



# THE VWETA CHADWICK POETRY PRIZE

Demystifying gender stereotypes and breaking inequalities through poetry...

*In honour of Late Vweta Chadwick,  
Founder & Global Programmes Director, ProjectASHA.org*

## ANTHOLOGY OF SHORTLISTED ENTRIES FOR THE 2023 PRIZE CONTEST

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## 1. Favour Orlando - Who can serve them their dreams on a platter

Who can hear our voices,  
And who would listen to our bemoan?  
They had stolen our petals from us  
And now they will do the same to our sisters.  
At 12, they are taken from the playground  
And are marching into the dark room of bargain  
Where a fat dowry is placed on their fragile heads  
And our fathers will say, "They are ripe."

Who can hear our voices,  
And who would listen to our bemoan?  
A white veil has been covered over their petite faces  
And two purple knots will be tied.  
In months, they will have their nipples sucked by sulking babies  
And our fathers will say, "A child and your husband are your greatest achievement."

Who can hear our voices,  
And who would listen to our bemoan?  
Finally, they have stolen their petals from them,  
We have watched it painfully die.  
Who can give them back their youth?  
Who can serve them their forgotten dreams on a platter?

We will not sit still and wait any longer,  
We must put an end to this ugly tradition  
And save the petals of our teenage daughters;  
We will give them the luxury of their youth;  
We will serve them their childhood on a platter of roses.

## 2. Anita Nwokoji - The dark Void

In the realms of anguish,  
I found a voice,  
Aching to be heard, breaking down walls, hitting principality and power to break through the noise.  
But as she speaks, her words dissolve and decay,  
Lost in the void, where pain holds its sway.  
The Darkness calling, invading her privacy  
Darkness! A profound torment,



Darkness! A shielding knight in the plight  
Take cover and never come out

Silent echoes resound an empty sound.  
Her voice, a wounded cry, seeking solace and relief, calling help me help me in space  
Yet it dissipates, lost in the void's cruel grief.  
Each syllable she utters carries a weight,  
A weight of old burdens, broken pieces, with the brainwashed mindset of hell  
A burden of longing, a cry for escape.  
But the void swallows them whole, without remorse  
Leaving her, stranded, with no guiding course.

In the void, her pain is masked and concealed,  
No empathetic ear to witness, to shield.  
Her voice, like a ghost, wanders in despair,  
Longing for validation, for someone to care.  
The pain intensifies, as the void devours,  
Leaving her raw, stripped of all my powers.

The emptiness echoes, mocking her cries,  
Exacerbating the ache, as loneliness implies.  
Speaking through the void, the pain deepens its hold,

Trying to connect with her inner child, for hearts to unfold.  
But the void remains indifferent, its silence profound,  
Leaving her shattered, on desolate ground.  
Her voice echoes, but finds no friendly ear,  
Lost in the vastness, consumed by fear.  
The pain grows unbearable, her spirit torn,  
As she navigates this desolation, all forlorn.  
Oh, now she speaks to the uttermost darkness  
Where hopes are shattered, and dreams left destroyed.

Yet, amidst the anguish, a flicker of light,  
A glimmer of resilience, refusing to take flight.  
She will continue to speak, though the void may persist,  
For within her pain lies strength, in every twist.  
And perhaps, one day, her voice will be heard,  
Breaking free from the void, with every heartfelt word.



### 3. Favour Davies - Her Essence

The epitome of such potential, locked up in one body...  
Show if off! My Love.  
You are worth more than a billion gems.  
Purer than light refracted through uncut crystals.

You are smart, knowledgeable, intelligent, innovative, creative--  
Beautiful, loving, caring,  
Strong, courageous, powerful.

Black goddess of pretty brown skin, chocolate drip, melanin sweet, rich epidermis.

Her thick dark curls, and coal-black tangled afros, full as ever.

She's clever, always got some *liver*.  
multitasking high flyer.  
You deserve the encomiums.  
You cannot be reduced to an object of sexuality, destined only for reproduction.

You are a star, You are a light, you were created for the illumination of an endarkened universe.

Crafted in the image and likeness of *Eledumare*.  
Beautified and christened His treasure, His workmanship.

