



# the heart is a caged animal

poems by Nkateko Masinga

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## Introduction by Tjawangwa Dema

I am and have been excited by Nkateko Masinga's poetry since I met her in 2018 at an international poetry festival in South Africa. Not only is Nkateko increasingly invited to give readings within and outside South Africa, but in addition to *The Heart is A Caged Animal* she already has three chapbooks under her belt with a fifth accepted for publication in 2021. I find it remarkable that I had not heard of this young poet until I looked through the festival programme where we met. In *The Heart is a Caged Animal*, Nkateko offers us a series of what might be described as love poems; which is to say that the poems move in the intersections and complexities that lie between confession, longing, consummation and loss. Love is found, lost, spurned and continually re/animated.

I began this introduction with a word that appears in every single one of Nkateko's poems in this collection, the pronoun 'I'. It is a natural enough starting point for the writerly voice and I think by now, the world has flogged the beast of what a poet means by 'I' to death and possibly back. For our purposes let us imagine that poetry's 'I' is an amalgamation of the poet's idea of a self. Reading poetry's 'I' in this capacious way allows the poem's speaker to represent as much or as little of the writer's lived experience, imagination and witness. 'Is there allowance for this?' the opening poem asks us, 'to be useful' to the other, to the many, by beginning with the self. The collection opens with "self-portrait as a grieving ghost", and again I want to emphasise the 'self' here. If we readers of creative texts want not only the bones - the factual architecture of a story - but also demand a story's symbolic meanings, then Nkateko offers us this over and over through her chosen mode of 'self'. A coherent self is shattered as the 'I' in these poems is at times mourned and mourner. It is now apparition and then flesh, and we are ultimately witness to its song of self.

Nkateko makes the reader complicit through both enquiry and intimacy, moving us close enough to the front of the crowd to be able to eavesdrop. While in previous work she has engaged explicitly with race this is not Nkateko's focus here. However, it is difficult to read this collection without being reminded of the philosophy of Ubuntu, which is underwritten by an admittedly dynamic but inalienable sense of relation, (i.e. 'I am because you are'). But the point I make here is that given her national and cultural context I am repeatedly made particularly aware of the individual in her speaker's 'I'. Even if Nkateko's personae were envisioned as exclusively singular in their perspectival use of 'I', in a number of poems such as "caesurae for the cessation of blood" the telling is often made relational. "I am yours to plunder/offering basket for a body / cadaver your carnival" and though the act described may not be, the telling itself is an act of autonomy.

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I believe, like Mvskoke Nation poet, Joy Harjo that "writing a poem is like listening." This, I think, is what makes writing poems 'hard' as some of my students have often said at the beginning of a class. Listening is a second education; it is a way to hold space and this can be difficult without practice. The poet must work to hold multiple thoughts at once – from muse, from self, other, other-than-human, the many. And if they listen well then the singular can be an instantiation of plurality. How can a poem be intimate and universal all at once? Perhaps for the personal pronoun to remain effective as a poetic device that remains open to multiple readings the poet must remain outside of a strictly navel-gazing 'I' and move instead towards relationality. For the reader, the 'I' in Nkateko's 'My Lover pulls me off the train tracks' trilogy, who turns into an apparition after being pulled from the train tracks too late, may not be the one who stays or the one for whom 'It does not matter if no train comes,/I am still leaving.' Instead, this 'I' is left both specific and multiple, and equally elusive.

Nkateko is also a performance poet and these personal poems have brought with them a sense of the epistolary, which continually conjures a listener-reader. To do this of course requires a poetic ear, so that by listening one is able to emphasize what is particularly lyric in a line. Thus, a sentence may catch the eye with its rich and evocative imagery of moving together and moving apart. This offers productive obscurity, that in turn heightens an otherwise delightfully varied but ultimately forthright discourse on love. We trust that Nkateko listens to the poem she is writing as she is able to invite us to listen to what the word 'heirloom', or phrase 'I loom', can do to lift, lighten or turn a line.

