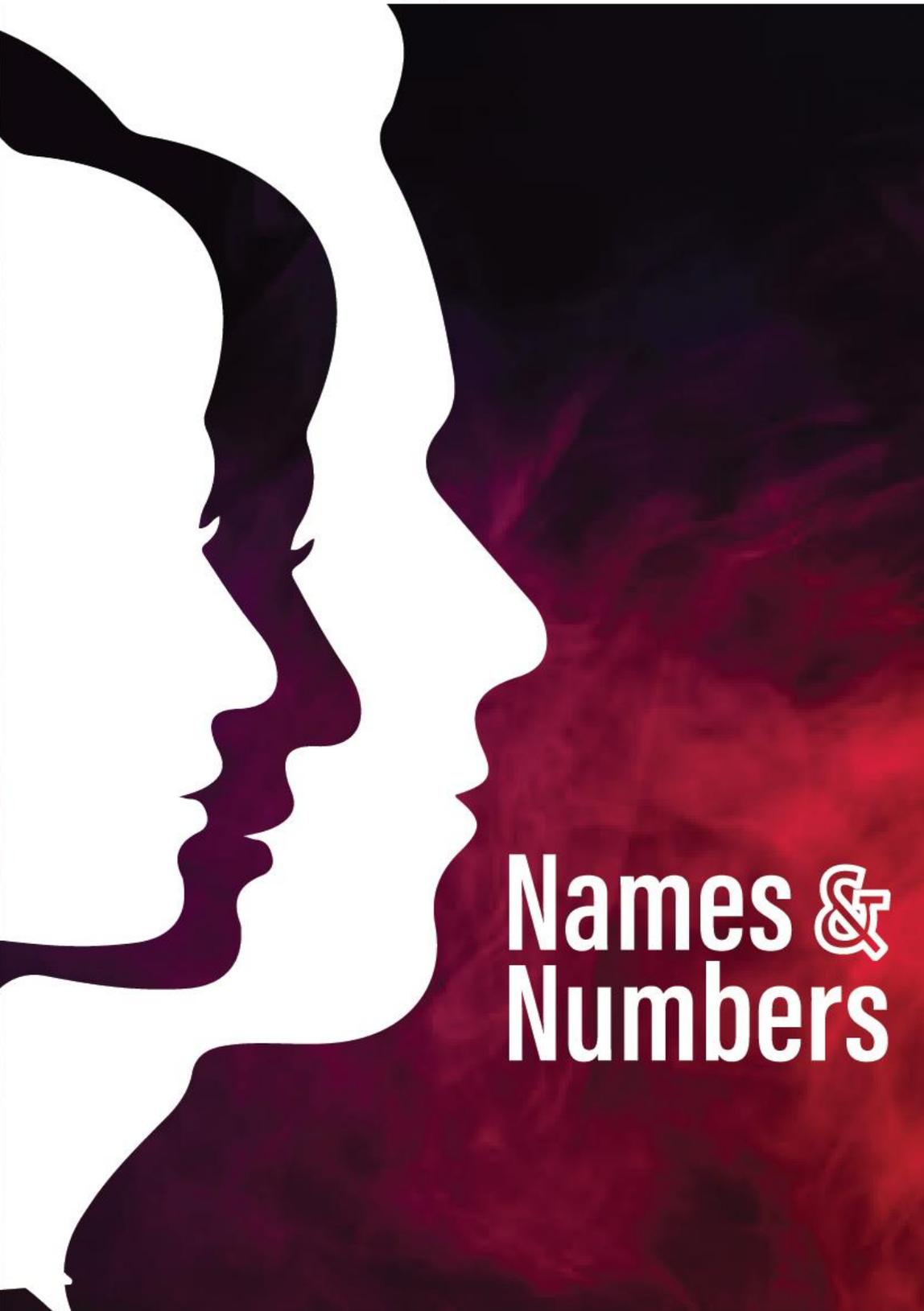


Opeyemi Oso



# Names & Numbers

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*Poems*

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INKspired

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*for Alexandra*

## PRAISE FOR “NAMES & NUMBERS”

Ope crutches on the permission of memory, history, and lived experiences to construct a book that not only mirrors him but also other people emerging from his socio-cultural context. This book is a passage to the visage of existence.

