

# VOWELS UNDER DURESS



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**A COLLECTION OF POEMS**  
(COMPILED AND EDITED BY JIDE BADMUS)

VOWELS

UNDER

DURESS

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## FOREWORD

### VIOLENCE AND THE PRICE OF SILENCE ON LIVES UNDER DURESS:

#### In Lieu of a Preface

*Vowels under Duress* is an anthology of eighteen poems by seventeen poets coming to let their words speak for them. The carefully selected poems cover various themes from existentialism, love, rejection, to rape and religion, amongst others. The emphasis in the collection is on sexual abuse, the silencing of victims and the attendant effects. The age range of the poets is generally between twenties and thirties. This is important considering the major themes that is explored. One notes while reading the work that the conventional African tradition or political stance that would be noticed in the poetry of older poets is not loud in this work. The poems, with the exception of Shamsu-deen's 'Naa Dataa Tua' do not really have geographical landmarks and could have happened anywhere. Another slight exception might be Ojelabi's 'Gratitude' which gives a hint of a post-colonial Commonwealth nation. The poems in this collection are largely sombre. They have the advantage of being written in a simple – but not simplistic – manner. There is an extensive use of pun and strong images, which run across the majority of the poems.

The collection opens with the title poem 'Vowels under Duress' by Jide Badmus. On the surface, it talks of a man who has to bury vowels under tongue while struggling with choking consonants. The night bears witness and life notes as the persona loses much. Eventually his desires and passions die while he struggles, 'vowels under his tongue' while he chokes on consonants. As one goes through, thoughts of several people come to mind: those people who become politically correct; people who bury their passion behind fear and die a thousand deaths; people who lose themselves and never say things that they should have; people who walk the earth and eventually lie in the grave with their

promise – flowers which should have unfolded into seeds that would blossom to bring more; people who should have been more but could not for whatever reasons... And you wonder what vowels they could have uttered that would have made all the difference.

Mohammed Shamsu-Deen takes the next turn with ‘Naa Dataa Tua’, titled after a place in Yendi, Ghana, where men who had sex with the paramount chief’s wives were beheaded. The poet uses images of this site, including the baobab tree and an executioner’s sword, in addition to rivers and bangles to craft his verse which conjures images of strong violence.

Joba Ojelabi’s ‘Gratitude’ plays on the five vowels to deliver a poem that ends in deep lines, touching on death, that show the poet’s sensitivity. The poem which is similar in rendition to Badmus’s ‘Vowels Under Distress’ speaks of how sometimes there are pains which cannot be said but which eventually have to be mumbled, not in the consonants that make all the sense but mumbles from loose vowels.

Drawing on death in its many forms is Wisdom Nemi Otikor in his ‘Requiem.’ The poem is a verse on abuse – the abuse of a boy by his uncle, the abuse of trust by this uncle who should have been a father. The poem begins with a plea for prayers by the poet persona: ‘Say a prayer for me/Please, say a prayer for me, sister.’ The persona is a broken male who holds his peace in the name of ‘love’ and does not tell anyone of how he was raped of everything, of love and faith. In the end, with nowhere else to go or seemingly no one to turn to, he asks for prayers. Thus, the poem becomes a cycle ending almost where it started. Following in the line of abuse and a call for death is Adaora Chinedu’s ‘Last Death’ which can be interpreted from a certain perspective to be the voice of a lady who has been raped. She cries that her ‘thigh is smitten and drips of bawling blood, shoulders in shame shudder.’ This persona has ‘been crucified without a cross’ with her chapel broken. The scars of this encounter have left her in a dark place and she considers



committing suicide. Towing a similar line is Chinedu Nzere whose poem 'Voices' describes the silencing of a girl's voice after being molested by her stepfather.

The mother is the perpetrator of sexual violence in Oyekunle Oyedolaop Ifeoluwa's 'Motherly Scars.' This mother prepares her daughter for prostitution daily. Soon, the persona lives on pills and alcohol waiting for death. 'Yemi Osadiya Fad's 'The Plea' has a persona who seems to be an experienced 'stick' on fire who wants to be quenched by a river in which no man has ever swum. The owner of the river cries for mercy, which the persona contemplates. The continuing silence of all these victims is also looked at in Jide Badmus's 'The Arsonist' told from the perspective of a boy, who is not allowed to talk but who devises a means to survive. Tukur Loba Ridwan explores this power of speech in his '(M) Oral' which looks at the loss of voice and the pretence of morality in tradition that upholds the unjust wealthy above everyone else.

