

the *mess* that is my mind



{poems}

Janoma Omena

THE MESS THAT IS MY MIND

JANOMA OMENA



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Dedication

To the ones trying to ‘adult’ correctly, the *yearners* of love, the *yearners* for a better life, and the *weirdos*. We can make space for ourselves here and now.

Preface

Reading this book, I could not help but think about this quote by R.F Kuang that goes, “Writing is fundamentally an exercise in empathy...” I find it interesting how literature can help us build bridges between our experiences.

“I am trying my best to not think,

to stay still,

and function like a normal adult.”

Navigating this world as an adult, unsure what to do or how to do it, is a recurring thread in this collection. In these pages, you’ll find a young woman grappling with herself and the consequences of her chosen identity.

“At home, I pretend—

pretend to not care about love

pretend to care about a faith that tears me apart.”

As a young adult, everything feels like a battle. Every choice carries incredibly heavy stakes, as though one wrong could send your world spiraling into disaster.

These are feelings I have grappled with too. And if there is anything this book agrees with me on, it’s that living like this is exhausting.

“I’m so fucking tired.”

And this is what grips me about Janoma’s poetry: its honesty. There is no tidy resolution to be found here. We are offered a glimpse into what it’s like in a mind that just won’t shut up. A soft sketch of a person breaking, healing, and surviving.

Janoma gives us images of stardust and pretty things in one hand, and offers her rage in the other, squeezed tightly into her fist.

“During the day, I curse the world for being so cruel.”

This anger, this frustration, I can relate to. And other times, I can only sit and witness, like in poems such as “To the cyst that lives in my ovaries.” I may never fully grasp the weight of these verses shaped by a uniquely feminine experience, but I’m grateful to be offered a seat at the table.

It’s here I think of the second part of R.F Kuang’s quote: “Reading lets us live in someone else’s shoes. Literature builds bridges; it makes our world larger, not smaller.”

Every poem in this book does its work of pointing you to a window or a mirror. You either find yourself in these pages, and the soft reassurance that you are not isolated in your experiences, or you witness a life, fighting to be seen in tender ferocity.

Either way, you find poems crafted with care. Poems that meet you anywhere. Poems that don’t mind if you stare.

Derek Ehiorobo,

Winner Evaristo Poetry Prize 2024.

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Love

The Awakening

Her lips taste like bubble gum
Her locs, like clouds on a stormy night
fall over shoulders of emotions
Her touch lingers on my skin –
a desperate attempt to be indelible.

There we lay,
safe in the starlight
The sun comes up
And we become a memory.

My Muse

I woke up early in life.

My dream came to me;

With a clarity so loud, I still shake at the memory.

For as long as I can remember

I have been running to it.

I sit and close my eyes, thinking,

The smell of my work in print,

The thought of my name for the world to see

The feeling of signing with hearts—

‘To my dearest reader’

After endless days of perfecting my handwriting.

I practice in the mirror,

What I’d say when they ask

“What inspired your work?”

I’d tell them

“Tears, beauty, love...”

I’d tell them of the way

You said my name

With the laugh in your voice.

The late-night gossip we shared,
Cackling over biscuits,
Of the softness of your face
on a slow Saturday morning.

I'd tell them—
Adjusting was new, but you made it so easy,
That being with you was like breathing,
And of the times you opened my eyes with your smile,
how your fingers feel like stardust,
And your lips taste like fireworks.

I'd tell them
There was a woman I loved before we met
That kept my heart safely tucked away in the corner of her chest.

Stardust

I feel your mouth on my nipple
And your fingers on my hips.
There are fireworks in my veins as you breathe my name.

You smell like cupcakes and tea leaves
Which makes sense cause you work at a tea shop
I nibble at your skin because,
What's more edible than a woman
Whose laugh tastes like symphonies and buttercream?

They say the first time you make love with a woman
Feels like wearing glasses
And in this moment
I see the outlines of the flames
The details of the seams of your shirt as I shrug them off
I see the small birthmark on your waist
The wisps of stretch marks like glimmers of light passing through the ocean

We ride the waves of endless highs
Safe in the moonlight
That creeps in from my small window

And when our souls meld it is
Stardust

Maybe

Maybe this thing they call love isn't so bad.

Maybe gentle kisses and inside jokes
aren't as gut-wrenching as I imagined.