—**Pelumi Salako**, *Journalist and writer*.

“The sing-song of Opeyemi Oso’s voice reminds me of a river— its craftiness, how it bends around boulders in its ever graceful sway. Language opening into language, Opeyemi offers us an eclectic collection— darkness and light breathing in their glories. Radiantly fantastic debut!”

—**Kolawole Samuel Adebayo**

*Author, “INVOCATIONS” (APBF & Akashic Books, 2021)*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
—The Waste Land, T. S. ELIOT

I have queried myself at the conception of this book—should a collection of poetry be my first published work? For someone whose first love in writing is fiction, how do you pour your heart and emotions out for readers to drink? It is simple. Poetry is almost spiritual—you write your truth in metaphors for the initiate minds.

In the lines of T. S. Eliot as stated above, it is almost as though a poet is at once a seer when his quid or pen kisses virgin papyrus or paper. It is as though s/he is blessed with vision for centuries or millennia after. Penning this note in April has been as cruel as it is exciting—just as “mixing memory with desire”. But we have to get out of our comfy beds if we must tell our story. For as a contemporary African writer puts it— “The minute we fall silent, someone will fill the silence for us.”

This collection of poems is as personal to the poet as it should be to the reader. After all, even though I do not write for everyone, poetry speaks about everyone. I intend that within the lines laced with elements of philosophy, eros and both intrapersonal and interpersonal politics, and war, readers can pick a reflection of self and society.

The book title —Names & Number is from a rhetoric last line from one of the poems of the same title. It is a pointer to one of the core reasons why I write— a good book must aside from educating or entertaining allow the reader the luxury of reasoning, about his/her identity and the society.

In all, as above, this book is intended to be spring rain to stir readers' emotions, to evoke love and tenderliness, as well as touch nerves to stimulate healing. This asks the question—”is poetry medicine?” —I do not so presume, for that is to rob a physician of his training and cunning. But if I could point a patient the way to go, or as Emily Dickinson wrote, “stop one heart from breaking... or help one fainting robin unto his nest again. I shall not live (write) in vain.”

**ỌpéyẹmíỌsó,**  
**Ilé-Ifẹ̀,**  
**April, 2021.**

*I have walked the long road to freedom...  
I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill,  
one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.*

—Nelson Mandela

## We Need New Names

we need new names  
say, dawn is ne'er enough to tell  
our dreams—  
the air, too thin to be bothered  
with the weight of our worries

a city of ruins remains of a boy's hope  
a happy ending is not always true  
of fairy tales—mere comedies of a sad story  
—a tragedy.

we need new names  
for dawn, morning and whatever  
births fragile aspirations  
nightmares are broken truths  
too scared, too scarred to make it  
till daybreak.

a boy is many things but his name  
call him Achilles, named after the strength of a thousand  
stallions, and falls to decay at the heel  
what is our memory? a two-edged blade  
to cut old wounds.

we need new names  
for this body, that shoulders  
responsibility like an *okrika* shirt  
turn too swift, you are reminded  
why poverty is a bad name.

## **A Mockery of Logic**

We asked God for a sign  
And got nothing

Silence is omnipotent  
A thousand answers and none

Faith has to be blind  
—a mockery of logic.

O! that thou rend the heavens  
Out of season, and confound the wise

We seek God in boundless darkness  
Infinite possibilities upon void.

**“Could my tears forever flow?”**

you breakdown  
God’s masterpiece into  
a stream of emotions

wrestle with God  
—a melee for that which  
is unknown but needed  
a pile of supplications

broken masterpieces  
jagged prayers

let the heavens rend.

## Currency of Our Youth

When we say, we are tired of the truth  
We mean, dredge our shallow understanding  
You may yet be ready for deeper thing—

When we say, lie is the currency of our youth  
We mean, bring a pouch full of truth  
You'll go empty.

When we say, we are tired of dealing in truths  
We mean, we have weighed the balance  
And every time we ask for change  
May be with our last breath.

