



TLC SHOWCASE

JACQUELINE HASKELL

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Introduction to *Takotsubo*

Back in 2018 I watched a documentary on TV celebrating 70 years of the NHS.

Organ transplants featured prominently, heart transplants in particular. One eminent surgeon remarked that the problem was, of course, the short shelf-life of hearts. This phrase stayed with me – what an amazing title, I thought! Until someone pointed out that it was also an amazing tongue twister!

However, the idea for what became *Takotsubo: the journey of a transplanted heart* (or *Hearts*, as it will always be known to me) was born.

‘Takotsubo’ is the name of a pot used in Japan as an octopus trap. With takotsubo syndrome, the left ventricle (heart chamber) narrows towards the top, looking larger and rounder at the bottom, giving it the appearance of a takotsubo pot. Takotsubo syndrome causes the heart’s main pumping chamber to change shape and get larger; the heart muscle becomes weaker, and its pumping action loses strength. The syndrome is often a response to extreme stress or grief: suffering from a broken heart is not after all an old wives’ tale.

Once I had the basics, a couple of lovely poets looked over the early manuscript for me, their own schedules on hold indefinitely due to Covid, and then I revised and reworked; I’m also a fiction writer, so sometimes poetry goes in the drawer for a bit. But going in the drawer brings a fresh eye when it comes out and its value should never be underestimated!

I had recently had interest from a small poetry press after sending it off many times to potential publishers over the years and entering literally dozens of competitions – which as most writers know is an expensive and time-consuming business.

I wanted it to be in the best shape possible, so I contacted TLC for a report on the final draft. In the end, the tweaks and recommendations were actually quite minimal, but crucial. They made me rethink certain sections and also encouraged me to kill some of my darlings – difficult advice to follow at the best of times! What remained was a truly integrated collection; *Hearts* is a narrative and works best if it is read as such.

The manuscript won the Cinnamon Press 2025 New Voices Award and was published in April this year.

And how did I come to write about an African Grey parrot in a church? Well, that, as they say, is another story...

Poems from *Takotsubo*

There are three hearts you can choose from:

1. your own diseased heart—final outcome guaranteed
2. beating transplant—the longest wait, outcome uncertain
3. non-beating ‘heart in a box’—journey time (donor to recipient) up to 8 hours
(*This last will increase your chances, notes his surgeon, in the margin.*)

He casts aside this missive, future-paces to his funeral,

— *Remember me,
Thy hand, Belinda, darkness shades me*

*On thy bosom let me rest
More I would, but Death invades me*

jots down the order of the service, underlines the salient points.

— *Death is now a welcome guest*

He underscores this last, again and again;
multiple slashes of violet ink swim the pages of the aria
(which he guarantees will be out of tune),

— *When I am laid, am laid in earth, May my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast*

the organ drowning out their timid voices,
pigeons swelling the chorus—
but oh! that descending chromatic fourth—what an opener!

Aria

His voice overwintering;
the tinkle of consonants on ice,
a lifetime of syllables, frozen in place.

That aria perched in his vocal folds,
notes scattering in his throat—his tongue,
a silver heron above his spittle-stream—mid

-sentence and he is done.
He returns to his violin, levitating above
the pressure points of his collarbone,

but that too is without refrain.
There is nothing of its notes in him,
just the stickleback trajectory of the heart:

that beat, his breath, the alchemy of his phrasing,
the steady fastness of strophic ghosts—
he could no more speak than pull a trigger.

A tourist in her life

She wraps herself in her Great-Aunt's bedspread—she of the quilting bees and breakfast gin—each square emblazoned with the cross-stitch of the heart.

Would they be too old-fashioned at the wake, she wonders, the antimacassars across her best chairs? She worries about the ham and cheese sandwiches dripping pickle, the awkwardness of spinach vol-au-vents, discreetly picked from teeth. The sourness of cheap funeral wine—will she have time for communion, beforehand?—her regrets spilling wafer-thin, pale as aspic.

