



Youth Speaks

Human Rights in Verse

a collection compiled and edited by 2022 IHRAF Youth Fellow

Charlotte Yeung

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Cover image: D. Aron Raj, 9, “Kindness and Conflict”

It is with great pleasure, and not a small bit of hope (not something easy to come by these days!) that I introduce the *Youth Speaks: Human Rights in Verse* volume of poetry, compiled and edited by 2022 IHRAF Youth Fellow, Charlotte Yeung, of Indiana. Charlotte is a powerful voice for social justice and human rights, using a pen as her sword to fight against growing authoritarianism in the world; global climate change and environmental challenges; economic, racial and religious fracturing and a host of other human-made concerns and issues, against which those of good heart and strong constitution must struggle.

Charlotte, and all of the included writers (and one artist) included in this folio, are using their creative passion, heart and soul to fight this battle for all of us. A spiritual task which they welcome with all the vigor and faith reserved for youth.

My generation has not risen to the social, economic and ecological challenges that we inherited. Far from it — we have elected and supported such destructive leaders as George W. Bush and Donald Trump in the USA; Vladimir Putin in Russia; Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe; Augusto Pinochet in Argentina; Xi Jinping in China; Hosni Mubarak and then Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, and many more (too many to count) socially, environmentally, institutionally and war-mongering oppressive leaders around the globe.

Now, as we prepare to turn the mantle of leadership over to a new generation, we can only hope that they, finally, have learned from their elders' social and political mistakes, greed and general spiritual anarchy. And might do better than we have done.

Back to my original comment that “a small bit of hope is not something easy to come by.” At the very least, these young creators show a breadth of understanding, passion, commitment and open-heartedness so we might believe, perhaps, that a generation of humans has finally learned, and better days may well be ahead, for all of us.

With our great appreciation to Charlotte, and all the authors and one artist who together have lit this candle of hope for us in these times.



Tom Block
Founding Executive Director
International Human Rights Art Festival
New York, NY
July 2022

This anthology contains poems from youth as young as 4 and as old as 20. Representing over a dozen countries from Sri Lanka to Guam, these poets give their take on current issues and long-standing issues. As I read these searing works of art, I was struck by the creativity and awareness of these young writers. These 40 poems were selected out of around 150 poems due to their intense or emerging literary talent and their observations about global issues.

As an editor, I was charmed by the binary symbolism of Ruchika Rashya Bhuyan's "VIBGYOR". I was enthralled in the pop culture peppering and multilingual fusion of Jaden Lynn's "My Mixed Curls Whisper 'Sing' Cento". As a writer, I felt inspiration spark when I devoured the distinct sensory details of Jack Power's "Body Language", and the creative allusions to history in "Boudica" made me smile. In it, Jack Power of Ireland writes, "Sweet oil and hard seeds are their spoils to share/The flushed, shameful pulp thrown to the gallows." I was shocked by the simple but powerful lines written in Seojin Ahn's "Soboro in North Korea". She writes, "Back home the children chew on tree bark/And wait for the birds, which/Unlike, I, return to them/None for the better." Another poem that pulled me in was Emerson Robert-Lujo's "Six Days", where she writes a searing truth, "No one takes time to know the girl who never had a family,/Or the boy who gets beaten every single day."

These were just a few of the moments of wonder I had when I read these poems. I am thrilled and grateful to have read these pieces.

These poems are a combination of experiences, lived and inspired by topics ranging from historical colonialism and racism to mental health and modern fights for freedom. The poets in this anthology are the future, the heart of the world. And the poems they write show that they pulse with energy and excitement for the future while keeping their past in mind. It is through art that we express our hopes, our fears, and how we make sense of this world. We create meaning and affect positive change through art.

And this truth is why I write. Art hits us at a deep level that no statistic could. I hope that lighting a spark in youth will encourage them to take this power further. In reading their first forays into this fire, you will know this power too.

Charlotte Yeung
2022 IHRAF Youth Fellow
United States of America
July 2022

Demand of freedom

By Aisha Ali Al-Kuwari, Qatar

All people desire a world free of war
Looking for hope and trying to ignore
Youth shouldn't be scared
And when seen with others they shouldn't be compared
They shouldn't work for the opponent
In their childhood they just need to live the moment
In this world we should all be like brothers
And never compare us with others
Us as humans we must insist
And show others that we exist
Hiding our issues worsens the damage
But this world doesn't see it except as an advantage
Speaking publicly and having different views
Ends up with different people each one confused
Each man each women each child
Have a different thought in mind
People like us need to be granted rights
And use these to spark the world with lights
We're in a rush and we don't have time
And if we do something wrong everyone will see it as a crime
We will use our voices to shout out loud
Even if it means we will end up with a huge crowd
We are born to do this everyday
And will try to do this even if it was a hard way

No matter who you are

By Sing Yu Kasper Lok, Hong Kong

White, Black, Red, Yellow

No matter what skin You and I had

Gold, Brown, Grey, Dark

No matter what hair color You and I had

Long, Short, Tall, Low

No matter what height You and I had

Fat, Thin, Strong, Slim

No matter what size You and I had

We look different

We are diversity

No matter who you are

We are all the same

We are all equal

We are alright to do anything we want

We are Humans, and we are ALL in the world together

Soboro in North Korea

By Seojin Ahn, South Korea

Soboro, sugar and cream, flaxen crumbs
Split in half, then half again, one-fourths for the family
In the house, by the woods, where the sweet smell called the birds
But they took away the bread from me—
Empty tables and empty stomachs, left
To starve
I remember the giggles that the Soboro brought to the children,
Mixing with the bird chirps, light as bread and twice as sweet
The birds still chirp—
But now it is the cries, the ever-hungry cries, that mix with it.
So I left, left with the larks and the geese
As they flew away South
Them to summer, and I along with it
A place where there would be buildings instead of pinewood
Where the Soboro needn't be split
But the bread I now eat, long after the flight
Is bittersweet, filled with doubts
For I feast alone, chewing on soft and light Soboro
A plastic table surrounded by buildings
A foreign city where the leaves have begun to fall
Back home the children chew on tree bark
And wait for the birds, which
Unlike, I, return to them
None for the better

VIBGYOR

By Ruchika Rasha Bhuyan, India

I sat in the park, sketching the sky,
when a little boy came up to me,
and asked, "Why is your sky black and white?"
"I don't have any other colours," I answered.
"Your Mum and Dad don't give you others?"
"They say I can only have black and white."
Smiling innocently, he replied, "You can get your own colours,"
and walked away,
as I continued shading my sky
in black and white
binary
this or that
like my parents say.
But as I fill the canvas,
I ruminate on his words.
I can get my own colours.
My hands come to a halt,
leaving a third of my sky
to bathe
in
my colours.
My sky will be all hues of the rainbow.
Mom says boys don't like rainbow girls
But Mom,
I never wanted boys.
I will get my colours
and learn to love myself
the way I love the girl with blue streaks in my Chemistry class.
One day, I'll paint my sky
all the shades of the rainbow
violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red.
One day, Mom and Dad,
you'll like it too.