If the poem asks it of her then the space of dreams or the otherworldly is given as much room as the temporal: knife and body co-exist with apparition and melancholia. She keeps us on the page, as all fine poets do, through language.

some ghosts are prone to grieving  
[...].

i abandon the body i existed in —

i follow him, hapless apparition

Not quite a haunting so much as an unusual, but perhaps recognizable, yearning for companionship. What is personal and specific, perhaps even what makes us feel most vulnerable, is often open to universality. Whereas even the South African 'born free' generation might often find themselves largely writing against apartheid and its ongoing consequences, Nkateko mostly abjures 'we' to turn her literary scope inward. Still, there is violence and fear here 'I want the fire without the cult / [...] / at the family reunion & not a sacrifice in sight / no-one's daughter a lamb to

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the slaughter'. I am treading on thinly veiled identarian ground here so I shall leave the true measure of a reading of this nature to the critics and gladly return to Nkateko's words. But to be clear, rather than disavowal I am proposing that Nkateko is offering us a version of nationhood that does not overtly privilege the national *or* obscure the individual. The two imaginaries, the individual and the collective, can coexist simultaneously in her work.

I reel you back to me with a recklessness  
I could only have learnt from my mother,

who inherited it from hers  
and has not died despite it

What at first may seem a small enclosure of love poems continually opens up to think on and with poetic forms, such as the ghazal, epithalamium and pantoum. Established poetic forms, for Nkateko, become another way to meditate on the self as worthy of both interrogation and archiving. Nkateko's deeply personal and intimately confessional poetic voice – perhaps a product of her conservative and religious upbringing – when it is made public offers the possibility of not just the revelatory but also the revolutionary.

It was inevitable, it seems

you, having rolled out of the chrysalis of uncertainty  
I, having disentangled myself  
from a nightmare that was not mine

Her valedictory poem, aptly titled 'last request' closes with the word 'amen' and assumes the form of that most personal utterance, prayer: 'no howling woman at the pulpit /[...] "I left my daughter sleeping/ & found her bleeding"'. To borrow from her quote of Santosh Kalwar 'nobody knows the aftermath', however it is safe to say that *The Heart is a Caged Animal* is a surreally poignant work. One which offers a meaningful contribution to the constantly growing body of work by African poets preoccupied with life, beyond and in spite of the all-consuming task of self-preservation. Dear Reader, in the end this is a thematically cohesive collection written by a poet who is alive to language and continually grappling with her craft. Nkateko Masinga is one to watch and here is as good a place to begin as any. The point at which her personae take a deep breath and begin ...I.

–Tjawangwa Dema, 2019

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## self-portrait as grieving ghost

my body is embalmed for burial  
as my husband weeps, sings hymns  
and begs that I return to him

is there allowance for this?

to be useful to my mourning lover:

in our kitchen  
as asparagus

in his lab  
as apparatus

in the aether  
as apparition  
as apologetic ghost

I'm sorry my beloved  
I truly meant to stay

'nobody knows the aftermath',  
kalwar said  
the malice of death, its wrath  
unrelenting and sparing none

nobody can predict the end,  
nobody knows that tears fall  
in the afterlife except us: the  
dead the lost the after after

after what? there is nothing  
beyond our life together,  
a chorus we had just begun

my love, even in death I grieve



## boat with no oar

I circled your bed at midnight  
chanting *love me*,  
then made your silence my poison  
& died

died  
& still didn't have you  
in the brief, bitter afterlife  
that ensued

imagine this wasn't a dream

would you wake up  
and wade to sea  
with my soul?

would you remember me?

broken boat  
witch with no coven  
& no spell book

voyeur at your bedside  
glaring?

cast a shadow over your name  
and let me live there

consummate our love posthumously

throw a net over my apparition —  
I'd do anything not to fall unheld

swim back to the shore  
alone, boat with no oar

save a jilted ghost  
with waves for a dress,

dead but  
still desperate  
for your affection

the waves change course

you wake up with my name  
seated at its throne,  
your tongue

which is to say  
you are home now  
I will no longer beg for what is mine

## portrait with stained bed sheets

It has been raining for as many hours as we have been married —  
I, still pink with the bliss of passion consummated,  
place my finger on your chin  
and you stir, a sign of life.

