



**LUARTS**



**ETHNIC MINORITIES  
NETWORK**

**TELLING  
OUR  
STORIES  
CAMPUS POEMS**



**#CAMPUSPOEMS**

# Telling our stories

## Campus Poems

**LU Arts** has invited poet **Indigo Williams** to curate an anthology of poems that will be sighted in locations across the campus for the whole of October, as part of Black History Month.

*From Zimbabwe to Nigeria and London, Telling Our Stories* is a collection of **11 Contemporary Black British Poets** writing on themes of ethnicity, family, home and what it means to be Black British. Curated by Indigo Williams, each poem presents a distinct voice that shares stories of the past, future and present life that influenced who they are and how they see themselves in the world.

Featuring poets: **Toni Stuart, Ioney Smallhorne, Yomi Sode, Raymond Antrobus, Theresa Lola, Indigo Williams, Belinda Zahwi, Inua Ellams, Keith Jarrett and Ada Ughanwa**

# Toni Giselle Stuart | 2018

## By Toni Stuart

And the wall is part of yourself –  
we know or we don't know but it's true for us all  
except for small children. No walls for them.

–Tomas Tranströmer, Vermeer

the girl walks through walls

– her right palm is eating through cement  
strait-jackets and swallowing straits. in the bath  
she hears her 6-yr-old voice think i'm special  
because i'm the same colour as jesus. living by  
his example is a self-fulfilling prophecy of  
insecurity and self-doubt. there is no good enough  
floating around inside her stomach. this is a food  
whose nutrients her cells have never tasted.  
there is only the milk of fear and the bread of heaven  
hunger. Lorde's litany is the choir's chorus stuck  
on repeat repealing through the rafters and the flat-  
ironed ringlets of curly heads. when the boy asks,  
one night in the bath: am i Coloured? the father says  
you are South African. the boy is five but somewhere  
deep in his third left rib, he hears a whisper say  
the father is lying. the boy is cinnamon. the girl is  
vanilla (the colour of ice-cream, not seed pod).  
the boy is straight hair.

the girl is two-hours-in-the-  
chair-pulling-her-head-in-the-opposite-direction-of-  
the-hairdressers's-brush-and-blowdryer-so-the-brush-  
can-move-through-unstuckunhinged-and-her-hair-  
will-fall-straight. the girl is stinging scalp and sore head.  
the girl is smiling teeth for straightened hair. the girl is  
why am i not beautiful like this all the time? sitting up  
straight in the back seat so her sweating back will not  
send her hair home before she arrives there.

**Toni Stuart** is a South African poet best known for her poetry writing and performances. She has stated that she aims to encourage others to find their own voice by offering inspirational creative workshops. Her poetry has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Looking Back, Going Forward: Young Voices on Freedom* (British Council, STE Publishers, 2004), and *In the Heat of Shadows, South African Poetry 1996-2013* (Deep South Publishing).

# Etymology

By **Ioney Smallhorne**

Atabey is stirring, she vex  
and searching for her people  
whipping up the winds  
heating high sea  
her eye is formed  
tracing the outline of her land  
uprooting tree, peeling off roofs  
overturning cars  
her tempest spiraling  
counter-clockwise  
spreading from one language  
to another  
until a campaign of conquest  
is whirling off your tongue  
and you exclaim

Hurricane!

Huracán!

Hurakan!

and then remember,  
this belonged to the Taino.

**Ioney Smallhorne** is a writer, performance poet and a member of Mouthy Poets.

# The Organist

By Indigo Williams

Like the organ, sister Joyce was a difficult beauty,  
a brash presence that had a grip in any room.  
She was the kind that made Sunday mornings gossip.  
Her five-foot frame body, thick as hard dough bread,  
triggered brothers into hunger.

She didn't look 'saved' enough for the old saints,  
who cut their eyes at her under their Sunday hats.  
They said she dressed like a confession  
every curve on her body telling.

But while their eyes were closed in service,  
she wooed them with a worship song.  
They were too busy singing to compare her skirt  
to the length of a hymn.

**Indigo Williams** is a British Nigerian poet, writer and Spoken Word educator from Brixton. She is passionate about the ways art can transform the way we perceive the world and its ability to facilitate critical consciousness. Indigo has performed and work featured at Tedx Brixton, Tedx UCL, Glastonbury, BBC Radio 4 Bespoken Word and across the UK and Europe.

# The Outing

By Yomi Sode

Onlookers witnessed your wrath that night  
how your fist rose to the heavens,  
striking down as if Şango[1] lived within you.  
Thirty going on thirty-one. I wasn't sure what to say.  
I've never been here.  
The papers described him as tall.  
They said his neck broke before he landed  
as if his body was a slinky, waiting  
for the rest of him to hit the ground.  
Witnesses recall you bloodied and exhausted,  
looking at your swollen knuckles saying  
what did I do? repetitively  
as if you were a toy wound for entertaining.  
Uncle Elijah believes mental health is a western thing  
He says back home, elders would out those who were cursed  
and banish them from the village. I sit with you, old friend.  
We break silence with passive laughs as if we were sat  
with our fathers. Then silence again.