Ode of Saudade

By K. Vaishnavi Sai, India

Those fragile blooms,
Weep deep in the night,
Hidden away, away from light's sight
As the pained dews caress the florets,
The scene, soft and serene,
Those bygone smiles, those teary sonnets,
Repeat back in a reel.
Lullabies under the moonlight,
tracing your every flight,
I see you waning in hindsight.
Nine months within me, yet I see nothing beyond you.
Like the sunset, like the sunrise, s
Your warm sunflowers hide my blue
Even, a lone glance would suffice
As I wither,
With my wailing winds, where my sunshine lays,
my orbs closed, petals a mild trace,
The night-fallen dew weeps again,
Even when its sunrise,
My bleakness facesit, shedding pain
Yet, I still imagine those tiny eyes.
You're like a scene,
How I wish I could rewind
Smile as those petals grow, unwind.
You're like a movie, never released.
You're like a song, never sung to me
as my petals fade, like the diseased
I dream of you, solitude in glee.
Dancing to my gentle sways,
A celestial bud, too ill for an earthly cry,
The parasite's glare, too evil to pry
Your whimsical scent blurs my sense,
The end of me feels astray, in vain
The last droplets too, condense
Your tiny, listless etched tendrils, make the dews stream again

Six Days

By Emerson Robert-Lujo, USA

Six days, I was there

Six days watching children who never knew better being restrained, poked, and prodded.

Six days, watching frail, broken young boys being mistreated and abused.

Six days, watching rape victims no older than 9 held down and sedated, because it was easier.

Because no one wants the hurt kids,

No one takes time to know the girl who never had a family,

Or the boy who gets beaten every single day.

A young boy hid under the table

He's scared, he doesn't understand

He doesn't know why he can't run and play

Why he has to sit in silence for hours at a time

For the first time, in the hospital, the young boy read Winnie the Pooh.

He was amazed by the images, he'd never seen a picture book before.

"We want help" they said

And they did

But they also hurt

They hurt at night when I wake with nightmares of being restrained and having blood drawn until I faint.

They hurt when I'll never know if that young boy made it out alive.

They hurt when I shake in fear of the lightest touch

Six days of help

For a lifetime of hurt

Body Language

By Jack Power, Ireland

Citrus fruit perfume tickling the air
The broken flesh thin with browns and yellows
Sweet oil and hard seeds are their spoils to share
The flushed, shameful pulp thrown to the gallows.
Like squishy virgins recoiling sin's touch.
The binge and gorge of the hungry glutton
Who, with licked lips and a damp groin, takes much
From the Church basket, pays with the button
Of his coat, and flashes the altar boy.
Incensed and throbbing, the priests cry and cry.
The butcher saluted by a meat tray
Chokes his gorgeous pride with a plastic tie
Pounding patties and snipping sausage skin
He grunts deep and comes to a sloppy pause.
His wife makes dinner and prays for her kin.
The thing in the mirror rebels no cause
Her body only made holy by men
And bloodshed in the name of tradition
Shaping her slow tease since she bloomed at ten.
Abused by boys and left scorned by women.

Boudica

By Jack Power

For Lucy

i.

Wrought in ferrous flesh, the lightning has struck.
Now, beyond her years, she sparks genius.
Born under Draco's flame and Libra's scales,
Soon, she will outgrow skies and take down Mars.
Fear like Jericho! She can destroy you.
She dances with the Cleopatra asp,
Matching each step of the last standing man.
Her furious breath blooms on ceiling's glass.
She has not backed down, indignant Caesar.
She has fought since she bled - and will bleed yet -
She will not fold to keep the tidy home
But will see the warming waters boil dry.
Woman of the world, Thatcher, Ginsburg, Parks.

ii.

Wrists chained, I offer my palms to divine.
The God in the sky is awful and male,
He'll spot in the lines something cruel and true.
Tough, calloused visions of women in pain.
They are roughed and wronged; how will she take it?
Does she know her rank in His destiny?
A child, but she must learn the prophecy.
It will be her ruin; it must be done soon.
To her, I'll become one of the sinners;
I am, after all, but Adam's mimic.
Will she then yearn for my throaty burden?
If I could somehow lend her ease, I would.
Oh, I would give her the world if I could.

Bleeding Roses, Damaged Sun

By Martzellina Adha Putri Hendrawan, Indonesia

They only choose us
When our thorns are gone
Plucked out
Only beauty, pureness left
Perfect display of innocence
But the old tale said
Its pain that creates beauty
Like bittersweet of red wine
Like a raw diamond
Rough and husky,
This petals show our purity
But this thorns prove the real us
Come in one package,
Rose comes with its thorns,
The sun rises with its rays,
Just like us, woman
We come with our heart,
Packaged in complicated soul,
Decorated with our beauty,
Stand with our voice
Some embrace the warmth of the sun, some get burned by it
Isn't same with us?
Once you understand, you love the smell of roses despite its thorns
So why you accept this beauty, red petals,
But denying our voice?