Maybe the world began when our bodies melded into one.

Maybe love isn't disgusting.

Maybe it's enjoyable when they gaze at you like that —
like you're the only most precious thing in the world
and they can't help being awed.

Maybe it's heartwarming, the way they get you random gifts.

Maybe it's fun when they blush at your teasing

Maybe it's sweet how they hug you and never let go because your scent makes them
heady.

Maybe love isn't a terrible idea

Maybe you feel safe knowing they're sleeping next to you

Maybe the world's a better place for you with them in it

Maybe you're just a bit happier because you heard their laugh today.

Maybe love really isn't a bad idea.

My Hands Meet Yours

My hands meet yours
Where the moon meets the sky,
I tuck your words in my chest
Memories of you etched into my bones
And hide the evidence of your lips on my skin.

At home, I pretend—
Pretend to not care about love
Pretend to care about a faith that tears me apart
Pretend that I feel alive when you're not near
Pretend that this faking is 'safety'
Pretend like this isn't some form of violence that thrums beneath my skin
Aching and begging to be soothed

I tell myself
It's just for a while
A year at most
That has stretched into ten
Dragging like cigarette flames refusing to fade

I tell myself

That you and I

need no validation

That maybe it's the test of time

That maybe the problem is the distance

That my hand doesn't feel empty without yours in it

I tell myself

That I do not long for your lips on my cheek in the sunlight

That we're overthinking this

That we're just really private people

That this isn't fear

That I do not wish to let the world know how precious you are to me

That you and I begin and end with infinity

Loving You is a Hurricane

There were butterflies when I thought of you

Memories of –

Mornings with rose-petal smiles,

Simple motions of grabbing clothes in sync;

Random teasing and gentle kisses.

Loving you was calm amidst chaos

We'd steal our corner of the earth

Your hand in mine as we

Watch the world burn

Missing you is bothersome

Like a stain that won't leave

Like questions begging for responses

Like doubts crippling my every move

Like wilted hope sick of salvation

Needing you is a hurricane

Floods of emotions waiting for release

There's a loud emptiness

Without the sound of your laugh

Without the smell of your perfume,

Without the feel of your skin,

And hopeless *what ifs*.

They Say Hair Holds Memories

They say hair holds memories

And if that's true, I'm calling my barber.

I want to erase the feeling of your fingers on my scalp.

I want to forget the sound of your laughter at crossword teasers,

I want to forget the quiet mornings

when our bodies danced in sync while making breakfast,

when evening walks required extra gloves in my coat,

and silly gossip about our office colleagues.

I want to forget the feel of your weight on my skin,

and the ache of waking up to an empty bed.

I want to forget the calls that were a bit too long,

the text messages you tried so hard to hide, how she made you laugh,

and the rise of our bickering.

They say hair holds memories,

I cut mine but still think of you.

Home Sick

My Bed

I feel my eyelids go heavy
From the exhaustion of waiting
for things to make sense

I wonder when this city would call me its own,
Pull me in its warm embrace
When faces will smile back at me—
When the streets will feel as familiar as my sheets

Until then
I'll take refuge in my dainty bedroom
And the smell of fresh linen

There is Poetry in the Wind in the Place I Call Home

There is poetry in the wind in the place I call home

The sunlight blinds me through the curtains;

I hear the lady that sells at the kiosk scolding her child,

And I know it is 3pm

The sound of a new evangelist has come and gone

Casting and binding whatever demons he went troubling

Making it our problem for not 'praying enough' despite the two churches on the street.

That was at six am

Generators will go off in three hours,

disrupting the night's silence,

till then

I will wonder what life would be like

When I am finally independent

I will wonder what I *can* do to build a home for myself

I will go through the anxiety of a future that leaves my skin crawling

I will soothe myself back into normalcy

And tell myself I am *fine*.

Three years passed
And I sat in my room, in a smaller house
In a different continent.
There is silence in the rain outside my window,
The smell of cigarettes ruins the petrichor
There are children running to their parents
And I know it is 3pm.

Home Sick

I have spent time on the screen wondering what to say to you,
not many words come out,
yet,
My mind is a maze of disjointed thoughts,
Muddled feelings
And tired scripts.

In this city—
The sun doesn't feel the same,
There's little flavour in the air;
And the melodies feel different from the beat I'm dancing to.
The breeze from the lakes feels different,
And sometimes I remind myself that different doesn't mean wrong.