Chisom Okafor looks at lust and religion in 'On Discovering God.' The persona and 'the other boy' have sexual encounters, swallowing 'the Word of the Lord.' Drawing on this theme too but from the view of the pulpit is POET's 'Trapped' which looks at a homosexual religious leader who rapes a boy. There is silence in the end as the boy cannot really talk. In this wise, we are told: the 'boy wishes to speak/but how you indict god/without being trapped in /quicksand of blasphemy?' Opeyemi Oso pushes this same theme from the pulpit further in his 'The Preacher.' This preacher is a hypocrite who sleeps around while condemning the act on the altar. In the end, the poem suggests that such ministries have become like the various instruments of death that will be their own doom.

Damnation through the loins is explored in Pamilerin Jacob's 'Blood Covenant: Tale of Wrongs.' The poem also tags the line of abuse and a virus (probably HIV) passed through sex. The persona has been a victim of rape by his/her cousin and was infected with the HIV at nine. This persona grows with the pain and is bitter, painting a picture of his/her eventual passage while visiting the past. There is that slight note somewhere that

(s)he would want to kill the cousin that sentenced him/her to the pain. The poem ends with the persona noting that his/her lover has also been infected and would share the death sentence as a token of love.

It is easy to note that *Vowels under Duress* is a thoughtful collection that covers several themes with an emphasis on a bold theme. Sexual abuse, the silence of victims and the destruction of their lives is an important discourse that is fortunately being promoted across (social) media with the rise of such movements as #MeToo and the like helping victims to come out. It is hoped that the conversation continues and that those affected by sexual violence would have a chance to tell their stories while they get justice and find healing in what ways they can.

Every poem has an audience, and it is my belief that these poems would not need to be under any duress to find a home in several hearts.

### **S. SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA**

*Poet and author, Home Equals Holes: Tale of an Exile  
Brighton.*



## INTRODUCTION

When I made the call for submissions for this collection, what I had in mind was art that would celebrate freedom of expression, discourage social intimidation and break the spell of taboos. I wanted heartfelt poetry that would address some of the issues the society shies away from.

Bulk of the entries received bordered on rape, domestic violence, emotional blackmail, child abuse, social intimidation, religious manipulation, depression and dysfunctional families.

The poems in this anthology explore subjects that people would not generally open up about in public. These topics range from experiences we hold back for fear of stigmatization (or victimization) to matters that make mockery of our freedom (of speech) and those that could affect our mental health and emotional well-being.

The individual works in this lean anthology were carefully selected to represent original stories told in unique ways. *Vowels under Duress* is a blend of rich voices stripped of stereotypes; it's a finely brewed cocktail of beautifully crafted words. The messages are clear and relatable.

***JIDE BADMUS***

VOWELS UNDER DURESS

*Jide Badmus*

He buries vowels under his tongue  
And struggles with choking consonants.

These words are never to be said –  
Neither in silent monologue nor in the dark.  
These secrets are sacred.

The night, a dumb witness,  
Watches in pain as tears are gagged  
This cold tale is never to be told!

Taboos like covered tattoos  
Lounge behind false walls.  
Desire burns itself in aching silence

This passion is a seed  
Planted in muffled whispers –  
Never to grow.

He buries vowels under his tongue  
And struggles with choking consonants.

***NAA DATAA TUA***

***Mohammed Shamsu-Deen***

How can a tributary replenish thousand rivers?

Bride price paid at the sight of every maid

Maids many of whom under duress

Part potential suitors to crack promises.

For bangles are cast here and there

Scooping women into the palace

How can a tributary replenish thousand rivers?

The executioner's sword descends

Within each breath taken

At the whisk of the king's forefinger.

So the baobab belches blood –

Blood of men who knew the king's women –

Men whose skulls become anklets of the baobab.