Skyscraper

By Avni Rathi, USA

Rising water does not soak into their tailored suits
the way that it does in our frayed clothing.
They cannot hear the continuous drone of tanks
or the popping of a sniper's bullets
Over the clink of their champagne glasses
And their empty assurances of peace.
As smoke buries itself in our lungs
from a faraway fire
that infuses the city with the scent of petroleum,
They sign the newest piece of legislature,
Their fountain pens engraved with the gas company's name
That drip oil instead of ink.
As we take to the streets
and chant until our throats are raw
and our voices hoarse,
Black Lives Matter,
My Body, My Choice,
We Stand With Ukraine,
They watch with carefully masked distaste,
And deal out promises of change
With every breath.
And then they sit in their SUV's
And go back
To the penthouse at the top of the skyscraper
While the rest of us barely make it back to the lobby,
maybe the first few floors if we are lucky.
Then, they put on their freshly pressed suits,
Pour themselves a glass of bubbling champagne,
And slide their oil-slick pens into their front pockets,
Before they lock the door

trust & betrayal

By Christyn Refuerzo, USA

“if you want something done, do it yourself.”

if i want my reproductive rights, i need to be a member of the supreme court.

if i want to see this earth last longer than me, i need to be an environmental activist.

if i want my children to live past elementary school, i need to be a congresswoman.

if i want to see a girl who looks like me on my tv screen, i need to be a screenwriter.

if i want to read about someone like me, i need to write a book.

there's too much.

i can't take all of it, not on my own

but you won't have to.
we will fight with you, someone tells me.

promise? I ask.

they nod,
their fingers crossed behind their back.

a few years later, i see my world begin to burn and all my friends with it.

i am woman

By Christyn Refuerzo

i am woman,

even though my head,

no hair, no eyebrows, no lashes, may say otherwise.

i am woman,

even though i am called, *sir?* when i wear clothes that don't cling to my chest.

i am woman,

even though i am not what the male sex may perceive as "beautiful"

because i am different.

in the eyes of the law,

i am woman.

in the eyes of the law,

i am still lesser.

because...

i

am

Woman.

Where is the justice?

By Dhriti Saraogi, United Arab Emirates

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts,

It hurts me to see,

That this is what the world has now come to be.

Where is the justice?

The justice promised to me and all those women who hurt?

Why am I judged for my body or the length of my skirt?

Yet you turn a blind eye still,

When what i write and say to you today is true,

When will the evidence ever be good enough for you?

Because its not just 1 woman, 1 rape, 1 mistake,

Its 99%of us, it happens every day,

Where is the justice? The promise to keep this at bay?

Listen to me, to all of us out here,

Are you unable to see our despair?

Or are you just unable to care?

You have failed us oh justice systems of this world,

And I ask you one last time, as I look upon you in disgust,

Where is the justice? The justice you promised to us?

Where Did You Hide It?

By Amber Pineda, Guam

I think I have a voice.

But it's buried under piling accusations of "You!,"
heavy on your fat, complacent tongue
that I bet enjoys the luxuries of
freshly made Californian strawberries,
Japanese grown watermelons,
and Italian leather.

It's burned at the stake with inflammable water and water-bred fire;
sustainable gasoline and drinkable ethanol;
and eager audiences and mumbled chants.

It's thrashed with bats and nails,
elitism and its suffocating details,
and your inhales and exhales
—the same ones I feel every time you mention red
with more greed than regret,
with more bliss than misery,
with more joy than sanity.

It's taunted off a bridge with vitality
so vengeful that I can almost, just almost,
feel the extent of your anger—an anger that blossomed
from 17th century hungry mouths and pointy eyes,
with glaringly blue irises and dilated pupils,
with sacred fleece and couth pinky fingers.

It's obscured with porcelain vases and silk robes
and then tethered to a ceramic wall
where a scourge will find its lanky limbs and bare back,
trace the confines of the multi-colored blanket it calls skin,
and mar, mar, mar.

I know I have a voice,
so where did you hide it?

Women of Glass

By Aradhya Saxena, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

They told me:

Women are made of glass,
whereas men of copper steel, and brass,
women may only claim validity
while they're young, pure, and pretty.

Women only deserve respect,
based on how they look and dress,
for women are made of glass,
shallow, fake, and of no depth.

Women are made of glass, they say,
their bodies matter only when on display,
The only worth possessing be elegance and charm,
and we love a fiery woman,
as long as she's docile and does no harm.

Women are made of glass,
made to fall and shatter,
freedom compromised by bars,
without men, they do not matter.

"The baby in your womb is important!"
they cry and shout and say,
until that baby is a girl,
then they turn away.

Women are made of glass,
inanimate little objects,
tell them to hide their scars,
forgetting who bestowed them.

Being a mother is no longer a choice,
but a responsibility with no compromise,
"you'll never find a husband if you act this way,"
As though my only purpose is to be a wife someday.

he says

By Mykyta Ryzhykh, Ukraine

he says i'm from asia

i'm from europe

he says that we are aria

and I say that we are the silence of corrupt judges

it burns that tomorrow is war

and I say that millions of people in the world have already been left without a home because of the war

he says he votes in elections

I say that it is pointless and the silence of corrupt judges will win anyway

he says i'm from asia

- well, I'm from Asia and also from Africa

i'm everywhere

and we are together

SET FIRE TO THE SHADOWS

By Lohansa J. Widyaratne, Sri Lanka

We're all afraid of the dark,
And there are no candles.
Not even a match
To light a small, temporary flame.
There's no gentle light here.
But there are bonfires.
They burn bright,
Feeding off hate and dried hope.
We flock to this,
Drawn to each other's pain,
Each other's desperation.
We add more every passing day,
Even though it hurts
To stay close to it.
The flames lick sky high.
It's fueled by the sort of hate
That scorches through blood and bone.
It's a soul-deep ache
That longs for stolen happiness.
With every scream, every tear
Our very blood, and every breath we take
We will seek justice,
Will seek what is owed to us.

ON THIS THE 21ST OF APRIL

By Lohansa J. Widyaratne

A girl sits at her dying grandfather's bedside,
Holds the gnarled, wizened hand in her own
And thanks whatever God that's listening
That he lived well enough to be loved,
And that he was enough at peace to leave as such.
Another child serves Nescafé to the funeral-goers
Eyes glazed, throwing empty glances at the coffin
Behind her, that holds what was once a father,
Then a soldier, and then a sack of flesh
That now lacks all meaning to everyone except him.
One more sits on the earth, on this the 21st of April
Her back to a headstone Not bothering to hold back her tears
Seeing how everyone else's flow as freely as hers.
Candles burn by the thousand, protests lead
By those who are brave enough to stare Injustice
In the face and call bullshit.
Most days, we do not acknowledge Death. But on others
He comes knocking on our door,
Bearing a coffin, and wishes 'Happy Easter'.
The TV screen reads 'Breaking News',
When what has truly been broken
Are things that can never be repaired or replaced.
All the while the crown glistens gold,
And its wearer plays the blame game with a confidence
That only comes with the promise of victory.

