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foreword
by J. K. FOWLER

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by AYODELE NZINGA

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This is a love letter. To Oakland. To the innumerable characters past and present that have sewn this patchwork landscape with the deep-rooted dyed fabrics that compose the Town, many of whom are here in this collection, many more who are not.

This is a thank you note with little soppy hearts dribbled along the signature line. For allowing Nomadic Press and myself the opportunity to work with such talent, immerse ourselves in so much love. To everyone who continues to lay bricks with us and reinforce the walls of our collective home as we transition.

Oakland is a gift. Complicated and nuanced, layered and full of all that composes life. Above all else, Oakland is love.

The relationships that were sown through our project at Nomadic Press continue. The work that we did existed before we arrived, continued through our tenure, and will continue far into the future. Intentional platforms built to amplify our stories are a necessity, not a luxury. Storytelling is intrinsic to the human experience. Stories—including those of earth, animals, plants, wind, water—remind us of the interconnective need for regaining balance once lost, employing curiosity and humility, listening with open ears and expansive multi-dimensional minds.

We are unfolding. Coming into something new. In September of 2023, Nomadic Press will become Nomadic Foundation. The Foundation will continue the work we started with Nomadic Press on an inter/national scale: grant and award administration, national funds for margin-
alized writers, and fiscal sponsorship for literary people and projects. We will sponsor projects like the budding Public Planter Publishing Podcast, which will offer new publishers nuts and bolts learnings such as templates for hosting events, place setting, book design, nodal publication philosophies, and much more—the tools we wish we had when we first started Nomadic Press.

Find poetic snapshots of The Town in the pages before you. Then walk her streets, support her local arts organizations and small businesses, step outside of the shiny new skyscrapers to the sidewalks and talk to people, plant flowers in public places, volunteer your time to help clean her streets and feed our people, raise vegetables in community gardens, become involved in local movements, visit her galleries, her lakes, her redwoods, her Bay shores. Love on Oakland—and then write a poem and share it at one of her many open mics.

J. K. FOWLER
Xalapa, Mexico
July 2023
THE TOWN is a landmark in my relationship with Oakland as an artist.

I grew up here even though I wasn’t born here—I was. The ‘I’ that is writing is an Oaklander. I belong to this place and it belongs to me. Such relationships are more complex than merely being born in a place. I earned my ownership. This soil earned its place in my heart, and in my myth of self. Oakland & I are entwined in my imagination.

As I type I think of poetry, theater, movement, and people who were/are larger than life. I think of fried chicken in brown bags on Jim Crow cars, and north star dreams chasing the idea of home and freedom. I think of Ester’s Orbit Room and Ms. Ester; I think of Freedman’s Lincoln Theater; I think of the Black Panther Party Breakfast program and their iconic newspaper illustrated by Emory Douglas.

I think about music made, and music videos shot here filled with friends and family. I think of the movies set here, and the epic “from Oakland” stories. I think about the careers launched here, the art, and artists made here, shaped in the evolving experience called Oakland.

I remember the comrades these streets ate, and honor here those that persisted against all odds to stay here in this town we have claimed as our own—until they couldn’t—we continue to bleed genius.

I think with my heart when I let myself be embraced by a need to be rooted in a place—when I think
Oakland, I feel rebel, hyphy, hip hop, funk, black artsy, this must be the place. I think of Oakland as a historic site, a myth, the place where I found myself, my purpose, my open door. Oakland is the place I find myself as the pendulum swings wildly in the world, change is dancing in the middle of all the rooms, and talking very loudly. I am experiencing this moment from a lens shaped by being in Oakland and my determination to stay here.

I feel Oakland in the place people keep their memories of home. Oakland has had, has, will always own more of me than any other geographic location.

