woman squatting against a wall
with her sun-dried babies holding onto her
flannel breasts, and maybe they are waiting
for their father, whose October blood is strewn
on the asphalt as graffiti for a countrysong.

Lagos never sleeps, like
these lagoonal boys sitting atop
the barricade of the mainland bridge,
with the cinematic silhouette of dead dreams
hanging above them; like

these schoolgirls riding canoes to school,
smiling at another news magazine by moonlight.
Lagos never sleeps, like me,
returning from a nocturnal poetry festival
where a white lady recites poetry in Spanish
to a group of ethnic-rooted Lagonians with
Niger-Congo linguistic ears.
I am wondering if this is why Lagos never sleeps—
daily regaling itself in the complex traditions
of diversity,
to the abbreviation of our lives
capitalized in the phrase ONE NIGERIA.

“Portrait of a Man on Fire”

Chimezie Umeoka

The doctor says the history of drugs
Settles somewhere in his bowels—

Cannot be released.

The veins under his skin are deaf
They do not answer to the praying and calling voices

And needles like searchlights cannot

Find them in the darkness of the disease
And no matter what you ask of some men

Silence gives them faith
In that land full of morbid visions.

The woman sponges his body
With water as milky as memory

Another woman, somewhere, washes
A baby boy in a tub populated with toys

I swear, there is something fucking memorable
About burning men, some innocence

Made familiar by the women of the Ganges.

When the disease eats beyond his ribcage
His eyes spread docile like a hole

Dug in the sky and the tooth gums
Shine like a sun with no one to watch it

Except the children now listen to his final Proverbs
With his degenerating skin—a mythology for their hands

And nothing really makes concrete sense to them until
His body scatters on the floor beneath the damp shawl

Like one beautiful answer uttered
By a silent god.

“Ode to Joe Ushie”

Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

What if I became Joe Ushie?

A name carved in the rhythm of time,
with words as tender as the dawn's first light,
where every line I write is a river
rushing through the earth with the weight of truth,
cutting through the valleys of ignorance,
and flowering in the deserts of despair.

What if I became Joe Ushie?

A voice woven from the fabric of the sky,
stitching the clouds with syllables of change,
where every poem I pen is a song of defiance—
a song that shatters silence,
a song that awakens the winds to dance
in the fields of justice, love, and peace.

What if I became Joe Ushie?

A dreamer whose eyes hold the secrets of the stars,
who gazes upon the earth and sees its scars—
and in his gaze, a thousand songs bloom,
like flowers in a garden forgotten by time.
What if my words could lift the weight of sorrow
and build bridges from the ashes of pain?

What if I became Joe Ushie?

A soul whose pen runs wild like the rivers of Africa,
that writes not only for the present,
but for the unborn,
for the voices of the oppressed,

for the hearts that tremble in shadows,
for a world that needs a savior—
not in flesh, but in thought, in ink, in verse.

What if I became Joe Ushie?

I'd be the poet who sings the songs of the earth,
the winds would know my name as they carry my words,
the trees would whisper my verses,
and every leaf, every branch, every bud
would bloom in reverence to the power of a dreamer,
to the power of a poet who dares to weave the world anew.

What if I became Joe Ushie?

I'd write for the hope that lives in the soil,
for the rivers that carry the heartbeats of nations,
for the stories we must tell,
for the truth that demands to be heard,
for the voices that cannot cry,
and for the future that can still be saved.

So I ask, what if I became Joe Ushie?

I would be the echo in the valleys,
the fire in the dark,
the ink that flows unbroken,
writing the world back into shape—
a poet, a dreamer, a healer of hearts.