Poor to be poorer.

By Esethu Sam, South Africa

Because the poor is poor even in
their minds, embraces poverty and
wear it like they wear their skin they
should remain poor.

Make lot of cash for the rich so
they can have chunks of it.

Sell their ideas because they lack
paper to bring them into existence.

Selling idea worth millions for thousands
for instance.

Their education shouldn't get them
anywhere.

Life shouldn't be any fair.

Now the rich invent things including
diseases so they can depopulate.

Because the poor got so much time to copulate.

Just like racing horses they have
blinders.

Always looking forward and never
on the sides.

Their minds inside a box.

Even when war knocks.

If they can't think for themselves,
who will?

If they won't stand for themselves,
who will?

If they don't work hard to change their status, who will?

Until they stand up for themselves

Until they work hard to break
generational curses.

The rich will only get richer

And the poor to be poorer.

LIGHT SWITCH

By Shabnam Hanna Shajeer, India

As I walked through the narrow trash-riddled lane,
Like a light switch my eyes closed,
To show roads of gold bricks and gems,
And then it was gone and again came the bane.
And the visions came again,
As I watched those people, who preached
Acceptance of all our sins, I saw them throw rocks
At those whose only wrong was to love someone of their own gender.
And it came again as I watched,
The people of my village starve,
As their fields were taken away in the name of public good,
By the ones in mansions who feast their way through the night.
It came again as I heard, when a group,
Who protested against abortions, saying it was murder,
Rape a child of ten,
And killed the poor soul.
And it came once more,
When I was pushed outside a place,
For being of another race, I saw,
My race employed to clean waste and to serve.
These visions may not come again,
But as I saw them, I thought,
If it was only them who could do what they want,
Aren't we human too?

Rants of a young black woman

By Vimbai Zisengwe, Zimbabwe

I am everything they hate

I am a woman and I am black.

My skin, a constant reminder that soil is more fruitful than snow.

My womb, a reminder that I am a need and not a want.

My dark skin, a magnet for crime,

As if daylight robbery never existed.

My sexuality, a crime I have been persecuted and executed for,

As if my thighs are posters that say, "TOUCH ME, FEEL ME, I WANT IT,"

As if my body has a price of free for all.

I am Black and I am a woman,

And I am tired of both.

For even those who come from me,

Seem to not want me.

For the pains of my labour never seem to be grateful.

How can I be hated by my own fruit?

However, hate is better than the pain of burying my own seedling before it can bloom.

The pain of the race has overcome the joy of the victory;

For even when first I will always be second best.

But, when I am finally on the podium,

I can see the fear in their eyes;

For my victory is the first step in ending their tyranny

Deny Her, False King

By Jaden Lynn, USA

Deny my words, the White Man laid my bountiful mountains
on their back and left me barren with hunger and red tear stains.

This child you tore from me like the other riches of my womb
jubilation in your victory, a victory I freely gave, for imitating the lamb
you dreamed, I let you reap the precious jewels beneath my terrains.

Build cities of concrete, a paradise where the flecked fountains
are all my brown girl will see when the old talk of newborn fawns attains.

How do you love her White Man? What else does she know of your catacomb
then sweltering heat and a quieting world where birds cannot sing cinquains?

Deny my words.

Tell her what we both know: that she maintains

being birthed witness to destruction. This foretold when my placenta remains
crumbled on the surface, decaying for the profit of no growth, a tomb.

Deny my words.

My Mixed Curls Whisper ‘Sing’ Cento

By Jaden Lynn

The brand-new Jordans, the crisp white-tee, the diamonds in his ears.

When sleep overpowered me, I dreamed of them - dreamed I was again in Saratoga...

The time I dropped your almost body down. She very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. The mosquitoes made sure of that. Woke up today feeling the way I always do. In summary: the world is currently one big “Previously on Homeland” recap that plays on repeat. Public visitation, we met at Borders.

Putain, comment vais-je rentrer à la maison ? Have some fire. Be unstoppable. Be a force of nature. Am I lying if I said I ‘read’ an audiobook?

The summer is made for stoop sitting, and since it’s the last week before school starts, Harlem is opening its eyes to September.

We sang my favorite “Lapa, Lapa, Lapa, on My Shoulder,” and, eager to please, I sang at the top of my lungs.

Don’t stop spinning for me, Black angel, but I’ve stopped spinning for you.

What She Is

By Jaden Lynn

They say your body not yours,
but it used to be mine.
They say that color is different,
but it used to be fine—
when biracial was kinky
for them old rich men.
When feminine was slinky,
a natural compromise,
for power without sex?
Who wants just power
without the domination complex
of abusing girls in bed?
I am shackled by the law, so
now you got what you desire:
state owned pussy for babies.
Go ahead laugh. My rights are satire.

An Eloquent Ramble

By Jiayi Shao, Canada

–History lingers until the lesson is learned.
Conspiracies flutter til the truth is uncovered.
I spent nights trying to piece together a narrative,
But how does one make sense of lives
disrupted because of hatred
that went unnoticed til someone
started the commotion and
Hijacked your lives–
How they lied,
told you: arbeit macht frei,
assigned you numbers & stripes, confined you
to eternal dilemmas between
Forgiving to move on or
Haunted by memories you refuse to absolve.
Justice became impossible when they
Laid out their lies on tables and invited
People to pick their own poison;
Mesmerized them with visions
of a golden sunset,
Then denied how they
manipulated psyches and
gave them belonging in the mass killing.
I know it's upsetting, and
that it still hurts,
when you wake up from nightmares reminded of
the attempts at erasure, wondering
when it would be over,
and how you got conscripted to a war you can never win.
But stop finding scapegoats:
Pathology, politics or the devil—
Acknowledging the darkness of humanity is how we
Rescue the future and turn a new leaf.
I wish we can take back the atrocities they've committed, but
Please, don't blame the devil for this.

