

A Blood Condition

by Kayo Chingonyi



Kayo Chingonyi was born in Zambia in 1987, and moved to the UK at the age of six. He is the author of two pamphlets and a fellow of the Complete Works programme for diversity and quality in British Poetry. In 2012, he was awarded a Geoffrey Dearmer Prize, and was Associate Poet at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 2015. His first full-length collection, *Kumukanda*, won the Dylan Thomas Prize and a Somerset Maugham Award and was shortlisted for the Costa Poetry Prize. It was also shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre First Poetry Collection Prize, the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, the Roehampton Poetry Prize and the Jhalak Prize. Kayo was a Burgess Fellow at the Centre for New Writing, University of Manchester before joining Durham University as Assistant Professor of Creative Writing. He is a writer and presenter for the music and culture podcast Decode on Spotify.

Reviews

'Chingonyi's poetic voice finds its full-throated maturity... Deep introspection becomes the vulnerable and brave heart of the book, rendered into jewel-like poems in 'Origin Myth'... An elegantly spare, cathartic and poignant but never indulgent collection that invites repeated reading' - Dzifa Benson, *Telegraph*

'*A Blood Condition* has a dignity that honours the past without indulging in any overflow of personal feeling. Dignity is an interesting quality in a writer - it cannot be faked without presenting as pomposity. Chingonyi's authentic, reined-in passions are stirring... Chingonyi's poems grow out of gaps, out of the moments when nothing more can be done. The dead

cannot be recovered, time cannot be reclaimed, the damage to the river is likely to be permanent, but a poem can be written and take its quietly powerful stand' - Kate Kellaway, *Observer*

'A deep thread of loss runs through these poems, and an attempt to reintegrate a past that spans Zambia, Newcastle and London... These fine poems weigh their sorrows carefully, reminding us how best we might "carry a well of myth / in the pit of our pith"' - Aingeal Clare, *Guardian*

Nyaminyami: 'water can crash and water can flow'

who gave them licence to live here
who brought them succour refuge
what gave them the right
to come between this centuries-old love
what do they know of love
who have not loved outside human time
this wall they built in all their wisdom
can only delay our union
those who know water know
eventually water will pass through
even the smallest gap in what appears
to the human eye to be a solid mass

16 Bars for the Bits

The old men who meet at the same time each evening
the youngers get bladdered and stagger; the heaving
the chatter of pigeons emboldened while feeding
and towers that balance at heights beyond reason
a beacon for dreamers and schemers and heathens
you can find angels behaving like demons
in ends where the rents seem to change with the seasons
and murder rates rise when the temperature's peaking
friends changing tack interrupted while speaking
students in packs only back for the weekend
the steadfast who waited and think about leaving
the homeless in parks making bargains with breathing
the lights in the dark guide you home and you're sleeping
or tossing and turning or scratching and wheezing
or thinking all night through the secrets you're keeping
and all this can come in the space of an evening

Origin Myth

Sired somewhere in the Congo basin
yet how it grew to populate the earth
teaching us the story of mutation
is the story that attends the very birth
of our kind, the tenuous nature of our worth.
Is it any wonder the road seems so unsteady?
Millions lost to veering paths already.

For those who came before me, a libation!
I conjure you as though we sat around a hearth
when I walk it's your shadow I'm chasing.
Next to my skin I still carry the hurt
finely woven as a cambric shirt
from before akashishi* took so many:
1920, nine years before Nellie.

* The Bemba phrase 'Bamalwele ya akashishi' means 'Those who suffer from the germ/virus'.

Discussion Ideas

- More details about Nyaminyami https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyami_Nyami Is this a story you knew? Is this an ecological poem?
- 'Those who know water know eventually water will pass through even the smallest gap in what appears to the human eye to be a solid mass' – is this a proverb? Is it a newly invented proverb? At what point does a story or myth become a proverb?
- Is '16 Bars' a fast or slow poem? What is speedy, what is timeless about it?
- More background to the 'Blood Condition' of the book's title here <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/11/a-blood-condition-by-kayo-chingonyi-review-deep-subtle-grace> What origins does the poem 'Origin Myth' explore?
- 'Origin Myth' is a poem of the AIDS pandemic. When is the right time to make art about the Covid pandemic? What might you have read / seen / experienced already, and what has been its effect on you?

Other books by Kayo Chingonyi

Kumukanda (Chatto & Windus, 2017)

If you liked Kayo Chingonyi, try ...

- Caleb Femi
- Victoria Adukwei Bulley
- Dai George

Kayo Chingonyi online

www.kayochingonyi.com