A nineteenth son of the king returns

From the market with his cart

Unfolding sweat like the cloth of rain

As he retorts to welcomes –

*Mother! Who is my father?*

## GRATITUDE

*Joba Ojelabi**(For Auntie 'E'nglish)*

"a e i o u"

This is where we found our words;

In the mouth of *Auntie English*

The young old belle that gave us voices

Although there were lies she didn't tell us

Like how we don't always have to rhyme

And a sentence can sometimes start with "Because"

Because words, unlike tears, can defy gravity

In attempt to escape a sinister depression

On nights when push comes to shove

And there are no consonants to

Make our pain into sentences

We'd make mumbles from loose vowels;

Like "Hay He Hi Ho Hu"

Because death will bring amnesia,

Time will make babies of grey skulls

So with sincerity from a failed memory,

We'd say thank you in Alzheimers' tongue

Making do with the only words left; "Hey 'e' I owe you..."

**(M) ORAL***Tukur Loba Ridwan*

1

oral - we speak into the megaphones  
of our skins with sensual onomatopoeia.

we wake the ghosts in our nerves like  
the wonders of sorcery. our tongues are  
.  
man-made genitals. we are just too good  
at 'refining' what we were given by default.

.  
but to another man's retina of perspective,  
all has been 'perverted' like cultural maladies.

.  
like coitus. now, this is what the pubis of love  
craves from the mouth of lust: one is male,  
the other is female. the rest is orgasm...

2

moral - this is about a piece that failed  
to begin a word with the thirteenth letter

.  
of the alphabet; finding pleasure from  
the pains of mutilated morality. nothing

.  
is left for tradition to wine with. anything

goes for man whose wealth can find his

.

desires on a platter - he has suffered enough  
to have paid: sowing, to reap what is labelled

.

bad for children's eyes. & we made this a lingo  
for all to speak, for all to learn, for all to pay for.  
to find this love, we must seek with our mouths.

## VOICES

*Chinedu Nzere*

tears burn behind the pupil  
of a teenage girl,  
you see, life has a way of restricting  
us to five letters.  
like how she was taught the vowel sounds of pain  
beneath the grip of her stepfather.  
he told her mother moaned in those letters the day she was conceived,  
lies are conceived too-  
buried beneath stifled screams/hushes/stigmas.  
till she embraces her scars,  
erect her walls and watch her cards crumble.  
this is what happens as she loses her voice;  
(a) man reaches for her depth to create memories  
(e)tched with nightmares  
(i)ndelibly reducing every  
(o)unce of her  
(u)ntil her voice evaporates into ellipsis.



**MOTHERLY SCARS***Oyekunle Oyedolapo Ifeoluwa*

If you see me by the river side  
holding waters between my eyes,  
do wish my mother a long life  
and days pregnant with scars.  
My body is a sacrifice  
mother prepares for men,  
she told me there's no afterlife  
and my home is on her bed.  
Alcohol is a strange fragrance  
that consumes me every night  
as father's mate devour my flesh  
digging me deeper still.  
My lips are now a gory sight  
where strange men are glorified.  
I am a pill eating machine,  
drugs are food mother prescribed;  
she said pregnancy means my death  
and she can't afford loose ends.  
My body is now volcano  
that erupts cold delight  
and climax is where I climb to ease  
the tension in my eyes.  
Please tell mother I'm still a teen  
that deserves a better life,  
tell mother I need to be free

that I may bury this tale  
for silence is where I find solace  
to see beyond my pains.

## THE ARSONIST

*Jide Badmus*

*(Tribute to the boy)*

*This is how it started:*

I set my shadow on fire & run from the scene  
not knowing we are Siamese joined at the feet.  
Thus I leave footprints of my fart, char on potholed tar.  
Like a chimney, I burn inside & bear the scars on my head –  
I watch my fear dissolve in flames  
(still I carry its ghost everywhere).

*This is how I was born:*

I'm a boy, not allowed to show weakness,  
this means fiery tears wait for night to fall.  
I'm a dragon – landmines are buried in my mouth –  
I'm a ripe blister, an eager bud of force & fury  
encouraged to mask my lush core in a hard shell.  
I'm a cold grenade – I carry hell in my belly.  
I'm a matchstick, erotic torch,  
spreading wildfires between luscious thighs.  
Can you imagine the arsonist being the fireman? – that's me  
I gather emotions like firewood & ignite them.  
I set off sirens in her head!