THE VOICE OF THE TREE

By Mendy Lubisi, South Africa

The voice of the tree probably sounds black
Strange, color doesn't have sound
Listen,
Black sounds beautiful rhythms and blues
melodies that will live rent free in your head
But never heard
When Black said
I get it, I never lose to put a finger down
I matter
Even when I'm gunned down like my history
I switch accents in emergencies when they ask what shade I wear
Once they listen
They'll think I'm civilized enough
To not put up a front
Strong black man, woman
When my accent proves weakness
My tongue learnt to curl to their words
Erasing my language
In the midst of insulting my name
They'll think I'm human enough to breathe
My neck have no knee on it
In lies that
I resist
My blackness is King
My queens hold their afros like crowns
Even when they cut it telling them it's policy
Where was the policy when they whitewashed my history
When black sounded strange
From whoops and whips till I was deaf
Even to my own voice when it sounded
Hear the African tree.

Civilized

By Charlotte Yeung, USA

Stained glass bleeds rainbow
light onto brown eyes. Barbarian, they
call us as their men burn our homes
and throw our ancestors into their fires.
robed men glare as they point at fat
books full of mythology and say
there is god. He is yours now. I rip
my voice to shreds singing hymns
of an invader's gods. I baptize my eyes
with moonlit tears, mourning more ritual
than the strange words I speak for
the thin broth, the itchy blanket.
Ye Ye, Po Po, where are you now?
Your incense is scattered, your altars
cracked. Suns sink into smashed
riverbank as i cut my heritage into
scraps, shoving the mangled bits they
like into caricatured stories and food.
Ge Ge, Ma Ma, are you ok? They said
blood is thicker than water but this man
swathed in gothic history claims to know
my real Father. Glory to the Lord, booms
the priest as we sit hunched over little
pocket books of words, breaking language
and tradition for a pittance of bread, a sip of
water. They tell me: what good is an old tomb
when the children starve, what good is an
ancestor when the world burns? Now
we ground it all to dust and inhale the dead,
a last gasp before slipping into the stiff
conjugations and clasped hands of Sunday
School.

Alien

By Charlotte Yeung

Their land was taken
in a blaze of guns and horses-
Aliens in metal
who demolished their people
like they were stalks of
frail leaves on a branch.
Alien descendants took over
their homes, culled
Their land and people.
This is ours, Aliens say,
bringing up lawyers with
paper contracts all to
say that they must fight
on their terms in plush
rooms with carpets,
judged by Aliens.
They watch Their homes
diminish and a language not
Their's spread-they must work
now but They are only given the
worst jobs. They're herded into
derelict camps and schools and
dead land with hardly
anything but a trail of tears.
They watch kidnapped land
worked to death. worked until the
weather and land rebels-
blazing fires and poisoned water.
too bad it doesn't make it to the Aliens.
They feel the wrath, homes the
first to be sacrificed to the land's
tearful floods and hungry fires.

Happy as a Clam

By Charlotte Yeung

I'm happy as a clam,
Forever watching my children die
In wars for wealth
Against kingdoms of pearls.
They journey across seas,
Pearls of fear in their mouths
As they fall and swallow sand.
Blood will stain their sides,
Then they will sink into
Dark depths.
And only their families will remember
All the memories they shared.
For they will be buried
In unmarked graves,
Discarded and used.
Just another soldier
In a war for nothing
But old mens' pride.

Walk with me

By Sohaib Mirza, UK

Walk with me

Through the past

To see the glory of war

To see the ugliness of war

To see how 'we' are erased from history

To see how 'we' are exposed to discrimination

Historical records and witness testimonies expose the truth

In deeply buried archives

Tell a story

Where the stench is present

Until

It is addressed

It is recognised

It is acknowledged

Still no formal apology is forthcoming

A shift in thinking is in need

An honest conversation

To an old debt

To all its former colonial subjects

It is time not to walk by my side

But to offer that hand of friendship.

A recipient of the Victorian Cross

By Sohaib Mirza

His name is barely spoken

His name is barely acknowledged

Both in his own country

Or in the UK

Yet through his bravery

His courage

His conduct

He risked his life

To return

To stop the German Army from reaching vital ports

To be treated in a hospital in Brighton

To be awarded the Victoria Cross by King George V

His name is Khudad Khan

1 of 3 men to come from Pakistan

A British Colony

To receive the Victoria Cross

I salute these men

I salute their stories

I request

That their names are not erased from the history books I read.

Theatre at the End of the World

By Harsimran Kaur

—after Borys Humenyuk

My sister and I went to the theatre to watch a movie about softness
we ate French fries clad in red, drank chocolate milkshake
said hi to the boys in the back and maybe we smiled at them too
that I don't remember because we were trying to think of daisies
through our fresh breaths high on mint

//

My sister and I know that somewhere in Mariupol they prepare for war
and bomb shelters and faces sunburnt on asphalt
and heat visible through every pore of the body and “shoot a crying baby”
and “impregnate their women” and “make them hungry”
and “let them study under the pitter-patter of drunk shells” and “rip their prom dresses”
and “vacate the centre of their necklaces” and “pull out their daisies”

//

My sister and I read The Forest Song in which Lukash falls in love
with Mavka¹

, they build a peaceful home in the end
she disappears into the snow while Lukash's smile freezes on his face
at that, my sister gets sad so I hug her, assure her it's not cold outside

//

My sister and I eat dinner like a king dance in the moonlight like a queen
read each other poetry like a prince wear our plum dresses like a princess

//

My sister and I get drunk on conversations the moon stumbling
on its way to the North descending into nothingness giving space to the sun

//

My sister and I hear the distant trains swaying through the black night delivering night mail
1 A female spirit in Ukrainian mythology. The spirits known by this term represented the souls of
girls who had died
unnatural tragic or premature deaths, particularly unchristened babies.

//

My sister and I dissolve our words and we become unspeakable

//

My sister and I rewatch the movie about softness over and
over and over again until the theatre explodes like a burning heart

//

My sister and I clean our weapons

I Wish for Freedom

By Alex Xu

Everyday I dream of taking three steps across the border,
But I still scream because I will never be a New-Yorker.
I have seen my friends die for attempting to cross the DMZ,
Into a completely different world, with freedom and breeze.
I see cranes and planes, flying around in the air,
If I tried to be free like them, I would be in fear.
I dream that one day I could be free,
And tell the story of how I came to be.
I wish I could escape a world of propaganda,
And live in South Korea.
I wish my son did not have rickets,
And be able to jump like crickets.
I wish we weren't trapped in a cocoon,
Ruled under by Kim Jong Un.