The pages of The Town are pieces of Oakland memorabilia, relics, artifacts of a place. They hold a collective perspective of The Town. The collection itself is a part of my Oakland story—Oakland took me in and let me become. I learned to learn here. As I learned I became a do-er. Oakland let me build things. It encouraged me to grow. It let me grow. I became. I met and was met by many extraordinary people and things in the making of this story—which is a grand scale love affair.

I am so proud, joyful, & humbled to be Oakland’s inaugural Poet Laureate. Of all the accolades I may receive in my lifetime I will always hold being the Inaugural Poet Laureate of Oakland amongst the dearest.

A place chose me. I am The Town’s poet. I rep the Town.

This anthology is a heartfelt thank you to this soil; the dreams it nurtured, and what remains possible here. May these pages hold the memory of us remembering this magnificent place as tenderly as Oakland has held me.
May Oakland’s future griots love it as we do, and when stories are told of our Oakland—may they all be love stories—even the one’s with grit, thorns, and regret, because those are all parts of any dramatic love affair.

In this sublime moment in my great Oakland story, I invite you to take in all of what’s shared and add your own recollections of the center of the universe—Oakland California—The Town. I offer a very special thanks to J. K. Fowler and Nomadic Press for their place in the myth of Oakland and their real presence in the publishing of The Town.

One world, one struggle, one word,

WordSlanger

AYODELE NZINGA

The Inaugural Poet Laureate of The Town (Oakland, CA)
siren stands sentry on an empty street corner feet aflame in gold flip flops

I got to give her half my check / you got to have money to be broke
barking directions into a .38 caliber cell phone like she held hostages
I gotta have some place to go / based off this right here right here

I got to give her half my check / you got to have money to be broke
Are you planning to disappear? I hope to leave my family & disappear wit’ you.
I gotta have some place to go / based off this right here right here
beneath a sky peaching feathery reds, blue cheese clouds

Are you planning to disappear? I hope to leave my family & disappear wit’ you.
barking directions into a .38 caliber cell phone like she held hostages
beneath a sky peaching feathery reds, blue cheese clouds
siren stands sentry on an empty street corner feet aflame in gold flip flops
THE ONLY CHILD

Silent, single resident
of the bombed
out living room.
Tiny thug scout
in track braids
and jeans dripping past hips
no wider than a squash.
The three year old
sits in one of the deep craters
on the couch, folding into
his psp console
as if learning to pray.

He hovers beneath the radar
of his father’s story
of the repo men who tried to reclaim
his Escalade. Next to his father,
a woman sits cruising men
on BlackSingles.com.
“He says he lives in Folsom.” She reports.
“Don’t nobody live in Folsom
without a number ‘round they neck.”
He slams Patron shots and rakes weed
into pyramids on album covers.

Suddenly, the boy
rolls off the sofa,
urgently waving the game,
and approaches his father.
The man pauses his story
of repo men and the M-14
kept propped at the front door like a broom,
then diagnoses: “Boy!
You ain’t got enough money
to buy no guns!”

He takes the game under thick,
affectionate thumbs.
His forearm enclosing the boy
who squeezes onto his father’s lap
staring bright eyed at the glowing device.

He laughs.

Between square tablets
of his teeth
comes a sound
shattering the room’s
low gray fog
causing the rest
of us drunks
to fall away from father and son
like so many empty shells.
Thank you to all the writers who helped make THE TOWN.

SCAN the QR code to meet THE PEOPLE behind the words and their bios.

or, visit:
nomadicpress.org/thetown
Aerosol, solid state marker, charcoal, calligraphy ink. Nzinga is a California artist who works in mixed medias to create. Visual Artists Jahlil Nzinga is a man on a mission. He spent his formative days in South Berkeley, CA. He was an avid skateboarder, and a budding clothing designer as a teen. He also had a great love of music. His group The Pack signed with Up All Night Records before he graduated high school. After exploring music as a career he found his way back to visual art where he has exploded into one of California’s most innovative visual creatives. You can find his work cast as jewelry, on furniture, on the walls of the interior and the exterior of buildings, on clothing and of course on canvas.

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