*Adesewa!*  
Gorgeously sculpted by the very Hands of Our Maker.  
Engrafted with his own Spirit.

Your radiance, ever shining!  
Your embrace, ever soothing!  
Your influence, ever outstanding!

You are beautiful and You are you!  
You are priceless.  
You are essential.



#### 4. **Obasiota Ibe - Ennui**

My mother reads a poem of mine and asks who I am over a phone call about wigs. A poet, I say, when all I really want to say is dying.

\*

Why do poets talk about bodies like they do not have them?

I mean, who startled them and stole theirs? Is a poem a search party in the wild?

\*

I have taken my body, its body and the periphery to a softer ground.

The body is the cumulative distance between remembering and forgetting.

There are days I forget that I am in a relationship with silence.

I have loved once. Been loved once. I have stayed 67 moons without love.

I am separatist in love. I have no idea what that means.

Only that someone said the way I love myself is different from the way I love a lover.

The way I love myself is the way I love a fire

—only enough to look at it but not to embrace it.

When a poet says 'all my life' they mean since my first poem.

All my life I have wondered which had more depth: love or silence?

Which could have us safely buried in inscrutable silence?

\*

In the beginning of a poem I'll never publish, I write that my grief is investigative.

In the end, I write that grief is so generic it is shameful.

I've read a story where prisoners revolt by trying to commit suicide.

Maybe death is a weapon.

Was Pa's death a weapon? Where was the war?

\*



I tear out a paper and write body.

It doesn't breathe.

\*

Every poem is a silence that found its true name.

## 5. **Ibukun Oluwakeyamo - Unveiling Mockery**

Oh, behold the grand spectacle, a sarcastic tale unfurled,  
Speaking through the void, the secrets long kept, unleashed,  
In Nigeria's male-dominated society, a woman's world,  
Where we claim progress, yet archaic notions remain, unceased.

"How will you keep a husband?" they mockingly inquire,  
As if our worth revolves around marital ties,  
Passion blazes within, fueling our ire,  
We rise, voices fierce, unveiling the lies.

"Past misogyny, you say? How laughable the claim,  
When 'Mrs.' defines our worth, shackling us still,  
But hear us now, our passion ablaze like a flame,  
Beyond labels, our value resolute, our spirits fulfil.

We've bottled in the truth for far too long,  
Hidden beneath society's expectations and whims,  
But no more shall we silence our passionate song,  
For in unity, we'll dismantle patriarchal whims.

Mockery dripping from our lips, sarcasm at its prime,  
"We keep a husband? Oh, pray, enlighten us all,  
Is that the pinnacle of our existence, our ultimate climb?  
Or perhaps, we aspire to greatness, standing tall."

Misogyny's whispers may try to deceive,  
But we see through the facade, the biased decree,  
Our worth transcends the superficial, we believe,  
Unveiling the mockery, with passion wild and free.

No more shall we be defined by a mere title,  
'Mrs.' or 'Miss' cannot contain our fire,  
For our worth flows deeper than societal recital,

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Passion and purpose our true heart's desire.

Unveiling the Mockery, reclaiming our voice,  
Nigeria's women rise, breaking free, our choice.

## 6. **Roseline Mgbodichinma - To rewrite a life**

My eyes widen,  
Lashes flip like bats struggling in zinc,  
Living is how we make room for invasion.  
We breathe air and never beg it to stay,  
So death is what happens when breath starts  
To feel unloved.

I gag a bottle of krest,  
& my intestines create a passage for gas  
Maybe this is baptism  
Maybe belching is a form of transition  
A metaphor for unspoken words?  
I'll rewrite a life in which death is not final,  
And water does not need to signify newness  
I'll rewrite the cloud as a bowl of smoke  
And make my gap tooth a passage for lightning  
Maybe all the world needs is a bottle of soda,  
Maybe something in the sun is too tired to keep us all awake

My cheekbones stretch and become a crescent,  
& my intestines create a passage for gas  
Maybe life is in baptism of death  
And we grow bodies to enable us disappear.  
In the end,  
I might die trying to rewrite a life  
Where death spits out the people we love.

## 7. **Okoronkwo Chisom - New anthem for the woman**

I come from a bloodline of women who bequeath silence  
to their daughters, teach them to muffle their voices as

they're not meant to be sirens. The first time menstruation



visited my sister, she folded the news like a pocket handkerchief.

