



VANGUARD
BOOK OF SEXUAL
AND
HIV/AIDS
AWARENESS

Poems and Stories

Edited by
Nense Anyanwu

**THE VANGUARD
BOOK OF SEXUAL
AND
HIV/AIDS AWARENESS**

A VANGUARD LITERARY SERVICES ANTHOLOGY



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To Patrick Poirson

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Introduction

In this anthology are stories and poems that explore HIV/AIDS and sexual awareness. They are songs and meditations and prayers and cheers. They are therapies and testimonies. They are the confidence we have that despite the fight against HIV/AIDS, love is still possible.

Our future will be better than our past.

Cheers!

Nonso Anyanwu
Abuja, December 2017.

A New Life

Hussani Abdulrahim

There was this heaviness in his chest that seemed to make breathing a very difficult thing. He rubbed his tired eyes that had grown weak over the days. He stood up, sighed and plodded to the window. He half drew the silky curtain and observed the night's scenery. Everything was mute save the crickets and some obscure creatures. He heard the distant barking of a dog. A cat snarled on the balcony. A bird's hooting came to him. The silhouettes of the leaves fluttered sluggishly on the window pane. It wasn't all so quiet after all. The sky was star-laden. None of these things was capable of arresting his attention and taking away his worries. It was something he was in need of.

Bored, he went to the mirror and observed his figure. He'd grown frail. It wasn't really as a result of his newly discovered HIV status, but because since he became aware that he carried the disease, his appetite for food had deteriorated. It was on a Tuesday afternoon, in Doctor Amar's office. He'd opened the letter with shivering hands. Afterwards, he'd wept. Doctor Amar, who also doubled as a close family friend, had consoled him.

"If managed properly, you'll remain as normal as any other man," Doctor Amar had said.

Both men had fallen silent for a while, before Doctor Amar pointed out one vital thing Amodu should do without delay.

"I know it's difficult, but somehow you have to let Rahila know. She has to check too."

Amodu had only stared at Amar as if he'd spoken in a language strange to him.

"Please, you need to tell her," the doctor repeated. "Do it for yourself."

"Please, Amar, help me keep this a secret. For now. I need to clear my head."

Amar nodded.

After that day, Amar had constantly phoned him to know how he was and to fix appointments. Amar feared for his friend. He feared that in such a state, one was vulnerable. And in truth, Amodu had contemplated committing suicide, but the thought flew out the window as quickly as it came. He was afraid of death. What he feared more was the concept of one taking one's own life.

Opening up to Rahila was posing a hard decision to make. For almost a year now, they'd slept in separate rooms. Whenever he paused to reflect on how they'd drifted apart, he always ended up baffled and guilty. It'd all started with the miscarriage. Then when she became pregnant again, they'd found the bright spot in their marriage again. They'd sorted out their differences and every time he returned from work, he returned with sweet scented flowers. That moment of bliss didn't last for long either. Rahila had had a stillbirth and hadn't gotten over that dark moment of her life.

And on his part, he'd failed to draw her close. He'd failed to accommodate the feeling of pity, to be aware of how hard it is for a woman to come to terms with not been able to hold her child and shower him with love. Rahila still remembered how it all went. It was hard not to be able to hear the tender scream of that part of you, one you'd carried all along for nine months, one which made your friends tease you at how rounded and awkward you've become. Every night, you spoke to her with your fingers spread tenderly on your baby bump. You believed she heard

you. You felt her kick. Because of her, you're too cautious. You couldn't wait to hold her and place a kiss on her head. And to finally not be able to live that dream, to see your baby wrapped and taken away without even being allowed to behold her face, was eternal torture. Rahila felt this way. It was as if she'd run mad. And Amodu hadn't helped matters. He'd let her slip away from him. She needed emotional support, but he'd been too busy and ill-suited to give that.

The next morning, Amodu was prepared, about to head out to work, when Rahila called out to him. For three days now, they'd not spoken to each other.

“Your breakfast. Won't you eat something?”

He halted. He felt disjointed. For a long time now, she'd stopped worrying whether he ate or not. She was used to coming back to retrieve the plates from the dinning, untouched. Sometimes, it baffled him that Rahila never complained. They'd become a couple just trying to tolerate each other without much fuss.

“I'm late,” he answered, sounding calm, trying not to meet her gaze.

She nodded. And he left.

When Amodu returned at night, he thought that Rahila had retired to the bed, as usual. He proceeded to the dining, expecting to find his usually cold dinner, but the table was empty.