*This is how I survive:*

My laughter is a bonfire –  
it means I don't let rhythm of doldrums

stop my feet from dancing.

I offer incense of sweat as sacrifice

& wait for the ember of time to bloom

into an inferno...I block the fire escape —

success won't slip through these fingers like smoke.

## ON DISCOVERING GOD

*Chisom Okafor*

We swallowed the Word of the Lord  
between two classroom roofing,  
the other boy's hand squeezed on a certain bulge at a difficult angle.  
*Christ speaks to me in different ways*, he'd tell me  
in coming weeks, soaked up in his playfulness;  
a strategic swipe here, jellied exit there,  
out-pouring of flavoured ice from the underside.  
I ate him to near-madness,  
one ball at a time.  
Midway, he moaned a call-and-response to a God that moulds boys.

## REQUIEM

*Wisdom Nemi Otikor (For Ilagbe)*

Say a prayer for me.

Please, say a prayer for me, sister.

The preacher asks:

*'How many girls are still whole?' –*

'Cos a boy should not be broken –

and you crawl into your cracks

like drowsy bubbles on sea bed

again, you are a little boy, and his hands

burgle. There is arson in your soul

and your body cannot hold the flames.

This is the first time you died;

8 is the year father left and mother

became an off-keyed concerto

8 is the year uncle came

*'Do not tell anyone. You know Uncle loves you'*

and you become a silent cacophony of love

Do not ask me what love is –

Love is dying. Dying is a little boy

holding love the way only mother should –

it is going to sleep a lullaby and arousing  
an opaque requiem searching for lost notes

it is your body breaking into sad splinters  
like a madman's calligraphy, on its unholy path to God

it is father's absence, uncle's love  
and the many things you should have told mother

and what if mother knew that your soul is a museum  
of the many bodies that have lost their ways inside you?

Yet, say a prayer for me brother.  
Say a prayer for me.



**TRAPPED**

***POET***

in my town,  
grey is a symbol of wisdom –  
skullcap of perfection  
worn only by gods.

a fortnight ago,  
*his holiness*  
had a boy crawl  
in worship to *sodom* –  
temple where boys  
become burnt offering.

boy wishes to speak but  
how do you indict god  
without being trapped  
in quicksand of blasphemy?

**THE PREACHER***Opeyemi Oso*

Bell tolling  
belle rolling  
pray the preacher comes to town.  
He's a dab writer, eloquent his pen be.  
Mountains flee at his fill,  
Rivers part at his ride.  
Riddles! Pardon my part –  
an onlooker lost in awe.  
The preacher is in town,  
call him a clown –  
yesterday he was lost in stupor  
lying dastardly on Delilah's laps,  
same harlot burned on his pyretic sermon.  
He is the failure borne of his words –  
an art lost in act.

This is how the altar lost its blocks:  
casting filthy stones at every crowing cock,  
licking between bloody fingers,  
thirty shekels ramble in flowing cassocks,  
the church as a mule chew silence like a cord  
till the crimson flowing down Aaron's beard –  
like Jordan through the gate of the Lord –  
became the noose that claimed Padre's head.

## THE PLEA

*'Yemi Osadiya FAd.*

Because I tame the fire on her body  
With my palms, lips & flesh.  
My veins dry & body heats  
& the stick beneath burns to ember  
At the times we lay.

In silence, I writhe to swim & quench  
from the river in the midst of the wilderness  
But the silence is broken by this teary plea;  
Never has a man swum in this river!

My lips seize the plea and blurt their own;  
I know, but save me this once  
Let the ember beneath quench in this river

No! – her teary tone  
often pierces my heart  
with the weight of a dead question;  
how long will my stick survive the flames,  
while I lie close to her river?

**LAST DEATH.**

*Adaora Chinedu*

This is how a million times I die with balls of grief burning in my gut.  
Wild weapons welded me into this wreck – I now pray in bitter tongues.  
My thigh is smitten and drips of bawling blood, shoulders in shame shudder – a stranger  
lives in my head.

I have been crucified without a cross – my chapel is broken.  
I try to swallow this stench of sin, and guilt but the world is a hall of brutes  
And girls like me lose the moon in our sky – our stars drench in the absence of rain.