I want to lay here and read my vows  
to your gently heaving chest —  
you seemed overwhelmed the first time I said  
*take me, my life is yours.*

At midnight,  
in a noisy crowded room,  
I made a promise.

You smiled and said only that you would be here,  
that I could count on you to stay, to love me  
as long as my soul needed companionship.

It was no dream. You are here.

I accept your arrival as a promise,  
a vow carved on this bed  
as we wait, curtains drawn,  
for the sun to embrace our joy.

## Inheritance

*after Audre Lorde*

I give birth & my lover renames me  
*ray of light* in Yorùbá. He  
says to me:

*'Iná, you have made my world  
anew'*

He holds our son  
to the sky,  
& says:

*'Iná, you have illuminated  
the darkest of river beds  
with this gift'*

*'Iná,  
our family tree is rooted  
in you'*

If the earth spun to my every whim  
I would have stayed with him,  
to supplement his sun  
with new light  
each day

would have birthed  
a lineage,  
a legion  
of brown-bodied  
baby boys

who would grow  
to host naming ceremonies  
in women's wombs

but I grew ill

and my light grew dim

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and his *Iná* was no more

but

light hits water  
and reflects

light hits water  
and through our *Omi*  
I reach for life:

the waves of the sea  
are my child's hands  
& each morning  
I reach for them,

watch him grow,  
touch the shore

my son,  
my *Omi*

and each night I disappear  
with my lover's light  
as the moon stands in  
for him, for us

*Before the moon wanes again  
we shall come together*

On a night of the full moon,  
you can hear the wolves  
howl my song:

*Olówó orí mi*

*Ọkọ mi*

Do you hear the stillness afterwards?  
As if the earth wants to know  
why *Iná* no longer sings  
her own song

Tell the terrain  
that *Iná* is a ghost  
who left her refrain  
in wild animals' throats

Everything with breath is an heirloom  
*Iná* left

Hear her:

*In the water, in the air, I loom*

## **pantoum for the parting**

what a mess I will leave you with  
none the wiser, mass of fragility  
baby girl, my face in miniature  
turn the ache into architecture

none the wiser, mass of fragility  
grow smart like mama, eloquent  
turn the ache into architecture  
speeches at presidential suites

grow smart like mama, eloquent  
your father's height, dizzy spins  
speeches at presidential suites  
hopelessly enchant the masses

your father's height, dizzy spins  
baby girl, my face in miniature  
hopelessly enchant the masses  
what a mess I will leave you with

## my lover pulls me off the train tracks too late

**i**

i hover above the body i exited.

he shouts at it, 'you wanted this?'  
his pain palpable, unlike its pulse.

its chest one could still percuss —      some ciphers of life are deceiving

he stifles the impulse to cuss at  
my cowardice (i gave no notice) —      some notes aren't worth receiving

what warrants his wrath?  
a body is merely a sheath.

i want to say 'no. i wanted *us*' —      some ghosts are prone to grieving  
but i am late, cold. satan's hiss  
and heaven's grip contending.

**ii**

i abandon the body i existed in —

i follow him, hapless apparition  
and suspicious spectre-simulate  
simultaneously. i meant to stay,  
i truly did. heaven and hell bid  
& i chose to return to my love.

i find him with her, happy host  
to a lover alive. i, jilted ghost,  
hover above my new nemesis —

we brawl for her body. she exits.  
I say to my lover, 'I wanted *this*.'