Here, such blood is a profane language for girls. For girls don't own their bodies. They grew up with the gospel of virginity

ingrained in their hearts like graffiti. Say, their hymen

is theirs to keep for their husbands. But once, a girl's thigh

was accosted by the groin of an elderly & society served her

blames in broken ceramics. She got prosecuted for being the dump

-site of a man's libido. She fed on the regrets like wolves eating the moon.

The first time mother invaded my ears with etiquette, I kept

my knees together till they nearly ruptured. She had told me

the story of her mother, how she sold her dreams to keep

her brother in the classroom; how she was married off to a man

who fed her spoonfuls of pain till words festered in her mouth.

This poem crafts a new anthem for those women, who hosanna

their men's words & let theirs rot in a garden of silence.

We mark a new era of women cooking ideas in public affairs,

making recipes of greatness in every sphere our toes step in.

Today, we bird our dreams & let them moonwalk the horizon like

paper kites. We speak up & pause to listen to the echoes of our

voices in every void.

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## 8. **Anita Michael - Death of Silence**

I, come from a family tree of shelled voices and pruned dreams,  
Where Prophecies manifested as aborted futility, fermented wine from dead vineyards.  
Unanswered prayers escaping unrestrained from the tired lips of unspeaking men.  
Women swollen with the full moon in their wombs,  
Delivering Stars from between their thighs,  
While begging this Earth to be their sky, to let them shine,  
Yet molding clay caskets to bury the stars who became dead seeds  
Destined to marry the cold earth forever.

I, come from a lineage of silence, with whispers as voices and echoes as replies,  
Where grandmother begged tradition with closed eyes and an empty mouth,  
And mother swallowed her tongue in obeisance to culture,  
Playgrounds filled with mute children,  
Standing guard to protect the full emptiness of failed history classes.  
And through the shapeless void, my voice resurrects like a storm,  
Cutting through the edges of despair, I am the reincarnation of my ancestors,  
Come back to reply the unasked questions,  
I, give form to the shy shadows of grandmother's curious mind,  
Daring to defy the gods that feed on the sacrifices of silence.

I offer the loudness of my voice as acceptable sacrilege,  
Calling out the music from the duct-taped mouth of my sisters,  
We break the shackles of shame with our freedom song,  
We shake off the chains of stigma with our refusal,  
We denounce the victim labels stamped on our heads through the silent ages,



We swallow the waves that drowned us and unleash the storms that free us,  
Writing our stories with bleeding lips, we author the Death Of Silence.

## 9. Susan Olalere - Hollow Cavity

Cast this expired breath of mine on a newly fierce canvas  
with the dye from my crimson veins  
accommodating the lord of emotions  
and to recreate an image of my old portrait  
as seen in the mirror of mundane art.

The old portrait, a homage to pain and hurt  
The ancient memories of scattered mine,  
where shadows lie, deep within the confines of the heart.  
Like the perspective of a visual artist;  
to think farther, is to see more,

My heart beholds this sight with reverberating sounds:  
The dup sound is curled with webs of uncertainties.  
The lub sound, crippled with a slope of emotions  
It reflects in my breath,  
as I release the trapped gas of despair.

So cast this breath of mine on a newly fierce canvas;  
On the pedestal of grace,  
to create an image of my new portrait

as seen in the mirror of heavenly art.  
That I may inhale it day and night  
Till all the shadows are chased out  
from the hollow cavity of my heart.

## 10. Pelemo Nyajo Children of Abyss

Title: Oloriburuku.  
Language: Yoruba.  
Meaning: Unfortunate one.

Children like me are excommunicated from heaven,  
We are the Lucifer reincarnations in wombs,  
A manifestation of blasphemies and "God forbids,"  
The grimace on our mothers' faces, human waste.



We are born the debris of broken cities, developing nations,  
Refugees in our own bodies, externally displaced people.  
We are the equivalent of "Eyah" and "sorry,"  
The poster children of pity and misfortune.

We are the litmus paper to test the existence of God,  
Specimen for every doctor, herbalist, magician, scammer.  
We are the ones with pegs on our throats, zips on lips,  
The belly of the black hole, a whisper.