## The Happiest People

we could almost believe it  
—the greatest paradox of our lives  
once set upon a lofty dream  
overflowing with saintly milk  
and kingly honey  
till a friendly war asunder rein  
our brotherhood  
here, here, we now believe it—the reality of  
our everyday cackles  
in the self-adulation of poverty  
—unsavoury sweetness of mucus on a sixties' baby lips  
the almost impossible dream that this giant  
here snores, to wake up a laughter  
—the joke had been made  
but I am not laughing.

*I spit  
honey out of my mouth:  
nothing is second best  
after the sweet of eros.*

—Hilda Doolittle

**Love is a Flower**

*—you must care too much  
or you don't at all.*

You, my love, are a wild beauty  
man's care or not  
nature tends her own  
—tender love in a lawn,  
carefree blossoms  
in no man's land.

Love is a flower  
—rose or sunflower  
Prickly or kind  
a flower is a find,  
one for every kind.

## Jello

I know things that soften you  
& I am jealous of them

water— how it licks every edge and hole.  
baptism, sanctification— how you are made whole

touch— you become jello on the palate,  
un-mouthed prayers seeking liberty beneath  
your throat.

if I ever give voice to my doubts,  
take me for a bath, remind me of  
water— how ceaselessly we flow— god and a  
trident, through myths and time

touch me where it's soft,  
teach me soft words like  
kiss, bliss & the taboo  
no one mentions but us.

## African Child

dear African child,

come, sit at the bosom of the moon  
listen as the crickets flute at your  
crescent buttocks

*omo eni 'ii sedi bebere*  
*ka fileke sidi omo elomii*

I will tell you  
Why you lust for the sea  
I know why the deep calls to your soul  
(dance)

freedom within you craves the waves  
like your ancestors who traded chains  
for the drown

I know why mother beaded your waist  
—to set the world on fire  
but the Atlantic isn't enough  
to quench your desire

*omo eni 'ii sedi bebere*  
*ka fileke sidi omo elomii*

when the drum begs you dance  
kick away at dust  
& eyes that lust  
after the “oil well” at the confluence  
of your luring thighs

sway as the wind.

## Things I Never Told My Feminist Girlfriend

I feared if I stared too long at her chest// she'd  
Say, 'a woman's body is not a map for broken  
Boys'// I wanted to say broken boys do not need  
a map// save a balm— a rub among the solemn hills.

She said pregnancy is a patriarchal curse// pain  
to keep womenfolk down// I'm lost in wonderment//  
what better way she'd have come// if the choice was hers.

I once told her// 'love is the potion that makes forget  
all sentiments'// she laughed// should I have said// 'stay  
mad at men forever if that makes you happy.'

## Tourists

boys like us  
are tourists  
we are not  
meant to stay

...

a woman's  
heart is a  
country-side  
motel,  
each new  
stay, registered  
by a creak.  
she knows  
how long he'd  
stay by  
how loud he'd  
knock

...

boys like us  
are tourists  
we do not  
know how well  
to stay

...

a woman's  
resolve is a  
temple bell  
reaching deep  
into a deaf's  
skull  
once it is  
benediction  
she butchers the grace,  
wipes the altar  
& locks the gates.

...

boys like us

are tourists  
I fear for  
country-dwellers  
like you.

## Game Street

I know this street  
like my backhand  
playing ping-pong  
on a date with fate

here, no one wins  
it's a tale for time's  
cracked lips. I hope  
tomorrow bites you  
kola

I know this game  
—men trade words  
and barter esteem  
imperfection mocks  
the perfect, we simply  
glory in absurdities

here's the tarred road  
to my love's yes  
—loser takes all,  
'love is not a victory  
match.'

## Home

Last time the door creaked  
Home was gone  
The windows echoed  
Nostalgia from a lost eon

This place, this house held us  
—good memories  
On time’s tongue

A new stranger lives here  
I wonder if she sees the wonders  
Etched on the closet mirror  
Does she know ‘TF’ are no initials  
“Together Forever” was our mantra

Last time this door creaked,  
She asked,  
What happened to the home?  
I replied, “you left.”