[1] Şango – King of the orisha pantheon, rules over thunder, fire, drumming, dancing and male virility. He is one of the most worshipped orishas in the pantheon and his legends are numerous and speak to the human experience.

**Yomi Sode** balances the fine line between Nigerian and British cultures, which can be humorous, loving, self-reflective and, at times, uncomfortable. Over the past nine years, Yomi has had work commissioned by The Mayor's Office, BBC World service/ BBC Africa, Channel4, various charities and recently presented a poem at the UN Humanitarian Summit.

# Skank v. (t)

By Keith Jarrett

London is the place, he sings  
into the history books of  
Blackness in these Isles;  
contrived footage of a Calypso-  
nian improvising an entrance  
to the blessed Motherland.  
After, reels of Blues dance:  
black and white couples,  
backs bent, elbows raised.  
Establishment looks askance  
at syncopated movement,  
jerking like the spirit's taken.  
Glance through three score  
and ten years past this point;  
contrived reframing carries  
in the knees. And we can't  
seem to step past this sinking  
shipwreck tale, still framing  
us off-beat; beaten; swept in  
on a broken wave.

UK poetry slam champion and Rio International Poetry Slam Winner, **Keith Jarrett** is a PhD scholar at Birkbeck University, where he is completing his first novel. His play, *Safest Spot in Town*, was aired on BBC Four, and his book of poetry, *Selah*, was published in 2017.

# South of South East

By Belinda Zhawi

1.

Your father's people are from South of the river Ngezi, a tributary for larger rivers, near a ruined stonemason city once named after a British Queen who claimed herself Empress of India. Your mother's people are South of the river Devure, in a small town that shares its name with the Russian word for she-wolf. With a name that means ember. Your mother's people are she-wolves & firebrands.

Naturalised. Naturalisation.

You have been naturalised.

Naturalised. Naturalisation.

You have been naturalised.

You are from South of the River Thames, East of a two century-old bascule bridge in a land built on blood & the back of dark skins. You are from dry savannah winters spent in your grandmother's compound & the deep ochre dust of a land locked. You - an island, Black in a White Sea. You are the fallen red of autumn leaves, a spin-off to the joke of wet British summers. You're the yearn for a home you grow further further further Further & further away from a tongue you can never forget but not always speak.

Naturalised. Naturalisation.

You have been naturalised.

Naturalised. Naturalisation.

You have been naturalised.

**Belinda Zhawi** is a Zimbabwean-born writer and educator who lives and works in London. Her work mostly focuses on memories of living in rural and urban Zimbabwe. She has performed across the UK in numerous venues, festivals and events including at Africa Writes, Bestival and TATE, with her work published in the anthologies *Liminal Animals* and *Casagrande: Rain Of Poems*. In 2013, Zhawi featured on Channel 4's *Random Acts* and also co-founded the monthly poetry night, *BORN::FREE*. Zhawi was shortlisted for 2015-16 Young Poet Laureate's London role.

# Grip-Release-Grip

By Tania Nwachukwu

The lace cuts away at your  
armpits and you immediately regret the cheaper seamstress. aunty ties your  
gele, too tight on the temple as if she were securing a ship's mast  
now you are seeing two of everything  
the fishtail skirt feels like rope around your knees  
your shoes, high heeled and hard soled  
you look like a drunk sailor walking the plank  
if Bella Naija did Navy  
but aunty is giving you a look  
hand firmly on hip,  
pushed lip  
brows knitted together  
as if you tore the clothes off your back. where are your earrings?  
of course.  
Despite your newly tied crown,  
or the coral beads collecting the hairs from your neck  
you must not forget to wear earrings apparently men will think that you  
too are also a man apparently.  
If only it were that simple to remove jewellery and gain privilege.  
when they herded all the women in to Chioma's compound as the masquerade  
ran through the village,  
feet flickering to the drums,  
taunting you through the gate  
or when ten men felt the shape of you  
then asked you why you were screaming  
or when he said to simply shake your hand went against everything he  
believed in.  
you were not wearing earrings.  
next time you will point at your unadorned ears,  
call him bros and shake hands in to a firm grip-release-grip-finger  
snap.  
if only it were that simple.  
you take the earrings from aunty,  
feel them swinging from your ears like a pendulum,  
waiting for the right time to transform you into woman.

**Tania Nwachukwu** is a Nigerian-British writer, poet and performer from London whose storytelling springs from profound, personal matters and from the lives and experiences of Black communities in Britain.