Maybe words can meld into sentences when-
The music goes off and DND comes on,
Maybe things will never make sense; and,
Ten years later,
I will find myself in a chair
Struggling to find the words to say.

Tired

I Am Tired

I am tired

I'm tired

I'm tired

I'm so fucking tired.

There is a Poem in My Throat

It is 12:04 and I am trying to create.

I am trying to let my thoughts run wild on the page
and begging the giggle hiding in my veins to scream.

It is past midnight and I am seeking joy in worn-out pages,

I wonder how long this will go on.

How long I shall ask myself to stand up from bed
before my legs decide to listen

How long my stomach will sit still
before reminding me of the need to eat

How long my mind will take
before it decides to act its age

I wonder if this is another form of exhaustion—

This waking up to bones that feel like lead,

This ‘I think too much yet my mind is blank’

These tears that sit on my eyelids unsure if they deserve to fall

It’s 12:19 now and I still do not like myself enough.

I wonder when this cycle will stop

When I will stop punching the calculator trying to stretch resources

When I will stop forgetting I exist

When I will stop living in my head

It's 1:05 and

I find myself numb

Hoping the voice in my head sounds like nightfall

I Should Be Happy Right Now, But I'm Not

I am scrambling to save myself
But there's only so much I can carry.

There's little hope and much despair.
I am sick of having to prove myself,
Telling them I am enough to stand with my peers.
That maybe there's some value I have to add,
Constantly in the demanding cycle of upskilling.

During the day, I curse the world for being so cruel
I curse my motherland for not planting opportunities
I curse myself for not having 'in vogue' skills
I curse the people sending 'unfortunately' emails
I curse the people who do better without seeming to try
I curse the past bosses that have left me scarred.

But I don't curse a lot, really—
I cry to whatever creator exists,
Exhausted from asking
“Why?”
“What are you trying to teach me?”
“Is this just for the plot?”

I Can't Deal With This Right Now

I'm keeping this weight tucked
in my chest
Because
Everything is fine.

My world hasn't been upended in a fifteen-minute conversation.
Home isn't a blurry mishmash of fairy tale dreams and Pinterest mosaics.
Freedom isn't a mirage.
Because everything is *fine*.

There is a myriad of sounds in my head
They mumble:
Too loud,
Too hopeful,
Too discouraged,
Too afraid,
and the headphones don't do enough to drown them.

It is weird.
The world doesn't stop
Despite the weight on my back,

Despite the tears that dry on my cheeks,
Despite the chaos that fucks up my sleep.

Inside me feels heavy

But

There is no pain here

There is no pain here

There is no pain here

Because everything is *fine!*

Emotional Constipation

There are whirlwinds of chaos in my head
And I cannot make sense of this drought that lines my fingers.

The complex myriads of questions
Fuels the familiar insomnia
That keeps my fatigue fresh.

This body is a vessel I no longer own,
Emotions act without consultation
I am barely an observer of
The gaps in my memory forming as they please,
The fear wrapping itself around my bones,
And the tears deciding to not show up.

They say it helps to name these feelings
To detach even just a little
Like this rage hasn't been etched in my soul
Like this anxiety hasn't felt more familiar than the sound of my voice
Like the longing hasn't died trying to distract me
Like christening a thing is reason enough to abandon it to the gods
Like finding out uncertainty is your new best friend—

The kind that adopts you without your permission
The kind that's rude and rummages through your freezer
The kind that doesn't seem to care that you're not ready to wake up this early
The kind that throws you into a blind date
but forgets you're not that into boys.

It is chaotic living like this
Trying to function because by heavens you're a fucking adult
And there are bills to pay
Yet loneliness sits on your bed at midnight
Squeezing your lungs till you can barely breathe.
And sometimes
You think
This might just end you.

I am Trying

11:16 pm

I should sit down and write;

I should journal;

I should tell myself that

I am struggling,

That I am not okay,

That my will to live hangs in the hands of an email,

That I cannot breathe without questioning why,

That I am trying my best to not think,

To stay still,

And function like a 'normal' adult.

It took hours to

Pry myself off my bed,

And make some efforts at '*todaying*'

My morning began at 12:45pm,

And I skipped breakfast

What's the point of eating

when your soul hungers for nothing?