This hurt runs over places beyond my length – daily I fade into the darkness of my being.  
Echoes of groans beat me into grotesque shapes, fugitive, fleeing memories of stolen  
kisses  
With foreign fingers engraved on the nape of my neck – waiting to take my last breath.

## BLOOD COVENANT: TALE OF TWO WRONGS

*Pamilerin Jacob*

i give my lover / a sip / of my blood / say / taste of my affection / in its rawest form /  
 all the poems / are in there / tied to haemoglobin / say / come taste the deepest parts /  
 of me / my greatest weakness / this virus / eating into my liver / like a child gobbling  
 candy / say / can't you sense my glow / how my thighs radiate / through these trousers  
 / two slabs of gold / come / lie with a ghoul / let us make children / before the sun sets  
 / before my sun sets / before my blood changes colour / before i am more bile / than  
 semen / more knife than salt / crush my nipples / with pliers / so the blood flows /  
 faster / so the ache keeps me warm / i love you / remember to give my big cousin / the  
 wedge / remember to cut off his thumbs / & bury them with me / i'll use them for  
 toothpicks / in the afterlife / or butt plugs / all i know is / if he is going to be / inside  
 me / ever again / it has to be on my terms / & i would have to be 9 again / i would have  
 to be crying again / but this time / not because / he injected his death sentence / into me  
 / but because / this time / i entered his room / with a nail cutter / & sniped him / this  
 time / amid the tears / i would be grinning / as the flap of flesh / hits the cement

i give my lover / a sip / of my blood / my liquid history / our new covenant / say /  
 have a sip / share in my death sentence /  
 prove your love /  
 prove your love /  
 eat the virus

## VULNERABILITY

*Wale Ayinla*

hunger is my body thrown into thraldom  
yelling under the queries of the night watch guard.

awoken into a box of jewels,  
is my skin undone of its yearnings?

now that i've given my lungs to smokes puffed  
out of a casket, i go back to my mother with

a calloused hand buried in a requiem.  
& i realize i once drank a joke so i could let out

the butterflies trapped in my oesophagus.  
my throat burns secondhand, ashes outlining

the vision, me breathing a question that mattered  
so little: *what will get filled first?*

the stars shoot above my head, and a kite,  
unthreaded, veers into the cloud.

## VILLAGE

*S.A. Ibrahim (After Muhammad Al-maghut)*

By the grace of God, Father,  
as lines eat through cheeks and birds chirp, I beg :  
Leave your habit of collecting reviews & wood on me.  
Instead, collect my broken bones from the streets before the winds bury me into mouths,  
into the hole that houses Mama's tinnitus.

This pen will lead to my death. It has rolled me into the groan of this freezing wind. It  
groans, brings me a rainbow of darkness -- a signal to my future that it has a mate.

In this cold evening, father; this cold Ibadan evening; where one man looks for  
tuberculous alleys to bury his woman & another for a butterfly's wing or a prisoner's  
sweat in a handful of dust, I go looking for a "word" -- a "letter" to place next to another,

But am I happy?

No!

Over & over, I tried to shake ink from this pen as the wind shook the curtains before  
they were ripped off by the cleric to embody Mama's cadaver, but I have failed.

My pen smells ink like  
males smell females.

I sleep, yet there  
is n

o



t

h

i

n

g on the bed but a cadaver, a  
bones, a misspelt word, an undone puzzle.

wi lt ed leaf, a rattle of

My skull is in prisons,  
my feet in alleys,  
my hands in nests.

Nothing remains of  
m e  
except ribs and eye sockets.

Forget me, father,  
return to your plough, your sand songs.

I have been compromised, father,  
everything has now become as  
impossible for me as stopping a  
haemorrhage with my fingers, as  
stopping death's call from stretching  
away, from my mouth.

**I ATTEMPT A GRAFITTI OF MY SHADOW ON A BOX HOUSE**  
**Sàlàkó Olúwapèlúmi Francis**

Memory in the dark  
unclothes and transmogrify  
into the monochrome figures dancing  
In my uncle's SHARP television.  
I can still see myself clearly,  
crouched before him  
as I chant at his beckon, a bible verse  
that will purge my mouth of all sins  
& make my temple worthy of occupation,  
then, slowly, apoplectic veins permeate my mouth  
in the name of the Lord, then violently  
until I felt Christ's tears well on my tongue.  
It doesn't matter that I was six,  
Just six.