//...& it was a night of crimson red//

By Mahbubat Kanyinsola Salahudeen, Nigeria

"On the night of 20 October 2020, at about 6:50 pm members of the Nigerian Army opened fire on unarmed End SARS protesters at the Lekki toll gate in Lagos State, Nigeria". _ Wikipedia

bullets, blood & death

they were only on a quest for freedom a quest for a new beginning. clouds of change gather to fill voids, voids we have longed lived with. the truth is in my country everything

that left & did not return is lifeless like the tsunami of young people who nipped my budding tongue, who taught me to speak & say out loud _ "A luta Continua" . today

makes a year they rolled through the space between highrises, sidewalks across the nation sing the anthem of youth, bow to the flag of valiant comrades fed up with

excuses & void promises. on placards were pleas for a future, banners scream of a nation in flames burning to ashes & seconds later, beneath the split milk of the moon

there was an ambush, the bullets sneaked through the night like sequins nested a home in the succulent blankets on their bodies. life quivered in their mouths then falls off their

lips then breaks into swabs, into shards. i don't know the feeling of reminisce of grief but I feel naked ever since the minister of disinformation said "no casualties were

recorded". of other places i do not know but here, every light is a flickery night & being bereaved to the sonority of bullets is no uncommon drama. where we come from, hope

is like a silly child always pinning for the impossible.

"everything that left and did not return is lifeless"

_ Ololade Akinlabi Ige's "Adieu"

The Syrian Refugee

By Eman Aldajah, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

I don't understand
How a heart that loved so deeply
Can feel so empty
I don't understand
How a country you once called your own
Can feel so strange
I don't understand
How the world you once thought was warm
Can be so cold
I am invisible
To feeling and emotion
The whole world quizzical
I just want to drown in this ocean
I just don't understand
How the most important people in your life
Can be gone by a flash in the sky
I don't understand
How everything that made you who you are
Can disappear and change at the same time
I feel like nothing
A leaf in the wind
My eyes now blind
To the colors of the world
I don't understand
How a life can once mean something
And then mean nothing
My hands can't seem to grasp
The key to the door we all think we know
My hands can't seem to clasp
The meaning of the world
You see, what I really can't grasp
What I fail to understand
Is what once was a beautiful world
Can become your worst nightmare, so fast
At the light signature
Of one man.

The Mauritanian

By Eman Aldajah, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

I am a polisher, so precise and delicate
I am a driver, so fast and patient
I am a floor scrubber, so strong and careful
I am a builder, so smart and stable
I am as free as a fish in a whale,
Swallowed and eaten by life and its worries
I am making a living while I'm dead
I am unbreakable and broken
I tell people the air feels heavier
The sun feels colder
I tell them the world lost its colors
Yet people keep painting
Pictures of lives not their own
I tell them that it's hard to do everything
While feeling like nothing
I tell them that a caged bird can't fly
That a snail can only get so far
That a slave is worth nothing
And that wishes don't work on stars
In this place of hypocrisy
Because of what makes us who we are
The color of our skin
Or the money we make, they say
That determines
Whether we have a soul or not
Whether we live or die
So they continue to take
What little they can
Of a crushed person's soul
Until one day,
Our broken voices
Become too loud
To ignore

Palestinian Olive Tree

By Eman Aldajah, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

As the cursed bullets whiz past the blood-stained sky,
And where the crimson- wounded sun burns with every battle cry,
Where the air is filled with blood-curdling sounds,
An olive tree stood firm on the ground
Where the bombs are fired away
Where the screams and shrieks of agony lay
There, in the sweet land where bravery is found,
An olive tree stood clutching the ground
Even upon death day and night
They're going to resist, they're going to fight
For God and hope truly did bound
Where the olive tree stood firm on the ground
As the night ends and the flag rises,
And trust me, upon all the sunrises,
There, in the holy, sacred land
Their strong roots will always continue to stand
For that brave tree in the distance that stood aground,
Did more, much more than just stand firm on the ground

Capital

By Marina McPhail, USA

The colors of capital:

Red, black and blue

African blood and bruise

Injustice woven into the very fabric and fibers

Of whiteness

Capitalistic brightness

Chrome, production, work hard

Alone

These bodies

Removed from humanity

Are just looked at as commodities

Bodies

Run, hum, strum the strings

Of this thing

This machine, this beast, this apparatus

Securing white status

Color stays dominated, subjugated, replaceable, and

Faceless

Designed to stay this

Way forever

Your purpose is production

And social function is

Obedience to greedy

Fat fingers

That don't want, they need

More green

So please

Ship them in, strip them

Of their clothes and hope

Burn, steal, kill, and grope

Those filthy wanting hands

Into the bleeding heart of the land

And build your machine

With cogs that have heartbeats, and elbows and knees

Squeeze every drop of profit from these

Bones until they drop
And even then don't stop
No pause on the job
Persisting and seething
No time for breathing
But what a beautiful scene
Look around, my son
The American dream.

The Queen Inside

By Dinuli Premarathna, Sri Lanka

If they lock you in a cage,
Seething with rage,
Don't let the bars rust,
Do what you must,
Brush off the dust,
And look into your heart,
See the queen who resides inside.
She's a phoenix who falls, but always gets up,
And a lioness who never gets beat up.
When the road gets rough, lift your chin up.
Ignite the fire inside.
Let the tears flow,
Or let your smile glow.
Your life is yours to decide.
And nobody else's besides.
It's a choice of your own,
Not to let your voice drown.
Shine like a star in the night.
Give rise to the queen inside.

The star

By Sebastian Watson, England

I own no beauty, give no shine
born of poison, lust and wine,
a body dark 'like death's cold lips'
dirt beneath soft mortal hips.
Innocence wasted on the living
this is a crime of no forgiving.
Unextraordinary i remain
a broken tool, an empty name
no place upon this heartless earth
with soundless cries,
those tear stained eyes,
a shattered soul, a broken heart
I take my place among the stars.