## **my lover pulls me off the train tracks again**

That night I show him the blade, say,

It does not matter if no train comes,  
I am still leaving. Not you, this place.

I am not ungrateful – your love has trained  
me better. I'll make tomorrow's lunch,  
our bed a week's worth of dinners,  
love-notes you can open on the subway.

My mother taught me to carry an extra ticket  
in case I lost one. I sharpen my knife, my spare.

## **my lover pulls me off the train tracks**

he holds me, hand against neck and whispers 'Thanks for staying'  
into the groove God made for only his fingers, to feel my pulse  
and say 'Oh thank God you're still here. Are you trying to kill me?'

*no no darling only myself*

we drive home in silence, the dogs barking restlessly at the gate  
as if knowing I almost did not make it back.  
The sky has readied itself in a coat of grey.  
The wind is howling        my lover is still sobbing.

I remember spending the fourth of July in Port Richmond,  
lying on a blanket watching the fireworks in wonder —

my host mother asking if the fireworks would trigger me,  
if there were wars back home that sounded just like this  
and I said 'I came here to forget what home sounds like'

my lover makes Milo with lots of sugar and swaddles me  
in a black blanket I find more comforting than his arms.  
he says, 'Don't ever do that to me again, you hear?'  
I nod, placing my head in his lap.

he knows I will try again. For a moment there is respite but he knows.  
This world is too noisy and tomorrow it will start its engines again.

## **if you can bear it**

*a plea, upon seeing my estranged husband at the subway station*

if you can bear it, let us embrace  
and allow me one last glance at your face  
incarnation in human male form  
with the familiarity of your touch  
before life's burdens become too much  
and subsequently forget

before my heart forgets your chest  
before my eyes forget perfection's best  
and while my hands are warm  
allow me to rest them on your shoulder  
for you to carry as you grow older  
I was ever born

## catharsis

under our bed,  
I find a greying photograph of the woman you loved  
and still love on mornings like this

place it on the mantelpiece for you to inspect  
give you chance to feign ignorance

at midday we separate

it was inevitable, it seems

you, having rolled out of the chrysalis of uncertainty  
I, having disentangled myself  
from a nightmare that was not mine

now I know

what the knife-wielder  
held against her frame  
in my dreams each night  
was no common blade —

but you  
your body

always so close to her skin  
always so red  
yet it was always I who bled

## first attempt

I reel you back to me with a recklessness  
I could only have learnt from my mother,

who inherited it from hers  
and has not died despite it.

Warn me  
that few have survived a love like ours.  
Warn me –  
I'll throw you  
my bloodline & pray you swim  
                  pray you maroon your doubt

There will be dry bones	unclaimed remains
a litany of lifelessness	scattered bodies
everything dead	but you and I
grasping at life	gasping
raspily	undead

## ***Jilted Belle***

*after Nina Simone*

you've given me no choice / but to join a coven for the complimentary book of spells / show up unwanted at your house for Christmas lunch / chanting in Xitsonga and Yorùbá instead of singing carols / it's no holiday without the "dear beloveds" speeches / you're the closest I have ever come to understanding bondage / I mean love / I mean family / I wish I knew what my mother meant when she said she was coming back / 'cause she did what you did / pulled a Houdini without the smoke & mirrors so nobody knows there was a blaze at house 143 except the ones who were burned / I will undress & say "Baby there was a fire here" as I shiver / before your face contorts at the sight of what you did / tell me / what does it mean to be dead in one state / but alive in another / are there different rules / different vital signs / how am I still on earth but non-existent to you? / let me be your Christmas miracle / a reincarnation / I am coming back to you / and I don't care if you don't want me / I am yours / I put a spell on you / because you're mine / close your eyes / say a prayer / Merry Christmas.