At the kitchen, he met a busy Rahila. He watched as she made comic runs from the gas cooker to the shelves and to the sink which was brimming with used utensils. Amodu stood there by the doorway and marveled. He couldn't remember when last he'd spent time with her in the kitchen. She was someone who paid attention to every little detail at culinary matters. Thanks to her, he'd learnt a few things about cooking. During those happy days, she'd been hell bent on teaching him how to

mix this and that. She'd tell him not to leave the meat steaming for too long, not to put all the ingredients at once and when to add the vegetables.

Amodu moved to the refrigerator and that was when Rahila turned.

"Welcome."

"You're late today," he said.

"And you're late too," she replied softly.

"The traffic was bad," he explained as she presented him with a glass tumbler.

For a moment, his problems seemed to fade away.

"I was at Halima's. You know, she's still down."

"How's she getting over the loss?" he inquired.

Rahila paused and turned to him.

"You know, it's always hard when you lose someone you love, but it helps a lot when there are those who understand and share in your pain. They help you carry the burden."

Amodu looked away. He knew it was meant for him. He felt guilty. He looked up and gestured towards the pot on the fire. Rahila turned quickly to it. There was a bowl of salad embellished with slices of tomatoes and onions on a low stool. He stared at the fine, round slices. Rahila was a maestro at cutting fancifully.

After a few minutes, he helped her move things to the dining. He observed that she was happier and calmer. He wondered why. They'd been so far apart for him to see any reason to be glad about. Sitting opposite each other and only a few minutes into their meal of jollof and creamed salad, Rahila said something that almost made Amodu to choke.

"I saw it. I saw the letter," she'd announced in her soft, soft voice.

"What letter?" He asked dropping his spoon.

"The one from the hospital."

He pushed his plate away.

"I was cleaning when I saw it. You're not going to tell me, were you?"
She asked, looking straight at him.

There was a silence.

"Believe me, I was trying. I was preparing to," he said, stunned by her calm composure.

"You've got to eat. It's not the end of the world."

He looked up at her shocked.

"Amar said that you needed checking too. What if...." He broke off.

"If I'm positive too? We deal with it. We'll live and deal with it."

"Why?" Her sudden change of attitude was somewhat frightening to him. He felt like fleeing that table. Rahila smiled.

"Lately, I've been thinking about Halima's case a lot. Her loss is a big blow for her. I've only lost a baby, what if I lose you too? So, I realized that sometimes, we're too naive, ungrateful and arrogant to really appreciate and reconcile with what we have in our hands."

Her face was now glassy. He looked at the table with a chill feeling of one been drenched by rain.

"I'm sorry, it's all my fault. I never cared. I was too distant from you."

They fell silent. What he felt now was light. As weightless as a feather.

Rahila stood up and was about to leave for the kitchen when Amodu knelt before her and said many things. The many things he'd always wanted to say but never knew how to. Things that he had felt awkward about. Amodu wept.

"Wallahi, I hold no grudge against you," she said. "I love you more than you can ever imagine."

Retro(virus)

Mobolaji Olawale

There is so much you can learn

In a waiting room

After spilling blood in test kits.

In the appearance and disappearance

Of white coats,

You learn how to bend time.

You move wristwatch's hands

Anticlockwise.

Tock tick.

You are in your barber's shop,

Watching strands of hair rise from the dustbin

And start clinging to your scalp.

His public clipper retraces its motion

Till you unmake acquaintance of it.

Tock tick.

You are rising from your bed,

Sweat re-entering pores in your skin.

Girl after girl

Slips feet into high heels

At your doorstep, catwalks backwards

Till she disintegrates into dust.

The concept of love to you

Becomes elastic again;

It stretches to include:

The blabbing-babbling praise of a mother

Performed by her baby,

Giggles disinhibited over dinner,

The thing that stabs your heart

With her fork, when she says goodbye.

Love becomes much more than

Fire at the edge of a burning match stick

Between thighs.

You refuse to leave this moment,

You say maybe here and now

The doctor will read your test result

With a smile.

Tick tock.

The wait is over.

The doctor opens his mouth to speak

Monologues
Oka Benard Osahon

*Yesterday they came to my school,
two women and three men.*

Why were there more men?

Do men know more about sex than women?

They spoke about AIDS and ways to avoid it.

I wanted to say I was good;

I had my protection, Vaseline and porn.

*Then they said clippers, razors, toothbrushes, needles could
make me a pariah*

A ghost in my own home; a beast in my own waste.