Born with Fire

By Aanansha Olemyaan, India

Born in a burning house
In a burning world
Born to turn to ashes
But I fight and fight
And dream shall I
Then you hunt me down
Sell my pride to satisfy yours
They say
“Don’t play with fire
You shall be burned”
But what about the fire within
The fire that's been blasting bullets
Waiting
Struggling to burn through
Cut my limbs and finish me off
But that fire still shall live
If not in me
Then in another of my own
One day it’ll burn those walls down
Walls you made to keep us mute
The flames you created to slaughter us
They’ll soon crush your conceit
Our kind shall never rest
The fire won’t just burn out
Until you hand us all we earned
You’ve cursed us enough
Born in a burning house
I believed the world was on fire
But I won’t turn to ash
I am hope
I am desire
I am the future
And I deserve a bright tomorrow

Contributor Biographies

D. Aron Raj, 9

Aron is a grade 5 student in Maharashtra, India. His piece, Kindness and conflict, is the cover of this anthology.

Here is his description of his work:

Nature is always a solved puzzle. We humans because of our ignorance, unawareness, greediness, making our earth an unsolved puzzle. Outcome of the conflict is the worst, that it even turns the life of an individual or the whole world including other creatures in the world, like animals, plants, renewable, non-renewable resources. In my artwork I had explained the sorrow of a child who is thinking about the solved puzzle of nature, how it turned to an unsolved puzzle. Fighting between countries for superior power, boundary issues, these all can be stopped if humans aren't selfish, arrogant. We children are more affected physically & mentally and our future will be a puzzle. Conflicts are there everywhere, from tiny to huge. The awareness has to be started from the house, then we can solve problems between villages, states, countries etc. kindness, unity and sharing are the hope of life.

Aisha Ali Al-Kuwari, 17

Aisha is a high-school graduate and a future engineer that hopes to create a change in the world. She was born in Qatar. Growing up in a highly-educated family she has always been taught the importance of having a sound education. Her plan is to pursue graduate studies in Engineering at Texas A&M university. She is an SDG-goals ambassador and a Sustainability-and-Recycling ambassador. She was awarded multiple times for her remarkable achievements.

Sing Yu Kasper Lok, 4

Sing Yu Kasper Lok is a 4-year-old living in Hong Kong, China. He enjoys reading, calculating mathematics, playing piano, doing musical theater and drama.

Seojin Ahn, 18

Seojin Ahn is a high schooler and young bilingual writer that aspires to empower the underrepresented with words. As a proud South Korean, she shares her unique insight and views on global issues through the medium of writing. She is a columnist for a Korean business magazine CEO&, and publishes a journal for her club Voice Us, aiming to raise awareness of human rights issues in Korea.

Ruchika Rashya Bhuyan, 16

Ruchika is an Indian 12th grader studying at the Dhirubhai Ambani International School, Ruchika Rashya Bhuyan is a teen author from Guwahati, Assam. She authored her first-ever coming-of-age novel, 'Until It Rains Again' at the age of fifteen. Her work has been previously featured on popular Instagram-based platforms like 'The Scribbled Stories', 'The Untold Tales', and 'The Amateur Writers'. She also pursues her passion for writing by contributing occasional articles to 'The Sentinel', a local daily in Assam.

K. Vaishnavi Sai, 15

K Vaishnavi Sai was born in Hyderabad in October 2006. Two of her works, 'The Starry Night' and 'The Black Rose' have been published in the anthologies of 'AIFEST, Volume II-Poetic musings on Mind and Melancholy' and 'Unbowed Muliebrity: The Womanhood.' She has bagged gold medals for her paintings from Konaseema Chitra Kala Parishad. Despite the competitive acknowledgments, her fondness for impressionism and Charles Dickens' works remains to be her most prized accomplishment.

Emerson Rubert-Lujo, 12

She has lived in Florida her whole life, and lives with Clinical depression and anxiety. Last year, she was hospitalized for 6 days at a hospital. This stay taught her a lot, but it was also painful to be a witness to such a corrupt system. In her writing, she aims for the uncomfortable and hopes to leave all who read her work with something to think about.

Jack Power, 19

Jack Power is a 19-year-old student from county Clare, Ireland. He is studying law, criminology and criminal justice in NUI Galway. He has a keen interest in poetry, and short story writing and is currently working on his first novel.

Martzellina Adha Putri Hendrawan, 21

"A ray of sunlight". That's how people describe her. She's Martzellina Adha Putri Hendrawan, an 21 y.o undergraduate student from an entrepreneurial university in Indonesia. Writing and reading have always been her hobbies. Her soul wants to stand for those who deserve the warmth of summer and the coldness of winter equally as others. A delicate yet passionate, bravest little girl. That's me, the sun who loves to shine through everyone's darkness.

Avni Rathi

She has just finished her freshman year of high school, and she likes to read and draw in her free time. She plays tennis and likes to hang out with her family and play with her cousins. Her favorite classes at school are history and english, and she also does debate. She has always enjoyed writing, especially essay writing and poetry, and she is glad she got this opportunity to write about something she is passionate about.

Christyn Refuerzo, 18

Christyn Refuerzo (she/her) is an eighteen-year-old Filipino-American writer from the San Francisco Bay Area and student at Sarah Lawrence College. She is passionate about using her writing to create more opportunities for representation of Asian Americans in the media and as a catalyst for change. She has been published in Wind-Up Mice Journal, The Weight Journal, and Rewritten Mag. Visit her website here and follow her on Twitter @christynr412.

Dhriti Saraogi, 13

Dhriti Saraogi is a student at Our Own English High School Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). She is deeply involved in competitions such as the Global Social Leaders held by the United Nations and the Voices Of the Future Generation writing competition. She is an avid speaker and writer, especially when concerning women rights and social issues. She strongly believes that everyone can make a difference.

Amber Pineda, 15

Amber Pineda is a high school sophomore in Dededo, Guam. She currently attends the Academy of Our Lady of Guam and is interested in astronomy and engineering. She has won third place in the Energy and Inventions Category in the 44th Islandwide Science Fair and was selected as Ambassador of the IAAC to Guam. However, she bears a profound interest in writing and art and enjoys creating short stories and poems in her free time.

Aradhya Saxena, 15

Aradhya, a writer from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) seems to have a few things she likes to do, and even fewer she's good at, raging being one of them. She's also fascinated by the human brain and its psychology, along with reading and sometimes writing. She also has a concerning tendency to hoard things.