I was refused a place in koinonia,  
Because I cannot stand upright.  
The congregation of my body,  
Is an island of disabled fragments.

But children like me are done with you,  
We are creating our own heavens.

Where disability can also mean:  
God.

## 11. **Olu Adedoyin Aluko - Speaking through the void**

The lies we were made to believe  
They say, "that's how it is done"  
A woman should be this, a woman should be that  
Know your limits, don't say too much  
Just smile and lock up  
Ask no questions and just nod  
But, who made the rules?  
Who are you to decide my fate even before I was born?  
Who are you to decide places I shouldn't walk even before I start to crawl?  
Now, those lies are engulfed in us  
"It is the norm, don't bother to make a fuss"  
It's sad how the society justifies wrong for right  
When a man cheats, it's his nature  
But when a woman cheats, she is nothing but a whore  
"Don't place a woman too high, she'll become pompous".  
Even in an abusive marriage, she'll be told to endure,  
"Stay for your children, you'll later enjoy".  
A divorcee is looked down upon  
"How can she not keep her marriage, what is her job?"  
A single mother is considered lucky,  
If any man finds her worthy enough to marry.

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The society is messed up and people are so quick to judge  
So, most women would rather not open up  
They would suffer in silence and live their lives like dolls  
But we will not give up!  
We will raise our voices and speak through the void  
We will spread the awareness and change this bias mentality  
We won't confine ourselves to a place  
We will set ourselves free from this society bondage!

## 12. **Othman Amina - Inside my Pain**

With silence becoming my only companion  
With echoes becoming the only sound that I hear  
With darkness becoming my favorite scene  
With shadows becoming my best friend

My tears are becoming a sea  
My words are trapped in oblivion  
My emotions are numb  
My strength is failing me

I found peace in the dark  
I found joy in an empty space  
I always bury my face in my hands  
Trying to pick up the pieces of my heart

I tried to seek harmony between the body and the spirits  
I tried to find happiness but sadness always come to dine with me in my world of solitude  
Most times, I soliloquy, I meditate, i ruminate  
Scanning through the pages of my heart

Trying to find answers to my muted questions  
How much longer do I have to scream  
For the world to see through my pain and come to my aid  
For me to be able to live free from heartache, from deformed thoughts and disfigured feeling's

Yet, no one comes to help  
All I hear is: a woman must learn how to tolerate anything and everything  
That: a woman doesn't air her dirty laundry  
That: a woman must learn how to bear any pain and every pain  
That: I should not talk about it  
That: it will get better  
That: I should accept my fate and learn to live with it

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Years go by and I am still waiting

When will this end ?

## JUNIOR CATEGORY

### **FRANCIS ZENOM: Voices from Within**

In the void, a hush surrounds me, Silence reigns, and yet I hear, Whispers from an inner sea, Echoes that are loud and clear.

Voices from within the soul, Speaking of the joys and fears, Echoes bouncing off the hole, Reaching out beyond my ears.

In the void of life's abyss, With no light to guide my way, I can hear my heart's own hiss, And the words that fill it, sway.

From the mouth that speaks no sound, Comes a message, loud and strong, A skill that in the void is found, Speaking with a voice that's long.

Through the void, my words are sent, Carried on a soundless tide, Whispers in the wind, not spent, I speak through the void, with pride.

So if the abyss should call, And the void appears ahead, I'll speak through it, standing tall, With the voices from within, I'm led.

### **Husna Aleeyu: THEY SAY**

I am only a good wife when I'm on my knees,

I must hold my tongue when the men speak,

Know your place, it's definitely not the peak.

She can only hold a broom and a mop, never a degree,

Never open a book to read, she should only cook and clean.

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Why does she have to be what they want her to be?

Don't you dare speak when you're not spoken to,  
Don't voice out your opinions, your only job is to woo.  
You're a woman that's all there is to you.

And in the history books they fill the pages with him's and He's,  
I wonder if there is ever space for a she.  
When will they let us write pages of our own,  
When will we have a page to call our own.

Lady carry that bruise he gave you like a medal,  
When they tell you to be pretty like a petal,  
Show them your intelligence even if they term you a rebel.  
You're a woman that is not all there is to you.