My heart jittered; I pored at the literature they shared.

I didn't like the pictures they painted.

Listen!

Shehu Abdus-Salam Aladodo

Listen!

To the one who was dragged to an unknown land,
known to the one who collected her cheap dowry.

Listen!

To the faint shrieks of the one without a voice,
listen as she battles her leg and moans in pain.

Watch as she drops the last tear of her chastity,
Listen to the helpless one, stripped of her shyness.

Listen to the one who was stripped,
not for a man but for everyman.

Listen to her as she speaks.

Listen to her lips,
as it moves to show her displeasure.

To her waist,
as it dances away from the pressure.

To her heart,
as it shed tears of regret and hope.

My Brother, Kainyechukwuekene

Ohia, Ernest Chigaemezu

From my bedside desk,
Somewhere you have always known,
Akure,
June, 2016.

Dear Kiki,

I realize it has been quite long since I wrote you. The last time I did, some years ago, I was attending a writing workshop in Accra, Ghana and you wanted to know how it was over there. So with my head reeling, I crammed all that happened into a series of long letters that were sweetened with some make-believe tales.

I have always received your letters and I am happy that you are happy. That you now live in Paris with your husband, Paul, and your two wonderful kittens. That you no longer sit within the confines of what used to be your former self. Inferior. Unwanted. Alone. That the memories you collect working as a kindergarten teacher melts back into solid happiness. I am happy for you, my dear. You deserve the butterfly-kinda feeling of glee that made me run mad during our teenage years.

Kiki, a lot has happened since my last letter to you. The latest is cheerless and shocking. I want to tell you about it because I believe you deserve to have knowledge of it.

My brother, Kainyechukwuekene, has full-blown AIDS. He was diagnosed with it four years ago and his health is increasingly failing. I do not know what to do, Kiki. I think I am losing my mind.

The day he told me about it, I locked myself in my room and cried till I developed a terrible headache. After that day, I would remember what he had said and the somber manner with which he said it on days when I was supposed to smile and live. Kiki, it would crush me into shapes of downheartedness I could never imagine. One time, I thought of his ill-health and wept hopelessly in front of my writer friends. We had gone out for a drink at a café but my outburst ruined the whole fun. I ended up in the arms of those who cared enough. I could not tell them the reason for my meltdown.

You remember Kainyechukwuekene and his rugged manner, don't you? How he was a mixture of mild pigheadedness and guts when we were little, always having his way because, well, no one swaggered the way he did. He wore moues gruffly and handed everyone a ration of the stuff he was made of: aloofness with a prim topping.

You know how Christianity dominated our lives at home and Papa, being the fanatic he was, brought us up with his fierce responsibilities and all that jazz? If he had known that in one way or the other Ekene was learning the "by-fire-by-force" headiness from him, he would have loosened his evangelical nature which he wielded like a colossal prize, too big to be displayed or hidden. And Mama? Arghh. Did she not start shouting at him and giving him "dirty" slaps because the neighbours were beginning to blame her taciturnity for Ekene's behavior? Did Pelumi's father not report to Papa that Ekene forcefully kissed his daughter while we were playing hide-and-seek one certain day? What of Obinna's parents who almost fought with Papa because he had refused to believe

their story that Ekene touched Obinna's buttocks? Did they not call Papa the father of a useless child? I still recall how Papa picked Ekene up and threw him in the air after Obinna's parents left. I still remember the white fear clearly visible in Ekene's eyes when he was in the air, fear that the moment he landed on the floor he would break something, perhaps his waist. And within a second, when he was already on the floor, he began to shout and shout till Mama could take it no longer and stuffed his mouth with a handkerchief. He had to bear the pains for his stupidity, she said. It was only a broken rib.

In 2011, when Ekene turned 17 and I was 22, he came out. He wanted to confide in me. He said too many things: He was bisexual. He was not a virgin. He loved a man 12 years older than him. He wanted me to know because I had earned his trust. That day, as he spoke in whispers, I wanted to tell him to shut up. I felt he didn't know what love is. He was only a boy, an adolescent caught up in the flames of heightened sexuality, as Mama would put it. I wanted him to say he was joking. But I found myself asking him about the man he was dating. If he was fine-looking. If he truly loved him. How did they meet? Facebook? We swore to keep his personal life discreet and if Papa and Mama should find out, if they eventually did, we would brace ourselves for whatever they threw at us.

