

HIRAETH

Selected Poems

HIRAETH: Selected Poems

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For my grandfather, whose intrinsic values and moral rectitude shaped my identity when I was a child:

Granddaddy, you opened the door for me, although you were not aware of it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I set out to write this book, I had very little faith that it would happen. Today, there is a book in your hand, and it is my book. I did it – and you did it with me!

Throughout the process, as people supported the Kickstarter project, shared links, and sent messages of good wishes, I occasionally paused to ask a pertinent question: Am I worthy? This is a question I have asked myself, time and time again, throughout my life when something positive or flattering happens to me: Am I worthy?

What did I do? I kept returning to a phrase that is well-loved by Nigerians: "Small [*your name*] of yesterday."

Small Yosola of yesterday—rough, defiant kid who drove her father to ask: How could I raise five children this way, and yet one decided to go that way?

Small Yosola of yesterday—skipping lessons to play with friends, based on her innate conviction that her way was the better way.

Small Yosola of yesterday—the child who was determined to become a professor because her godfather always used the word "Professor" in addressing her, rather than her given name.

Small Yosola of yesterday—curious, strong-willed, and a contrarian, who was in touch with the whispers of the wind.

Thank you for making this a reality for me.

*But, most of all, did we write exactly what we saw,
As clearly as we could? Were we unsophisticated
Enough to cry and scream?*

— Alice Walker, 'Each One, Pull One'

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INTRODUCTION: Words Move

“A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a homesickness or a love sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfilment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.”

— **Robert Frost**

Robert Frost presumably wrote the words quoted above without any idea about how they would be received – used, even – today, over fifty years later.

Today, I sit here, eyes affixed on those words as they come alive inside me, as they speak to something within me, and I recall the various ways in which poems have sprung to life for me, my contemporaries, and my literary ancestors.

A poem begins with a lump in the throat, the sound of rain falling against the window as you gather what is left of your heart after loved ones have walked away. It begins with a kiss on the platform as you await your train and the world looks on as though you are not there.

A poem begins with a name that will not be forgotten, a face etched in your pillow, the way that he leaves his scent on everything he touches, even your cheek.

Sometimes, a poem begins with an open wound or a dauntless scar that refuses to be scrubbed away. Other times, it begins

while contemplating the war waged against alien cultures in the name of national defence. On some days, a poem begins with a fuzzy memory, a fleeting moment, the sadness that made you feel at once alive and empty.

Whatever a poem begins with, it is something that is irreducibly human, something that is recognisable, whatever our language, whatever our fate, and wherever on this Earth we find ourselves.

Poetry, then, must be about life — the things that we experience but cannot always grasp or convey. And so we settle down in the space where creativity comes to life, pen in hand, heart beating softly — *some nights, there are tears in your eyes, or something heavy on your chest* — and we attempt to capture floating fragments of the universe, we try to stitch them together into a fabric.

Afterwards, we give these fabrics names, and we share them with the world, perhaps for love, for affirmation, for solidarity, or for comfort. We share, and we hope they reach a person or two, and we dream that they help somebody sleep better at night. Whatever the case, we hope that our words do something, edify someone.

It is said that we read to know that we are not alone. In writing this book, I hoped for a number of outcomes; but my key objective was that somebody somewhere would read these

words and sit quietly, pondering the subject matter, consoled by the knowledge that our daily experiences, especially the adverse ones, are not ours to bear alone.

Alice Walker, the African-American writer and activist, in the poem titled *Each One, Pull One*, said that those of us who write, paint, sculpt, or sing, share the intelligence and fate of all our people. Whether or not I share the intelligence of my people, I cannot say with certainty. Yet, I know that I share something with you, if only humanity through my creative impulses. It is that which prompts me to write. It is that which moves me to present these words to you in this book.

I hope that one or two words in this book would stir something in you, make you laugh, cry, stare at the ceiling, and perhaps even roll your eyes. Because that is what words do – they move.