*I must study politics and war,  
that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy...  
in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music...*

—John Adams

## **A Man of Peace**

*men who seek peace  
must first prepare for war*

I have trained my hands to war  
& taught my tongue, seek peace  
For, men who war must first be counted  
lovers of peace,  
or to what end do we sacrifice that which  
we hold most dear;  
the vainglory of victory  
or chance for a dance with death?

## Et tÚbrute

I know warm things—

hugs—that shawlbrothers  
on cold winter nights

blood, free-flowing from  
The betrayal of *esprit de corp*

Stabbed by the same blade  
That once guarded me through nights

..

I know warm things—

but shudder at the thought  
of our last embrace  
—cold night, cold embrace &  
a cold plunge

it makes no sense  
that betrayal is a synonym  
for brotherhood

& things so warm  
can be as cold  
as the death of us.

## **Beyond Redemption**

*for all who(’ll) ever consider(ed) suicide*

dear son,

redemption is at the secret place  
behind your fear  
—pull the trigger  
and you will understand  
silence is louder than a mighty roar!

father,  
I don’t suppose home resides in an abyss  
what I seek is beyond the light.

## Names & Numbers

we know what the last line reads  
before the scripts were rehearsed  
dust to dust

thin air carries with it  
memory of the ages  
—from nought we came  
To nought we are cast

this skin glories in absurdity  
scars are a tale of miracles

the lingering question lives  
—do names become mere numbers  
In death?

*hope rises like a phoenix  
from the ashes of shattered  
dreams.*

—S. A. Sachs

## Sulphur & Hell

Men burn  
I do  
Some rise  
(From the ashes)  
I do  
Remember this  
When next  
You threaten  
Sulphur and hell.

## Seedlings

We named ourselves after things  
given to the earth in hope  
—seeds, sacrifice, libation  
given away with sealed lips  
like first seedlings  
poured away in salty eyes  
like marital blessings  
but father knew, boys must first die  
before they become men  
so, he gave us to the earth  
& said kiss mother nature  
& rise as mighty oaks.

## Survivors

we have worn a thousand faces,  
two will do for testament

..

Scarface— for days when our battles  
aimed to swallow our beauty

we bear the testimony of death  
on our cheek

men who have seen a certain decedent  
& mockery, when the shadow fell

he shall pass us by— already,  
we bear the mark of the slain.

..

Joker— our scars are only evident in our hysteria  
we wear no relic from past-life

*abikuis* a modern demigod  
—immortal, cursed with long life

wearing the worries of reincarnation  
like rainbow on a poker face

depression does not claim us,  
a thousand ways to die makes no appeal

every night, we wear our lips  
into the shape of our consistent death

and name ourselves  
after a familiar name— survivor.

## What It Means to Be Water

a boy's angel named him after  
water. after seamless flow of  
bridled emotions. but water is  
chaos gushing over a leaning  
mountain.

a plunge pool is dangerous  
like my name-destructive in its beauty  
—anger waiting to pounce— to change  
the landscape forever. isn't that  
what this universe is? Reason I frolic  
with anger— the audacity to repaint  
what is.

a boy named after seamless water  
knows what resides in the deep, that  
bridled peace is no calm, that silence  
is everything and a storm, and chaos  
means change— which is not always  
unkind. to frolic with anger is to dare  
the heavens, to break down rain and ask  
the earth to bask in the deluge.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Opeyemi Oluwadare Oso** writes from Ile-Ife, Nigeria. An avid lover of nature and Art in all forms with keen eyes for poetry.

A trained Geologist and Public Servant whose devotion to Poetry and Fiction writing has seen him contributed works for both Nigerian and International publications. Names & Number is his first published compilation of poems.

When not carrying out his primary duties as a Public Servant, he is attending, or organizing a literary event under the aegis of his group - Echoes of African Art & Music. A literary platform started in June 2018 with its maiden event -ARTITUDE; a date with poetry, art and music, held in Ile-Ife. He has been dubbed Officer of Poetry for his keen interest in promoting the art and also participate.

Opeyemi Oso looks to the future with much hope as he aims to keep putting out works that enhances others and address societal issues.



**INK** spired