Kiki, I watched Ekene grow freer year by year. Maybe because he was doing a Law programme at one of the prestigious universities in the country. He had begun exploring his sexuality with that freer spirit and it seemed very exciting to him. Mr. "12 years older" was out of the picture. So were several others, both guys and girls. And by the time he finished his schooling and was called to the bar, his heart had become a sky without stars, a thing obscured from overuse. He had also picked up the dirty habit of smoking "monkey tails" and would laugh senselessly over

petty issues. I became scared, Kiki. The fear was forceful, a mass of squirming realities choking me. Ekene was turning into something I detested. He was changing. I respected his need to survive here though he was confused. He tinkered with his life. With the possibility of changing for the better. With his chances to “Ha-Ha.” With what became his virility. I offered to help him in those periods, to examine every bit of his lifestyle, but no, Ekene’s inflexibility would not give way. He seemed undaunted, unbroken and unremitting. Gradually, he doubled his lifestyle. When Papa and Mama heard the juicy gossips about him, they dubbed him “Abnormal” and disowned him. Ekene did not mind.

Kiki, nostalgia is almost pulling my head off. It has been my nightmare these past years. I wake up each morning to the memories of him and our childhood days and I begin to sink because the memories might eventually be my last scrappy possession of him, diminishing, haunting, sapped. They appear all the time now, the memories. In one version, I am interrupted while on an okada to a nearby market. In another, I am discussing the peculiarities involved in publishing an autobiography with a friend. In the latest version, it is comical: I am waiting for Ekene at the foot of Mama Chiboy’s Ube tree. He is up, plucking the fruit and throwing them down and I am picking them and stuffing the little purplish fruits in my trousers’ pockets. Obviously we are stealing but we do not mind. I hear a dog bark. “It must be Lion, Mama Chiboy’s stupid dog,” I say to Ekene. “Come down let us go.” He climbs down from the tree immediately. But we realize Lion is headed our way so fast. We clear the barbed wire fence and in the hurry, I abandon my slippers and Ekene’s short is left hanging on the fence. He ran ahead of me in his underwear that day. Kiki, this particular memory cracks me up. Even now, a smirk is playing across my face. I can’t cry any more, Kiki. Of what use is crying now?

I am seated here, at my bedside desk, leaking my emotions onto this brown paper and thinking I am giving you one big revelation that your poor heart will totally find exhausting to accept. I am wishing that I do not have to do this. I have always wished so. I am praying for a miracle, still. I am unsure of the kind of miracle to pray for, whether it should be for Ekene's curing, or for my own. Ekene is all I have got, you know it. He does not deserve to die like this. If only he had been careful. Or was it me? Had I been insensitive, unwise and stymied with every issue that was about him?

Kainyechukwuekene's health continues to deteriorate. He is almost too weak to do anything. His sight is failing too. After writing this letter, I'll go visit him at his place to know how he is faring, if he takes his antiretroviral drugs at all. You remember that white fear on his face the day Papa broke one of his ribs. I can see that fear screaming wildly at me each time I visit him. That fear would clutch him by the throat and start a riot on his face. It would demand to be let free, to be felt whole. He would start to break and sigh and whisper silent words and wish that all he was facing were unreal.

I am praying for Kainyechukwuekene. Last year, his doctor told us that it is no longer a death sentence. He could live well with a healthy lifestyle and good medications. It is good news. I only have to support him in any way possible. AIDS patients who look positively towards life and receive much encouragement and support from people around them tend to live longer. Kainyechukwuekene will live long.

I am praying for myself too. I need strength. This is taking all my energy in a certain way.

Later, Kiki. Stay well.

Your friend and sister, always,
Chikwendu.

He Was a Doctor
Brigitte Poirson

He was a doctor and could not cure himself.

He was a friend and could not call for help.

He was a son and could not ask for trust.

He was a brother and could find no relief.

He was a companion and just could not relate.

He was eaten by his own cells.

His skin shrivelled.

His bones withered.

His limbs shrank.

His flesh faded away.

His lungs smothered him.

He stopped living long before his death.

The Unkillable Monster

Gloria Ronoh

Sometimes life can be pain.
We tend to pretend it's plain.
We crouch around for hope,
But we cannot find the scope.
Tears fall down my cheeks,
And I watch as the clock ticks.

My heart is filled with rage.
Anguish and flickering flames outdo my age.
The wound inflicted in my soul aches
for all I see is pale black,
Rushing through the air,
Wanting to draw my very breath.

My heart pounds
as I watch the grounds,
wondering who'd be next
for I would rather text
than watch it swallow more
as its thirst flows.