# Ghetto van Gogh

By Inua Ellams

The night my mother tells the story of the thief / I am cross-legged on her lap / Her mouth is inches from my ear / She lets the dusk slip into her voice and whispers / about the boy who snatched a mango at the market and ran / becoming the teenager who robbed a shop at gunpoint / shot the blind cashier / shot him as he fell, shot him once more dead / became the man who stole 36 cars and when apprehended / to be publicly hanged / asked for one wish, his whole lip quivering /

My mother who is inches from my ear / explains his dying wish to speak to his mother / The crowd parted silently / she gathered his bound wrists / kissed his rough skin / her cheeks shimmering in the killing heat / He bent forward says mother / her mouth even closer / dusky voice hushed / bent towards her cheek as if to kiss goodbye and switched sharply / bit into her ear / strained against the flesh / ripped the thing off and spat / You should have told me mother / what I did was wrong

**Inua Ellams** was born in Nigeria in 1984 and moved to the UK as a child. He is a poet, performer, playwright, graphic artist and designer. He started performing in cafes in 2003 and has since worked in venues which include Queen Elizabeth Hall, Tate Britain, Theatre Royal Stratford and Glastonbury Festival.

# Maybe my most important identity is being a son

By Raymond Antrobus

my mother  
asking how  
to open a tab  
on her laptop,  
to email a photo,  
calling to ask—  
can you change  
the lightbulb  
at the top of the stairs?  
my mother  
spending hours  
helping me find  
a doctor's form,  
a hearing aid battery,  
anything  
misplaced, my mother  
who keeps leaving  
her keys in the doors  
or on the walls,  
who keeps saying  
I might have to change  
the locks, mother  
of self-sufficiency,  
of beads and trolleys,  
of handlebars,  
short-tempered  
spiteful mother,  
mother of resistance,  
licorice and seaweed  
on the table,  
lonely mother,  
mother needs-no-man,  
mother deserves my cooking,  
deserves a long sleep,  
a cuppa tea, a garden  
of lavender mothers,  
all her heads up,

mother's tooth  
falls out, mother  
dyes her hair,  
don't say graying  
say sea salt  
and cream, remedy,  
immortal mother.

**Raymond Antrobus** was born in London, Hackney to an English mother and Jamaican father, he is the author of 'Shapes & Disfigurements', 'To Sweeten Bitter' and 'The Perseverance'. In 2019 he became the first ever poet to be awarded the Rathbone Folio Prize for best work of literature in any genre.

Other accolades include the Ted Hughes award, PBS Winter Choice, A Sunday Times & The Guardian Poetry Book Of The Year 2018 and a Griffin Prize shortlist. Also in 2018 he was awarded 'The Geoffrey Dearmer Prize', (Judged by Ocean Vuong), for his poem 'Sound Machine'.

# Portrait Of Us As Snow White

By Theresa Lola

We inherited black holes for eyes,  
so light was the benchmark we measured the beauty of skin against.

We sat in our dorm room  
and discussed who the fairest of all was.

The Igbo girls claimed they could be cast as foreign  
as long as the sun didn't betray them.

The girls with skin the shade of the bronze masks  
our ancestors carved directed the conversation.

The myth was that backstage curtains are dark colours  
so that dark girls can camouflage into them.

We never said the word 'race', substituted 'yellow pawpaw' for 'white'  
as if we knew the word 'white' would peel our tongues down to a seed of guilt.

My bow legs hung from my bunk bed like question marks.

I was unsure of which shade my skin will grow into,  
so I could not be the lead role in this fairy tale.

Now I know our ignorance is a kind of bacteria  
bleach multiplies instead of killing.

One of my dorm mates used 'Papaya Skin Lightening Soap',  
the scent was like every other soap,  
she rubbed it on her skin until

she was cast as Snow White in the school play.

The myth is that despite all the light on her skin,  
her soul remains a backstage curtain.

**Theresa Lola** is a British Nigerian poet, events programmer, and workshop facilitator. She is currently the Young People's Laureate for London. She has performed across the UK and internationally. She was joint winner of the 2018 Brunel International African Poetry Prize.

# Shackles

By Ada Ughanwa

Shackles, bound, chained from top to bottom,  
suffocating, inside, out, all around life.  
Breathe, can't, move an inch heavyweight burden, dragging me down.  
Oxygen hurts to breathe  
the weight upon me is too much to carry  
ive been holding this burden for nineteen years too many,  
I string it along everywhere I go  
Its on my neck like a rope, revolving slowly but quickly never taking my life.  
A padlock, but no key, I'm meant to navigate myself out of this, can somebody help please!  
I've been stripped off clothes, dignity and peace  
my whitewash eyes glare back into your hollow soul.  
Tongue, twists, bruised and battered,  
resentment boils blood that spews from my gargling,  
dribbles stain my very being  
and caress my carcass.  
I'm gone.

**Ada Ughanwa** is a student at Loughborough University. In 2018/2019 she was awarded the Arts Scholarship for Creative Writing.

**Special thanks to Indigo Williams for curating this  
anthology.**