On nights like this,
My bed feels small,
My mind carries on loud and desolate
With no sense of direction
Sometimes it feels like a fog has been set loose.

11:46 pm

And I wish I could sob
I wish I could cry to myself in the dark—
Admit that I am afraid,
That I feel alone,
That I am exhausted,
That no one's coming to save me,
And that for the first time in 23 years,
I don't think I can save myself.

Metamorphosis

There is a Scream in My Belly

There is a scream in my belly

I feel it climb up my throat

When the stress leaves me vulnerable

When the annoyance leaves me naked

I force it down with deep breaths and steady smiles

I mutter *I am fine* to the few that see the cracks in my eyes

Nothing in my body is mine

I am a vessel brimmed with noise

The sound of a snore

a pin drop

a muffled laugh

Maybe one day it will crawl out

This vile thing sharing space with my womb

Maybe it will birth something new and pretty or

Something too dangerous to feel

Metamorphosis

My heart beats in the tempo my mind can no longer follow.

My body runs for miles in my head and feels the ache of a breaking bone.

Up down up

down

down

down

I cannot comprehend this metamorphosis-

I am breaking,

Constantly crashing with each step,

This anxiety keeps me hostage in my bed.

I wonder when this cycle will stop.

When my body will stop shaking at the endless list of responsibilities,

When my stomach will untangle the knots at the thought of waking up,

And the sound of guests won't trigger the familiar taste of bile in my throat.

To The Cyst That Lives in My Ovaries

The day they found you was nerve-wracking

I was asked to hold in pee so they could measure

Wasn't it ironic?

The ultrasound to confirm life

Announced my complications with birth.

The diagnosis was easy:

No periods?

Acne?

Weight gain?

All that makes you a *cyster*.

Living with you is the hard bit.

It's a constant myriad of questionings and double checking—

Is this emotional constipation?

Is my mind just tired of functioning?

Are my responsibilities just too heavy?

Did the brain fog come from doomscrolling a little too much?

Did the cyst shrink? Or is this the high before the long-winded fatigue?

I wonder

When I can see a doctor and not get the same prescriptions:

Weight loss and birth controls.

As if keto didn't spike my insulin,

Or cardio didn't double the stones on the scale.

I wonder when

I can stop using my body as a test subject

For the doctors and the nutritionists on YouTube —

Five supplements

No milk

No bread

No alcohol

No beans

No cardio

More weights

More greens

More water

More sleep

Less me.

To the cyst that lives in my ovaries,
I may hate you
And swear at my fucked-up genetics
For bringing me closer to diabetes
But
Maybe building muscles is your peace offering
And my mindfulness, a consequence of your gentle nudge.
Maybe I've learned to love my body in a way unique to me,
And while I may still hate you,
You've become a familiar stranger.

There is a Shift

There is a shift

In the way I am thinking about things,

In the way my anger finally feels it deserves to stay,

In the way my feet finally leave its mark on the ground,

In the way the base of my spine feels firm,

In the way my mind no longer chatters before moving forward.

There's been a shift

In the essence of my being;

A quiet certainty despite shaky grounds,

Despite loud misdirection parading as loving concerns,

Despite the fear that floats in my belly.

It's 12:00 am and I'm at the steering wheel.

My delusion is sat in the passenger seat,

Urging me forward.

Anxiety sits at the back, quiet but still present,

And in this moment, I am 16 again,

Proud and loud.

I am 12, afraid and alone.

I am 21, carefree and wild.

I am 24, moving forward like a raging storm.

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Janoma Omena is a queer Nigerian creative writer and poet whose work explores the themes of identity, queerness and belonging. A regular at Manchester's poetry scene such as Pull Up and Speak and Verbose, Janoma's writing has been featured in *Brittle Paper* and multiple anthologies. She is also the founder of AfroQueer Lit, a writing community that supports LGBTQ+ writers of the Global Majority through workshops, writing circles and resources.

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Janoma Omena is a Nigerian creative writer and poet, committed to telling stories of queer Nigerians. Her work focuses on the mundanity of life, queer joy, and adulthood. She currently runs a Substack publication, Midnight Musings, and the AfroQueer writers' workshop series. Her work has been featured on Brittle Paper, and twice on WSA-Nigeria's Anthology; Survival and Invisible Battles. When she's not daydreaming about stories, she finds joy in wandering the city, pole dancing and watching anime.

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