---

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

**Opeyemi Oluwadare Oso** is a young Assistant Superintendent of Police, a writer, poet and art enthusiast. He works currently in Ile-Ife, Osun State Command. A staunch law enforcer and a lover of nature and Art in its generality. He has written many poems for both Nigerian and International publications. His first book -a collection of poetry works- Unspoken Tales, is ready for publication.

**Jide Badmus** is the author of two poetry collections: *There is a Storm in my Head* and *Scripture*. He lives and writes from Lagos, and can be reached via the following social media handles: Instagram: Instajhide Facebook: Jide Badmus (JBard) Twitter: @bardmus, @JB\_INKspired and Email: [jidebadmus@gmail.com](mailto:jidebadmus@gmail.com)

**POET** is an acronym formed from Poroye Ezekiel Tobiloba. The 2nd son of 4 children, POET is a graduate of Economics from Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State. His works have appeared on anthologies. POET writes from Ijoko, Ogun State.

**Oyekunle Ifeoluwa Peter** is a Nigerian poet and spoken word artiste. He made the shortlist of the top fifteen poets for PIN FOOD POETRY PRIZE (PFPC) 2018 and the shortlist of top ten student poets for the NIGERIAN STUDENTS POETRY PRIZE (NSPP) 2018. He was the winner of WORDIATORS POETRY CHAMPIONSHIP 2018. He is a graduate of Industrial Chemistry from the Federal University of Technology, Akure. Whenever he is not writing poems or performing poetry to broken mirrors, he is either teaching Chemistry to random kids or finding home in piano keys.

**Tukur Ridwan Ishola Olorunloba**, a Nigerian poet, literary critic and essayist who hails from Lagos State, attained his B.Sc degree in Political Science; University of Ilorin,

Nigeria. His love for writing (poetry especially) has landed him a contributing role in the Nigerian literature since 2013 when he began the journey of writing. His works have appeared on online literary platforms such as *Sprinkle Stories*, *Our Poetry Corner*, *Ace World*, and *Words, Rhymes & Rhythms*. He is currently a freelance writer, with special focus on poetry on any theme or any form

Born a Ghanaian, **Mohammed Shamsu-Deen** is a professional teacher, certified visual artist and literary critic. His works have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, such as *ACEworld publications*, *ANA Review*, *SPIC International and IndoAfrican Poetry Anthology*. In addition to being a judge for many a literary contest, he is the head for Education Unit of Arts from Our Savannah (AFOS) in Ghana.

**Pamilerin Jacob** is a young Nigerian poet & mental health enthusiast. His poem was shortlisted for the Ken Egba Prize for Festival Poetry 2017. Some of his poems also appear in the Best “New” African Poets 2017 Anthology (as Olawale Ibiyemi). He made the winning list of PIN Food Poetry Contest 2018. *Author of Memoir of Crushed Petals (2018) & Gospels of Depression (2019)*; he is a staunch believer in the powers of critical thinking, Khalil Gibran’s poetry & chocolate ice cream.

**Wisdom Nemi Otikor** believes that writing is therapeutic and sees poetry as a course to healing. He is from Rivers state but wakes up these days to an insomniac Lagos. Home to him is firstly Mom and his two younger brothers, other things can follow. He is a bubble of laughter in a city of God.

**Wale Ayinla** is a Nigerian poet, essayist, and editor. He is a Best of the Net Award nominee, and his works appear or are forthcoming on *Palette Poetry*, *Waccaman*, *Barren Magazine*, *Glass Poetry*, and elsewhere. He is @Wale\_Ayinla on Twitter. He is the founding editor of *Dwarts Magazine*.

**Sàlàkó Olúwapèlúmi Francis** writes from North Central, Nigeria. His writings aim to interrogate the place of memory, loss, love, history & culture. His works have appeared or forthcoming on *Ngiga review*, *Prachya review*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, elsewhere. He is a recipient of the 2017 Green author prize.

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