With long claws and teeth like penknives,
We desire to flee for our lives.
Craving for new blood,

its roots seek more ground,
While its claws sink deep into flesh.

I fear the approach of the monster,
Daring to run away faster.
The monster cannot be proven
Bearing an identity that is hidden
With a name so broad: HIV.
So it's never really out of view.

I thought that was enough,
But the roads got tough.
We waited for aids,
But the name grew to AIDS,
And all I did was watch
Wishing I could strike back.

The Dangerous Master Inside
Synthia Yieseh Achoh

Oh HIV/AIDS!
You come from afar,
With your dreadfulness
Which renders many miserable.

You come as HIV, but
Within the twinkle of an eye,
You develop into a giant
Which breeds so much disaster.

The dangerous master hides in us.
We nurture him unaware.
His signs of existence only appear
When a greater part of us has fallen.

You think you're brilliant,
Without attaining the top.
Numskulls may be your customers
Who parade themselves around
Without any protective weapon.

Now, we are strongly sensitised,
Your insidious nature is known,

And your grotesque plans widely open.

Nymphets may parade as dogs.

Once infected, they feel lifeless.

Leave that lazy sit,

And battle with this disease.

Get in contact with your doctors,

And grab anti-retroviral drugs.

Women!

Protect your babies.

Go for anti-natal check-ups

Young men and women,

Abstinence, fidelity and condoms

Are essential, now you know.

Be warned.

Together, let's conquer HIV/AIDS.

Safety First

Nsah Mala

I would dodge your kiss

Be happy with my peace

Than connect fleshy lips

To become a long eclipse.

Without going for a test,

Romantic life can't be best

Since HIV/AIDS isn't hung

On faces but turns into dung.

I would flee naked intercourse

Until we take the right course.

Glittering and Rotting

Nsah Mala

Some smooth skins we see are sour
Inside, harbouring double skeletons
Lodged within corporal cupboards
By those who fear or ignore anti-retro.
While they glitter outside like gold,
They rot & decompose inside like corpses.
AIDS' copious mining can be tamed
If they open up to winds of counselling.
AIDS, if not controlled, can kill for sure,
But prevention and education can cure.

Notes on Contributors

Hussani Abdulrahim, born in 1995, is a Chemistry student at Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto. He is a budding poet and a literature enthusiast who picked interest in the art during his secondary school days. In 2016, he jointly won the Green Author Prize and co-authored *Rainbows and Fireflies*, an anthology of poems. He was longlisted for the 2017 Nigerian Flash Fiction Contest. He strongly believes that words have the power to change and heal the world.

Alabidun Sarat is an Applied Chemist who writes public commentary and has been featured in The Commonwealth Youth website and *The Punch*. She writes short stories, hopes to write a book she has no idea of, and is very much in love with horses.

Oka Benard Osahon is a creative writer from Benin City. His poetry can be found on *Kalahari Review*, *Visual Verse* and *Spilwords*. He was one of the winners of the Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest, June 2017 edition. He lives and works in Abuja.

Synthia Yieseh Achoh is an 18-year old Cameroonian. She is an aspiring writer under the mentorship of the writer and poet Nsah Mala. Her entry for the 2017 Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition in the Senior Category received a Bronze Mention. She is currently studying Arts 1 (History, French and Literature) in the second cycle of Government Bilingual High School, Nkol-Eton Yaounde.

Brigitte Poirson, a former lecturer, is an award-winning prose and poetry writer. She has published seven books in French and English. She has created, edited and published poetry anthologies in South Africa, and

organizes poetry contests with WordsRhymes&Rhythm, a Nigerian publisher, to promote young African authors.

Gloria Ronoh is a Kenyan female writer who has provided her services independently through the online forums: Wordpress and Wattpad. She is a member of the Writers' Guild Chuka in Kenya, and currently studying in Chuka University. You can learn more about her services by visiting her blog: gloriaronoh@wordpress.com.

Nsah Mala is a Cameroon writer, author of three poetry collections: *Chaining Freedom*, *Bites of Insanity*, and *If You Must Fall Bush*. His short story, "Christmas Disappointment," won a prize from the Cameroonian Ministry of Arts and Culture in 2016. His poems and other writings have appeared, or are forthcoming, in anthologies and magazines in Cameroon, Nigeria, Canada, USA, India, and France. In 2017, his French poem was used in the novel *En compagnie des hommes* by the international award-winning Franco-Ivorian writer Véronique Tadjo. He has two forthcoming collections, one in English and another in French.