## ghazal for the ghastly going

*"I am not cruel, only truthful."*

— *Sylvia Plath*

I'll take your love in rations: this portion will last 'til June,  
when my leaves turn brown and yours, green. Until June,

when the wind howls in my hemisphere, an overt warning  
of the danger to come. Hold the ache in my chest 'til June,

then tell someone. I am ready to admit this won't last forever:  
though I love you dearly, I will only breathe in gasps 'til June.

I deserved to know there was another love brewing elsewhere.  
You are not cruel, only truthful. You may stay here until June,

then pack your heart into your new lover's breast, your ruin  
into her decaying chest. Only luck will spare you until June.

## caesurae for the cessation of blood

you, at the breakfast table / my heart on a platter  
words make good skewers / you, a horrid partner  
surgeon hands      killer eyes / I am yours to plunder

offering basket for a body / cadaver your carnival  
cause of death: unknown / add lies to the arsenal

don't clap at my funeral  
*please sir, I did not mean / to exit at the interval*



## honeymoon (the ache)

*a letter addressed to my husband, found in his suit pocket after our honeymoon*

I always imagined I would find a photograph of your former lover in the backseat of our car as we drove off after our wedding. That we would take her ghost with us to our honeymoon, to dissect her mistakes, to design a manual for love with her name under the 'Things to avoid' list. Now I have joined her. I have taken a permanent seat on the throne of your past and I wonder how she eased herself into this role. If she had to rename the daughters she imagined. I want to compare notes. I want to know if she continued to dream of you, as I do. I wonder if she gasped at the memory of your face, your perfection. Do you know what you have turned me into? A shell of my former self. A home for what hurts. A foster mother to grief. A witch. Are you aware? Watching you dance at your wedding, I wonder if this woman you chose is next to inherit the ache...

## **boat at the shore**

in lieu of making you the boat and the oar / I have found another way to reach the shore / I am no longer stranded / like tendrils of hair / desperate to be held together / I am not marooned except when you wear that shirt / when you wear that shirt / then remove it / I want you / and this love that hurts / to hurt / I want your sweat on my skin / our sweet melancholy / our holy suffering / I lift my cup to drink / you pour / you know best how to part waters / and still not take me home

## last request

I want the fire without the cult  
small chops and malt  
at the family reunion & not a sacrifice in sight  
no-one's daughter a lamb to the slaughter

no small god called an uncle  
with too many faces & not one of them holding restraint in the mouth  
too many hands & none of them clutching a Bible

I want the gospel without the gun  
praise songs without the weeping

no howling woman at the pulpit  
"I left my daughter sleeping  
& found her bleeding"

no border traversed  
no veil, torn  
once holy now wholly broken  
& months later  
no daughter's daughter born  
to a fallen god called an uncle

spill the blood of the covenant  
spill the water of the womb

let there be no boundary crossed  
let there be no innocence lost  
amen

## About the Author

Nkateko Masinga was born in Pretoria, South Africa. She is a writer, performance poet, publisher, TEDx Speaker, 2018 Mandela Washington Fellow, World Economic Forum Global Shaper and 2019 Ebedi Writers Fellow. Her written work has appeared in *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review*, U.S journal *Illuminations*, UK pamphlet press *Pyramid Editions*, the University of Edinburgh's *Dangerous Women Project*, and elsewhere. She is the founder and managing director of NSUKU Publishing Consultancy. Her work has received support from Pro Helvetia Johannesburg and the Swiss Arts Council. She is the interviewer for poetry at *Africa In Dialogue* and co-winner of the 2019 *Brittle Paper Anniversary Award*.

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## About the Cover Image

Melissa D Johnston has been a digital artist for over 10 years, devoting the most recent ones to exploring the creative possibilities of mobile devices such as iPhones and iPads. Her work has a dreamy quality that seeks to evoke simultaneously the realm of the unconscious and the realm of playful imagination, which together form a space for healing.

"Sorrow" is from Melissa's "Precipice" series and attempts to capture the emotional quality of that experience.