Repenting yesterday's cruelty, she makes another lunge for the cat, catches him by the scruff, and, rendering him immobile, bundles him back into the cupboard. She tries to keep his claws away from the Irish linen and manipulates him into her oldest blanket, into the warmest, smallest space, and, ancient as he is, he lets her, until even her touch becomes too much, and he hisses, green-eyed, blinking with a forest of reproach.

Finally, she shuts him in, leans back against the door jamb, and hears not his mewling, but the cries of gulls on the industrial railings of the old chain pier; that first night—an out-of-season weekend, their first together—waves breaking beyond brackish water, hair made anemone by soft Welsh rain. Until a sudden ache in her breast robs her of the memory, leaves it all used up, spread too thin, like the jam she used to make, her summers wild with the slippery paste of hedgerows, clotting cream on delicacies, too sweet for her new, austere palate.

Vital signs

I will get a tattoo, go to a séance.

If she mentions Beloved...

(you bought the bird, of course you did, went back in the daylight
of which you claimed to be so afraid)

... then I'll know, your brother tells me,
as we go inside.

I see ruffled feathers, a dove perhaps?
Yes, feathers—in a church.
A handful of fur, spit-aled breathing,
the comfort of lavender spaces.

An orchard, blossom falling...

On the way home, I dance the pavement cracks,
look for signs that you are here.

Dearly Beloved,

says Beloved, from beneath the covers of his domed and gilded travel cage (for Nick had so loved and indulged him that nothing was too good for that bird) currently occupying its own pew.

Nina—somewhat less indulgent—reaches across and taps sharply on the bars and wishes that she had listened to common sense and her brother-in-law and left Beloved at home—I mean, good God, who takes an African grey to a *funeral*?

Irritated with herself, she shifts on the dank stone pew, causing her handbag to jostle the nearby cage.

Fuck it! Screeches Beloved, unnerved at this sudden intrusion into his space.

Fuckity fuckity fuck it! He squawks, in a rhythm comfortingly reminiscent of freight trains on the railway tracks of home—a whole other world about which he'd quite forgotten until that moment – as Nina breaks the golden laws of parrot keeping (he had after all been Nick's bird, not hers) and pulls back the folds of his blanket to peer directly inside, make eye contact.

Oh, dear God, she whispers, shielding her own face behind the blanket, as if this very act would make her invisible to the rest of the congregation.

Abide with me, sings the choir.

God squad! Hoots Beloved, *Dear God, God, God!* Bobbing his beak in time with the words, thoroughly enjoying himself now.

Oh, good God, he echoes, more quietly, meeting her gaze with some sympathy, for he would have comforted her if only he'd known how.

About the Writer

Jacqueline Haskell is a deaf and disabled poet from Hampshire, England. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck, University of London (2009), and was then mentored by novelists Jill Dawson and Tim Pears in the Gold Dust scheme for emerging writers.

The collection *Stroking Cerberus: poems from the afterlife* was published by Myriad Editions as part of the Spotlight Books series in January 2020.

The collection *Takotsubo: the journey of a transplanted heart* won the 2025 Cinnamon Press New Voices competition and was published in April 2025.



Individual poems have appeared in, amongst others, Broken Spine, Atrium, Brittle Star, Ink Sweat & Tears, Dream Catcher, The High Window, Anomaly Literary Journal, The Bombay Literary Magazine, and This Line is Not for Turning: An Anthology of Contemporary British Prose Poetry. Her long narrative poem, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was performed as part of the Transcriptions series at the National Gallery, London, June 2009.

Her short stories and flash fiction have won prizes in numerous literary competitions, including the Bridport Prize, the Asham Award and the FISH Publishing Short Story Prize; her debut novel, *The Auspice* (now *Caldera*), was a finalist in both the 2018 Bath Novel Award and the 2020 Cinnamon International Literature Prize.

Jacqueline's one literary claim to fame is that at the age of eighteen, she was taught creative writing at a beginners Adult Education evening class by the then unknown Ian McEwan; she thought his short stories were quite good.