Mykyta Ryzhykh, 20

She is a Ukrainian writer published in the journals "Dzvin", "Ring A", "Polutona", "Rechport", "Topos", "Articulation", "Formaslov", "Colon", "Literature Factory", "Literary Chernihiv", on the portals "Literary Center" and "Soloneba", in the "Ukrainian literary newspaper", the almanac "Syaivo".

Lohansa J. Widyaratne, 19

Lohansa J. Widyaratne is a poet from Colombo, Sri Lanka. Lohansa's life revolves around two things- family and books. Being an only child, Lohansa had plenty of alone time and got into the habit of reading books to remedy her loneliness. Most people say that she lives under a book-shaped rock. Lohansa started writing for the same reason she started to read; to escape, and to make a safe space to store my thoughts. She hopes that her poetry becomes someone's refuge, someone's home, and someone's motivation for good.

Esethu Sam, 19

Esethu lives in Cape Town with a mom, two siblings, and a niece. Esethu writes poetry and wants to change their home situation. Esethu is trying to publish their first poetry anthology but cannot because there's no money.

Shabnam Hanna Shajeer, 15

He is an Indian writer who loves music, reading and to eat. He was born into a wonderful family, one where his parents work hard to give him a good life. He picked up his first book at 4 and has not stopped since, dreaming of becoming an English teacher to impart the wondrous world of literature to others. He wishes that one day, the world would be kinder to everyone.

Vimbai Zisengwe, 17

She is a writer from Zimbabwe. She is an upper at Arundel school and loves her family, God, and reading fiction. She is currently very passionate about improving people's lives.

Jaden Lynn, 18

Jaden Lynn is a biracial poet with an unhealthy obsession for sour patch kids. Pursuing her B.A. in creative writing at SUNY Brockport, she has been recognized as a finalist in the Presidential Poetry Contest. Her work has appeared in multiple issues of Jigsaw, St. John Fisher's Angles, and collections of Talented among others. Besides her part-time passion for teaching, she now works as the editor-in-chief of Jigsaw magazine.

Jiayi Shao, 18

Jiayi Shao is a youth writer based in Toronto, Canada. Her work has been previously acknowledged by The Louisville Review and TeenInk, among many others. She loves capturing the often unnoticed beauties through her poems. In addition to writing, she likes to wander with an inherent curiosity that has brought her many unique experiences (and sometimes asking questions to the point of annoyance). She is currently in Boston and quite busy being inspired by life.

Mendy Lubisi, 16

Mendy Lubisi loves exploring her different passions. So far, what she's learnt about herself is that she loves drawing, poetry, podcasts and crime stories. She is an Imagine scholar, someone who believes in kindness, making the world interesting and safe. She's hoping to have an organization like the FBI or CIA for South Africa so that the country with a very high crime rate can have somewhere to rely on for safety and peace.

Charlotte Yeung, 19

Charlotte Yeung is an American best-selling children's book author with 50+ publications on platforms ranging from the New York Times to Carnegie Hall. She is the 2022 Indy Youth Poet Laureate. She is a 2022 IHRAF Youth Fellow and editor of this anthology. She is studying Political Science with concentrations in International Relations and Environmental Policy at Purdue University. Her creative and lobbying work touches on human rights and global social issues such as climate change, mental health, and war. She can be found @cmyeongg

Sohaib Mirza, 18

He is a full time student in the UK, hoping to go to university. He likes football, listening to music and reading.

Harsimran Kaur, 17

Harsimran Kaur (she/her) is a recently graduated high school student from India. She works as an editor-in-chief for The Creative Zine. Her creative writing pieces have appeared in Jellyfish Review, Milk Candy Review, Big Windows Review and elsewhere. She is an alumna of the Adroit Journal Mentorship Program, The Stanford Daily High School Journalism Workshop and The Common Young Writers Program. She likes clementines, Garamond and Moleskine journals.

Alex Xu, 13

Alex Xu is a thoughtful and creative 13-year-old kid who is currently attending 7th grade at the Landon School in Maryland. Alex has always promoted fairness, and respect among his friend group since a young age. His interest in social equality and human rights grew stronger in middle school after he read books like “Animal Farm” and Alex participated in Landon School’s DEI activities. Alex wishes to study World Politics in college. Alex enjoys playing golf, soccer, and cello during his leisure time.

Mahubat Kanyinsola Salahudeen, 18

She is a genre-bending writer from South Western Nigeria who has a great interest in fictional prose and confessional poetry. Her works have featured in several magazines including Spillwords magazine, Brittle Paper, Ice Lolly, Arts Lounge, SprinNG journal, Litround journal, Confetti and elsewhere. She is a winner of IHRAF 2021 Creators of Justice Literary Award, a Girl Up 2021 Sports Scholarship Fund winner and a IHRAF 2022 Youth Fellow. She is on Twitter @SMahubat

Eman Aldajah, 20

Eman Aldajah is a Palestinian/Jordanian born in Chicago, U.S.A who is currently living in the UAE. As a 20-year-old poet passionate about human rights, Eman uses writing as a way to convey stories that need to be told and aspires to become an influential author one day. Eman created her own YouTube channel dedicated to sharing original poetry about human rights. Apart from reading and writing, Eman likes to spend her free time with family, ice skating, baking, and learning new languages.

Marina McPhail, 20

She grew up outside of San Francisco in one of the most diverse and most segregated counties in the state. The following poem serves to capture her constantly-evolving understanding of the tangle of race relations, media, sex, gender, and history in America. She doesn’t know where her place should be in this fight. But she is curious and young and ready.

Dinuli Premarathna, 16

Dinuli Dihansa Premarathna is from Sri Lanka. As a great lover of reading and writing, she is interested in entering this competition as it seeks to cultivate feelings of justice and empowerment in youthful minds.

Sebastian Watson, 16,

He is an English poet who has always found poetry an important and effective way of expressing how he feels about things. His poem 'the star' is important since it is about the ignorance that arrives with crimes against black people such as described in the poem assault, drugging and murder. His poetry always highlights a darker side to things and he jumped at the opportunity to write about something with a darker yet important tone. He wishes to be a published author when he grows up but right now he is hoping to do a paramedics course at college.

Aanansha Olemyaan, 14

She is a student in India. She hopes to be a writer someday.